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Victim arms herself with new identity. An abused woman finds that the Social Security Administration can help her elude her ex-husband. Where to turn for help.

By Stephen Buttry, World-Herald Staff Writer

The woman at the center of this story, Lee, spoke on condition that The World-Herald not disclose her current name or location, her former full name or other details that might identify her. Lee is her middle name.

The World-Herald examined legal documents, correspondence, employment records, court documents in civil and criminal courts in the state where she lived during the marriage, and court records in the county where she now lives.

A reporter viewed a videotape of a public meeting in her former state during which she discussed her abuse.

An attorney who has helped her and researched details of her identity change and her past life also confirmed her story.

Although The World-Herald agreed to withhold some identifying details, Lee agreed that everything in the story would be factual.

Thousands of pages of legal files tell the story of Lee's abusive marriage and contentious divorce, but one document stands out for its brevity: In just 20 words, the Social Security Administration gave her a new identity.

She has a new name and new Social Security number, bestowed officially by the U.S. government in 1999.

As though she were a mob hitman who testified against a godfather, the woman Lee used to be vanished with the government's help.

The new woman created by official decree lives in a small Nebraska town, hiding from the ex-husband who abused and then stalked her and who still terrifies her.

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“I wanted other women to know that there is hope,” she said in agreeing to discuss her experience. “There are people who will help you. You don’t have to live in fear.”

She wanted men to know something, too: “Men who abuse women are cowards.”

In 1998, the Social Security Administration changed its rules, making it easier for victims of domestic violence to change identities.

Since then, the government has issued more than 4,000 new names and Social Security numbers for victims of domestic violence and their children. Twelve were from Iowa; 10 from Nebraska.

Lee didn’t get as much help starting a new life as the mobster might. The government’s witness protection program would give him a new home and a new job and would cover travel expenses.

All the government gave Lee was a new Social Security number. She chose her new name herself.

She grew up in a Western state and moved to the Midwest as a young wife and mother. That marriage failed, leaving her a single mother. She returned to her home state, working in a variety of private and government jobs.

In the mid-1980s, after her son was grown, she met a polite, attractive professional on a trip to Mexico. He came to her home state to court her. She agreed to quit her job, move to his home state and marry him.

She looked happy in the wedding photos, but problems began on their honeymoon in Hawaii. That was when he first hit her. After they got home, the mental and physical abuse escalated.

“He used to demean me sexually and do all kinds of bad things,” Lee said.

“I’m the boss,” he told her once. “I get to say whether you live or die.”

She believed him. Several times he held a pillow over her face, starting to smother her. She remembers visiting a place with oceanside cliffs. Her husband kept trying to maneuver her closer to the edge. Looking back, Lee believes that “if he’d have gotten me within two feet of that cliff, he’d have pushed me.”

During the divorce, Lee’s husband once told her: “I wasn’t going to let you divorce me. I was going to kill you.”

Divorce didn’t free Lee. Her ex-husband threatened her, stalked her, even attacked her physically in court.

After receiving counseling from a shelter that serves battered women, she worked there as a counselor, then legal advocate, public speaker and fundraiser. But even as she provided support to other battered women, she couldn’t shake the man she feared.

When she learned from a friend that the Social Security Administration could give her a new identity, she applied, presenting documentation of the abuse she had endured.

Changing identity affects nearly every part of your life, Lee says.

She needed a new driver's license, credit cards, library card, passport. Her government personnel and pension records needed to be changed to her new name.

In every case, she had to be sure the changes were complete.

She doesn't know what her ex has done to try to find her, but she believes that he would hire a private investigator and spend a considerable amount of money. She had to be sure that no records would show both names. A simple "a/k/a" (also known as) on a document could give away her new identity.

"You have to change every single thing," Lee said. "You can never trust anybody again."

Even confidants could inadvertently give an ex or a detective a clue. "You have to be careful even with your own family," Lee said. "If you've got kids, you're really in trouble because they talk like little magpies."

Sometimes, you can't trust even yourself.

Once, she said, "I started signing a check, and there was a whole different name on top." Embarrassed, she tore up the check as the puzzled merchant watched.

With a new identity, Lee drove to her new hometown, which she had heard about but never had visited. She drove a rented truck loaded with her belongings, towing her car. Three pets rode up front, her only companions as she started a new life.

She bought a house and fixed it up with money she was able to seize from her ex's assets, acting as her own attorney. She had a prominent lawyer for a while, but legal fees and her ex's success in hiding assets left her bankrupt.

Buying a home with a clean credit history is complicated enough. Lee was able to transfer some credit records to her new name. But with a bankruptcy and an identity change, her history was cloudy at best.

She doesn't have a full-time job. The small town where she settled didn't offer much opportunity beyond refuge for a middle-age woman with no employment history. She gets by on a pension and a modest income for providing in-home care for the housebound elderly.

Legal proceedings in her new identity have been complicated because she can't disclose information about her past. Lee feels isolated, afraid that somehow her husband will learn where she is and who she has become.

"You can't make friends," she said. "By the time you get to the third question, you're in trouble. I can't say why I moved here, which everyone wants to know."

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While visiting, a trusted friend from her past inadvertently called her by her old first name while they were out in town. Although Lee understood, it didn't make her any less terrified that her secret had slipped out or someday might.

A phone call in which someone gets the wrong number and hangs up is not just annoying but chilling.

When a piece of mail arrived once at her new address with her old name, Lee was terrified and mystified. Was someone who learned her past identity playing a prank? Or had he found her? She never learned who sent it, but she loaded her handgun, one of two weapons she keeps in her house.

Once, when someone learned about her previous identity and threatened to expose her, federal authorities intervened.

At times, the dread implicit in her secret life has worn Lee down. "Sometimes I feel like calling him up and saying, 'This is me. Here I am,'" she said. "You just get so dismayed with dodging shadows that you almost give up."

Although Lee wants other women to know they can change identities if needed, she warns that it is a desperate move. "It's kind of like trading one prison for another," she said. "I'm in a little prison here."

Lee figures that she will remain in Nebraska under her new name until she hears news of her ex-husband's death.

That day, she said, "I would feel like I was reborn. . . . I'd sleep without sleeping pills. I wouldn't jump at every noise."

Where to turn for help information about getting a new name and Social Security number:

- www.ssa.gov/pressoffice/domestic_fact.html
- www.ncadv.org/publicpolicy/ssnumber.htm

Resources to help victims of domestic violence:

- Omaha YWCA Women Against Violence 24-Hour Hotline: (402) 345-7273
- Nebraska domestic violence hot line: (800) 876-6238
- Iowa domestic violence hot line (800) 942-0333
- Girls and Boys Town National Hotline: (800) 448-3000
- National domestic violence hotline: (800) 799-7233 (SAFE)
- Nebraska Domestic Violence Sexual Assault Coalition: www.ndvsac.org/
- Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence: www.icadv.org/

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