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When Dating Goes Bad, Teens Seek Date in Court

By Lisa Redmond, Sun Staff

LOWELL – The face of abuse is getting younger.

Experts who deal with battered women say they are seeing teenagers under 18 going to court to seek restraining orders against spouses or dating partners with the help of their parents.

“We are seeing a slight rise in them,” said Jason Brill, assistant director at Alternative House, a battered women’s shelter in Lowell.

Although no court statistics are available, Brill estimates that each year there may be a dozen restraining orders taken out by juveniles, through their parents. He based the estimates on his outreach work with Greater Lowell schools.

Teens under 18 must have a parent take out a civil restraining order on their behalf, he said. Restraining orders involving juveniles are not public information.

One in five high-school students has been involved in an abusive relationship, according to the Network for Women’s Lives, a Concord-area based group.

Teens who are abused by a boyfriend or girlfriend face two major obstacles: understanding the types of abuse and overcoming the stigma of seeking a restraining order against a classmate.

“Education is key for teenagers so they understand that they don’t have to have a black eye to be abused,” Brill said.

The Massachusetts Court System reports that civil restraining orders have seen a slight decline in recent years. There were 32,177 restraining orders issued in 2003, down from 34,375 in 2002 and 34,636 in 2001.

The state statistics do not differentiate between teenage and adult restraining orders, nor do they distinguish between males and females.

Restraining orders cover people who are or have been in the following relationships, according to JaneDoe Inc.:

- a substantive dating relationship.
- living together in the same household.
- engaged or married,
- have a child together.
- are related by blood or marriage.

An Abuse Prevention Order, called a “209A Order” or a “protective order,” is a civil court order intended to provide protection from physical or sexual harm caused by force or threat of harm from a family or household member. A 209A order is designed to keep an abuser from hurting a victim anymore. It prohibits or limits contact between parties.

Cassandra Breault, assistant chief probation officer in Lowell’s Juvenile Court, differs with Brill on the rising trend in teenage restraining orders. She said a parent’s involvement often stops the unintended behavior before a restraining order is needed.

The breaking point, she said, is when the behavior has risen to an “extreme level.”

The state can grant three types of orders: emergency restraining orders (obtained at a police department if the person is in danger and court is closed), temporary restraining orders that allow for a full court hearing in 10 days, and long-term orders that last for up to one year.

New technology has given abusers greater opportunity to harass victims.

Constant and repeated threatening messages via the computer, instant messaging and derogatory comments made on Web sites like myspace.com can be viewed as abuse.

“Cyber-harassment is another type of abuse and it provides instant access,” Brill said. “We see more of that type of abuse than we do bruises,” he said.

Brill said teens need to know that they can seek a restraining order for cyber-threats. “Text messaging, especially, provides documentation,” he said.

Cindy Southworth, director of the Washington, D.C.-based Network to End Domestic Violence (www.nnedv.org), said teens use the Internet and cell phones every day.

“I was talking to one 15-year-old who told me she gets 200 text messages a day,” Southworth said.

“When the boyfriend calls your daughter’s cell phone every five minutes and the messages are threatening, that’s not true love. It’s control,” Southworth said.

Elizabeth Martin, executive director of the New York-based www.WomensLaw.org, said the downside of technology is that it allows abusers of any age instant access to their victims. She called it “cyber -stalking.” The upside is that technology gives victims access to instant help, too.

“No one should be afraid of technology,” Martin said. “It can be used to help the victim.”

Each month, the WomensLaw Web site gets 77,000 visits from people who use the Internet looking for help, she said.

Going to court for a restraining order against a former boyfriend who attends the same school can be very intimidating, said Brill.

When that happens, parents, police and school officials often work together to craft a workable restraining order.

Brill said he had a recent case where a female student at Greater Lowell Technical High School took out a restraining order against her former boyfriend. The courts worked with the school to shift the teens’ lunch times and transportation to limit their interaction.

Kathy Kelley, Alternative House director, said cuts in state funding for school-outreach programs probably haven’t helped the situation.

“When we are able to get out there into the schools, we usually see people who will approach the speaker afterward and disclose that they have been victimized,” she said.

The effectiveness of restraining orders is another issue.

“Whether or not it works depends on so many facts and every situation is different,” Kelley said. “The emphasis should always be on safety.”

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A Checklist for Abuse

Are you a victim of an abusive relationship? You may be, if two or more of the following statements applies to you.

The person you are going out with ...

- is jealous and possessive, won’t let you have friends, checks up on you, won’t accept breaking up.
- tries to control you by being bossy, giving orders, making all the decisions, not taking your opinions seriously.
- puts you down in front of friends, tells you that you would be nothing without him.
- scares you.
- makes you worry about his reactions to things you say or do.
- threatens you.

- uses or owns guns or other weapons.
- is violent.
- has a history of fighting, loses temper quickly, brags about mistreating others.
- grabs, pushes, shoves, or hits you.
- pressures you for sex or is forceful or scary about sex.
- gets too serious about the relationship too fast.
- abuses alcohol or other drugs and pressures you to take them.
- has a history of failed relationships, and blames the other person for all the problems.
- makes your family and friends uneasy and concerned for your safety.
- makes you feel like you need to apologize to yourself or others for your boyfriend's behavior when he treats you badly.

From *In Love and in Danger: A Teen's Guide to Breaking Free of Abusive Relationships*, by Barrie Levy

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