

N.C. takes aggressive stance toward battered-wife problem

By KAREN BARBER
Special to the Summer Tar Heel

Kate, 23, had been married for six years. Things were good the first couple of years between her and her husband, but when money started getting tight around the house he started acting differently. At first, he would come in and yell at her for a while. Then he started drinking and slapping her occasionally. Eventually he started drinking more and beating her more violently. After two years of virtual torture by her husband, Kate realized she was a victim of wife abuse.

Glenda, 35, had been married for 15 years. Her husband had beaten her during most of their marriage. She put up with it, hoping that he'd change some day. It wasn't until the kids came along and he started beating them too that she realized she was a part of the battered-wife syndrome.

Kate and Glenda (not their real names) are like thousands of women across the United States who are brutally abused by their husbands. Battered wives are found at all socio-economic levels, in all age groups and in all races.

Fortunately for such women, there is a growing awareness of the problem in this country and others, while efforts are being made to help them. In Orange County, several services are available to these women.

Social workers at the Chapel Hill Department of Human Services offer supportive and legal counseling to battered women. "We help them sort out what they want to do," said Jane Cousins, a social worker. "This is a legal kind of issue, involving separation and counseling. If she needs us, we'll go to court with her and be supportive. We're very responsive to battered women and getting them out of their homes to a safe place."

Cousins said another important service available to abused women is the Orange-Durham YWCA Coalition for Battered Women, which was organized about two years ago. The coalition has approximately 60 members who are concerned about wife abuse in the area. About 40 of them have gone through special advocacy training sessions to offer counseling and shelter to battered wives.

"We do a lot of crisis intervention counseling," said Dawn Tucker, an advocate for the coalition. One of the main things we do is to help these women find out what their resources are, such as family members and work skills.

The coalition also provides the abused wife with information about her legal rights. "We tell them things are crimes that they

might not have known were crimes, like verbal threats," said Tucker.

Ursula Sherrill, a social worker in the Department of Medicine at North Carolina Memorial Hospital, said the hospital employs 50 social workers whose duties include dealing with battered wives seeking medical help at the hospital. "We talk to battered women about the fact that they're not alone. Many feel at fault. We try to help them to see their situation and let them know that other women have experienced the same kind of problem. We also try to help them look at their alternatives and clarify how they feel," she said. Sherrill added that hospital social workers help make the women aware of community resources available to them and help them figure out a housing situation that could be used for refuge.

Mental health centers in the area also offer

counseling and aid of this nature to abused wives. Kit Munson, a counselor at the Orange-Person-Chatham Mental Health Center who works extensively with battered wives, said many women don't come to her for help as a battered wife.

"Many come in because they say their husband has a drinking problem or because they feel inadequate as a marriage partner," she said.

Tucker said many of the battered wives she works with in the coalition tend to blame themselves for the problem.

"If you're working with a media image of what marriage is and yours isn't like that, you say, 'What am I doing wrong?'" she said.

Stress was another factor Cousins cited as causing wife abuse. Men who have a low self-image tend to beat their wives more often too, she said.

"Another factor is the fact that violence is accepted in our culture," Cousins said.

Tucker said she thought a lot of men have the attitude that "you ought to keep your woman in line." "Another problem is that men learn physical violence is an acceptable way to express anger," she said.

Cousins said many battered wives are reluctant to leave their situations because of economic reasons, fear, lack of shelter or because they don't want to give up the relationship.

The women finally try to get out of their situation, said Cousins, when the husband starts beating the children or when shelters offering support and refuge are made available. "It's reassuring for a woman to hear that her husband has no right to treat her that way," Cousins said.

Most of the various counselors interviewed who work with battered wives agree that Orange County and the surrounding area needs a shelter.

Tucker said she would like to see two kinds of shelters made available for battered wives. "One would be a temporary refuge for a woman leaving and re-entering the relationship, who may eventually leave for good. The other type of shelter would be a refuge for women starting out on their own."

Munson agreed that a shelter in the local area is needed, adding that in North Carolina, shelters exist in Winston-Salem, Greensboro and Lenoir.

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