

Morning Call (Allentown, PA)

June 20, 2005

We Must Call Domestic Violence by its Right Name

By Pam Russell, Special to The Morning Call – Freelance

The June 16 Morning Call contained accounts of five different incidents of domestic violence. A front-page article described the way Quakertown residents were held hostage with fear while police searched for a man who had killed his estranged wife in her apartment and eventually turned the gun on himself.

A few pages into the newspaper, another article reported that a former Connecticut state trooper killed his estranged wife and wounded her divorce lawyer before committing suicide.

In the police reports, we read about an Allentown man who threatened his wife and two children with a gun, and about a “domestic disturbance” in which a woman allegedly stabbed her boyfriend with a knife.

Even the “Dear Abby” column had something to say on the subject, advising a formerly battered woman not to give her abuser another chance.

One thing was missing from all of these stories: the phrase “domestic violence.” It seems that nearly every day we read or hear about relationships that have gone bad or jilted lovers who snap. We talk about abuse in terms that dance around the real issue and don’t hold batterers sufficiently accountable for their actions.

If we are going to eliminate domestic violence in our community and send a clear message to abusers that their behavior will not be tolerated, we have to acknowledge the problem. That means calling this crime by its name. We can’t be afraid to use the words “domestic violence” and “abuse.”

We often hear that domestic violence is merely a “marital spat” or “lovers’ quarrel” or a sign of a “rocky relationship.” Those types of phrases downplay its seriousness. It is, in fact, a crime.

It is a myth that batterers are “out of control” during violent episodes; physical violence is just one of the many ways they use to exercise control. Abusers are characterized by a need to maintain power over their victims. They control their partners with intimidation, insults, threats and mind games.

They dictate where their partners can go and how long they can stay there, who they can talk to, and how much money they can have. They lie to their victims, and about them.

And, sometimes, they kill them.

According to the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 110 people in Pennsylvania were killed by their abusers in 2004. Of these, 72 were shot to death. Thirty-four abusers committed suicide after murdering the victim.

The most dangerous time for an abused person is when she escapes from her batterer's grip. Once the batterer knows he has lost his hold over his victim, he often is consumed with regaining control at all costs, commonly with a mentality of, "If I can't have you, nobody else can." Perhaps that was the mindset of Jeffery Ogle, who, the police report, killed his wife Robin Shaffer and then himself in Quakertown on June 15, just a few days after she left him.

Domestic violence is an enormous problem, and it probably is the most under-reported crime in our country. According to FBI statistics, a woman is battered every nine seconds in the United States and domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women ages 15 to 44 in this country.

Most abuse happens behind closed doors and the victim suffers alone, ashamed, afraid, or unable to seek help. Too often, domestic violence only comes into the public consciousness when someone loses her life and becomes the news of the day.

But it is not a private matter. Each person killed creates a tragic void in the lives of their children, their families, friends, neighbors and coworkers. Their death denies the world of their talents and abilities. Their murder leaves us unsettled knowing that there are victims of domestic violence who are not safe in our communities, in their own homes.

For people who are living in a domestic violence nightmare, there is a place to turn for help. Turning Point of Lehigh Valley provides free and confidential services, including crisis and options counseling, a children's program, court advocacy and emergency shelter. Information and assistance is available 24 hours a day by calling 610-437-3369.

Pam Russell is executive director of Turning Point of Lehigh Valley Inc., based in Allentown, which serves victims of domestic violence.

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