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Stopping Violence Against Women: Not Just for Women Anymore

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By Denis Devine, Staff Writer, North County Times

I've never beaten my girlfriend, or struck my mom or sisters. Most men reading this can say the same. So it's easy to think of violence against women as a terrible social problem, perhaps, a rampant injustice, a public health threat, but most of all, someone else's problem. If a particularly tragic tale of domestic violence tugged at my conscience, I had imagined the most I could do was donate to a shelter for abuse victims.

But on Monday, Valentine's Day, I heard a large group of compassionate, bold men say something different: violence against women is something all men must deal with. Because it's mostly males doing it – 93 percent of violence against female adult victims is committed by men – the responsibility falls upon us to stop it. And that means far more than calling the cops when we hear a crime in progress.

It means teaching young men that disrespecting women is not manly or acceptable, but that talking about their feelings is. It means letting friends who tell sexist jokes know that we don't find it funny. It means exploring the ways our own behavior contributes to an atmosphere of sexism and machismo that teaches women they are less than men, and that we will enforce that dominance with our fists, if need be.

While most men chose chocolate, flowers and jewels for their lady loves on Valentine's Day, a group of about 200 men and women from the San Diego County region gathered in a Mission Bay conference center Monday to discuss how to help stop gender-based violence – another way of saying violence against women like our mothers, sisters, daughters and girlfriends.

“It's just not a problem on most men's radar. It's not a big deal to them,” said Steve Allen, co-founder of the Men's Leadership Forum, the committee of the San Diego Domestic Violence Council that organized Monday's conference. “We're saying it is a big deal. We're saying if you knew the societal cost, let alone the human tragedy, it would be a big deal.”

In North County, one such tragedy reached a conclusion last week. Eugene Orange was sentenced to 111 years for brutally murdering his wife, Zeda Barnett, a 37-year-old mother of three boys.

Barnett had twice sought temporary restraining orders against her husband in the months before her murder. On her second application, the well-loved Palomar College employee wrote in July 2003 about what happened when she told Orange she wanted to end their relationship: “He got very angry and stated to me that ‘our marriage is not over’ and that if he cannot have me ‘no one can.’” Before that month was over, Orange fulfilled his deadly threat, stabbing his wife to death in their Escondido apartment.

Many people had warning that tragedy was coming. The Men’s Leadership Forum seeks to educate men who might find themselves in those shoes – either striking their wives or learning that their friends do – so that we can prevent more suffering and pain like what Eugene Orange rained down upon Zeda Barnett.

Why men?

For too long, violence against women has been mischaracterized as a “women’s issue.” When a newspaper story broaches the subject, guys often flip toward the sports pages – only to routinely encounter stories about athletes raping, abusing and otherwise mistreating women.

Don McPherson, the forum’s keynote speaker, railed against the way boys are taught not to cry, express their emotions or “throw like a girl” – a particularly nasty slur to a child who grew up to become an NFL quarterback. McPherson – whose Sports Leadership Institute challenges sports to fulfill its promise of teaching children how to be healthy adults – criticized the narrow definitions that confine manhood to notions like strength, control and hiding emotions.

“Where are the opportunities for men to express their other characteristics?” he asked. “The answer is to raise boys to be whole people. My friends kid me about ‘getting in touch with my feminine side,’ but that’s not what I’m talking about. I’m talking about getting in touch with my wholeness.”

The men leading Monday’s workshops emphasized that the lessons boys learn about manhood sabotage their ability to handle relationship stress later in life, which leads many to turn to violence to resolve conflicts with lovers and others.

McPherson isn’t the only jock working to stop violence against women: In a televised address about his Safe at Home Foundation, New York Yankees manager Joe Torre revealed the emotional scars left by his father’s abuse of his mother.

Torre’s story echoed what Zeda Barnett’s 16-year-old son, Kyrell, told a judge Feb. 10: “I’m really mad that my mom is gone,” Kyrell said at his stepfather’s sentencing. “Ever since he came into my life, my life has been a living hell.”

A barrage of statistics

The Men’s Leadership Forum seeks to address what experts say is a global pandemic of violence against women by encouraging men to act locally – in their homes and communities, among their families and friends.

The men gathered Monday were social workers, high school guidance counselors, sports coaches, pastors, fathers, sons, brothers, husbands. They were all sick of the war on women that men have been waging.

The San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency's Office of Violence Prevention reports:

- In 2003, law enforcement officers reported 21,272 domestic violence incidents in the county, including 3,207 in the north coastal region and 2,361 in the north inland.
- About 21 out of every 1,000 households in San Diego County reported a domestic violence incident in 2003.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice's National Crime Victimization Survey:

- More than 2.5 million American women experience violence each year.
- About one-third of female victims suffer injuries as a result of the crime.

According to the National Violence Against Women Survey:

- 25 percent of women reported suffering violence at the hands of an intimate partner over the course of their lives, compared with 8 percent of men.
- The more serious the violence, the greater the disparity in the victims' gender. If it really hurts, it's more likely a woman at the receiving end.
- 76 percent of women victims reported being assaulted or raped by past or present intimate partners.

Men are committing the overwhelming majority of violence – especially violence against women and girls – but that doesn't mean most men are violent toward women. Of the minority who are hurting women, most aren't sociopaths or psychopaths.

Instead, as Jackson Katz, one of the movement's forefathers, put it in a 2003 paper, they are “men who have learned to use force to maintain power and control over women, children or other men to ‘prove their manhood,’ or to try to get their emotional or physical needs met.”

Becoming ‘empowered bystanders’

That cruel curriculum – lessons that hurt both men and women, but women more – was at the heart of Monday's conference.

Workshops sliced off various portions of gender-based violence's poisoned apple: the limits of law enforcement's ability to respond, the effects on children, discrepancies in how men and women communicate, how religious communities can help, and how concepts of masculinity

contribute to the problem.

Men swapped strategies for dealing with everything from sexist jokes told by friends to neighbors who abuse their wives. It was a common theme: It's time for men who get it to speak up and let other men know they don't approve, becoming what Katz calls "empowered bystanders."

"A lot of guys think it's OK to do this sort of thing to women because no one has appropriately challenged them on it," said Allen, the director of legal services for the San Diego-based Center for Community Solutions. "A joke can just not be funny, it can be outright offensive, but men don't appropriately confront this guy, because we don't want to seem wimpy and sissy."

Allen added, "These poor guys, it's hard to have sympathy for them, but they learned it, and we want to help them unlearn it. This effort is also going to benefit men. There are thousands and thousands of guys currently incarcerated for domestic violence and sexual assault because they didn't have alternatives, they didn't know better."

David Wexler, executive director of the San Diego-based Relationship Training Institute, recently returned from a guest spot on the "Dr. Phil" show, where he discussed his new book, "When Good Men Behave Badly: Change Your Behavior, Change Your Relationship." His institute has helped thousands of service members and their families through the U.S. Navy Family Advocacy Center in San Diego.

Wexler dissected on Monday the many ways in which the lessons young men learn about manhood cripple their ability to communicate emotions later in life or handle stresses that arise in intimate relationships. Wexler acknowledged the truly "bad" men that won't make good partners for women under any circumstances. But, he said, "most men who mess up in relationships get tripped up by the emotional demands" but can learn how to handle stress without resorting to violence.

For the men who already know how to resolve conflicts peacefully, express their emotions and appreciate a more complex idea of masculinity, Wexler said, "It's the good guys' job to bring the guys in the middle over to our side."

Too often, a man's first exposure to the ideas discussed Monday comes when a judge orders him to attend a counseling group for batterers; several therapists who organize such groups throughout San Diego County were in attendance.

Doug Willford hopes men and women don't wait that long to come to the discussion groups he leads at the Life Skills Learning Center in San Marcos.

"It's difficult to get people to get help before they get in trouble," he said. "Sometimes we don't know how we'll react until we experience severe stress. It's better to get help now rather than waiting."

Faith in solutions

Also moving to help are five San Diego County congregations, including St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church in Fallbrook.

These religious groups, behind the leadership of the Diocese of San Diego, are participating in the Safe Place Faith Communities Program. That means St. Peter's is building a set of resources – a team of trained volunteers, a network of resources, a safe place to talk – for its parishioners who want help with domestic violence.

“We want to take away the fear, shame and negativity of talking to people about it,” said Terry Hawthorne, pastoral associate at St. Peter's. While the parish already hosts a weekly visit by a bilingual domestic violence counselor from the Palomar Pomerado Health System and has an active Men's Group, the Safe Place program will coordinate the church's ability to respond to parishioners in spiritual crisis – the hell of family violence, hell for the victims and torment for the perpetrators, too.

“There is a spiritual aspect to this,” Hawthorne said. “People might start to believe that they are unlovable by God, by other people, and their self-esteem goes really down. They need to know that the church is there for them in this and in all things in which they need help.”

All this work might not be able to stop every Eugene Orange in North County from beating or even killing his spouse, but we must try. For there are children, boys and girls, who are watching, and counting on us to make a stand. That stand might not require the dramatic rescue men love to imagine; it might merely require us to examine our behavior and make a subtle but significant change.

Some things men can do to prevent gender violence

1. Approach gender violence as a men's issue involving men of all ages and socioeconomic, racial and ethnic backgrounds. View men not only as perpetrators or possible offenders, but as empowered bystanders who can confront abusive peers.
2. If someone you know is abusing his female partner – or is disrespectful or abusive to girls and women in general – don't look the other way. If you feel comfortable doing so, try to talk to him about it. Urge him to seek help. Or if you don't know what to do, consult a friend, a parent, a professor or a counselor. Don't remain silent.
3. Have the courage to look inward. Question your own attitudes. Don't be defensive when something you do or say ends up hurting someone else. Try hard to understand how your own attitudes and actions might inadvertently perpetuate sexism and violence, and work toward changing them.
4. If you suspect that a woman close to you is being abused or has been sexually assaulted, gently ask if you can help.

5. If you are emotionally, psychologically, physically or sexually abusive to women, or have been in the past, seek professional help now.
6. Be an ally to women who are working to end all forms of gender violence. Support the work of campus-based women's centers. Attend "Take Back the Night" rallies and other public events. Raise money for community-based rape crisis centers and battered women's shelters. If you belong to a team or fraternity, or another student group, organize a fund-raiser.
7. Recognize and speak out against homophobia and gay-bashing. Discrimination and violence against lesbians and gays are wrong in and of themselves. This abuse also has direct links to sexism (e.g., the sexual orientation of men who speak out against sexism is often questioned, a conscious or unconscious strategy intended to silence them. This is a key reason few men do so).
8. Attend programs, take courses, watch films and read articles and books about multicultural masculinities, gender inequality and the root causes of gender violence. Educate yourself and others about how larger social forces affect the conflicts between individual men and women.
9. Don't fund sexism. Refuse to purchase any magazine, rent any video, subscribe to any Web site or buy any music that portrays girls or women in a sexually degrading or abusive manner. Protest sexism in the media.
10. Mentor and teach young boys about how to be men in ways that don't involve degrading or abusing girls and women. Volunteer to work with gender violence prevention programs, including anti-sexist men's programs. Lead by example.

— Jackson Katz, www.jacksonkatz.com

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