

Program tries to heal men who beat women through prayer, counseling

BY COURTNEY GAILLARD
THE CHRONICLE

It took JoAnn Mitchell 10 years to recover from an abusive marriage. While the physical scars healed, the emotional scars and bitterness lingered for quite some time. Following her divorce from an abusive husband, Mitchell found herself repulsed by even the sight of a man. After years of counseling, soul searching and prayer, Mitchell counts herself as a survivor.

"I have been hearing so many people say, 'I'm a survivor, I'm a survivor.' But at the same time these survivors were

people who were still hurting," said Mitchell. "Unless I had gone through the steps that I took to become a survivor, then there's no way that I could work with men today."

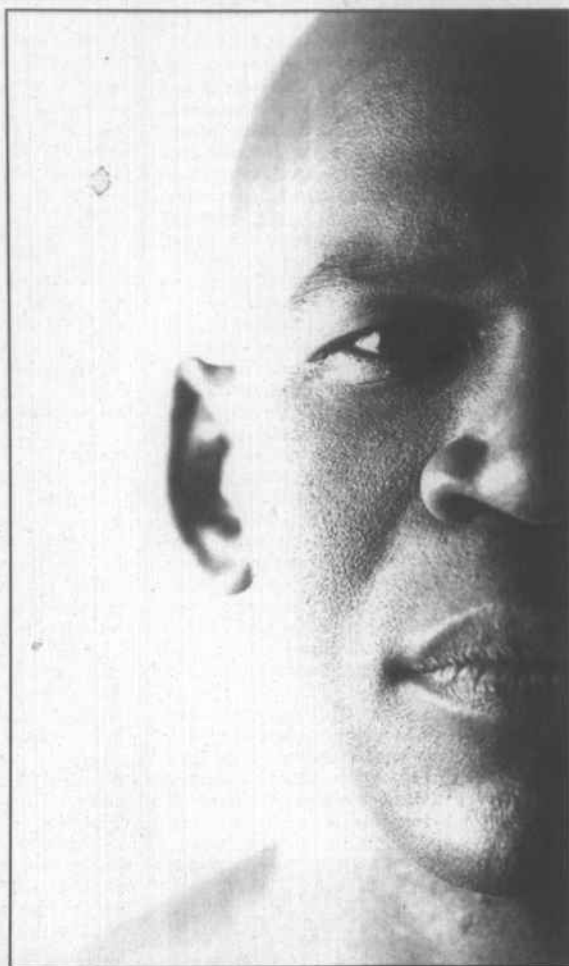
She has spent the last three years reaching out to families affected by domestic violence, particularly male abusers, through a faith-based nonprofit called A Balm in Gilead Enrichment Center. (It is not affiliated with The Balm in Gilead organization that conducts AIDS/HIV education training with churches nationwide.)

Mitchell says her personal but painful experience is what led her to create the program, whose name is based on Jeremiah 8:22.

"What we want to do is get not only the client but the community to see that this problem is much bigger than just the woman and the child," said Mitchell, who is founder and executive director of the enrichment center. "Domestic violence is not a hate crime. The judicial system has really turned it into a hate crime."

"It is a sickness and it is a disease just like cancer or HIV/AIDS. If it's not treated, then it spreads and eats away at our communities.... It just eats away at families."

Her program predates the



Mitchell

Founding Fathers initiative. The city of Winston-Salem unveiled this male-oriented domestic violence prevention program earlier this year.

Special attention is given to men struggling with anger and violence issues in the MAN the Moment program. Mitchell says the MTM program is more than just an anger management course — something she considers to be just a bandaid over a generational curse that she insists has to be broken.

"Ten weeks (of anger management) is not enough for anyone to deal with the situation. What 10 weeks does is make the man that much more angrier because he doesn't want to be there," said Mitchell. "The only way to stop the violence is to deal with the root of the problem,

which is the male."

She hopes to reach men in every segment of the community, including the homeless and ex-offenders, with the program. She is planning to work closely with The Bethesda Center and the Forsyth County Sheriff's Office on setting up counseling sessions.

Mitchell believes that rehabilitation cannot be predetermined to take place in a set period of time. That is why MTM and the Women of Worth (WOW) program, which is a counseling program for women who have been or are victims of domestic violence, are both structured as 30-plus-week programs. All programs are voluntary and involve one-on-one counseling or group sessions. Counseling sessions are held at various locations around the city,

Mitchell hopes the center will operate out of one office by sometime next year.

The enrichment center also offers support and assistance to children aged 6-17 affected by domestic violence in the Step by Step program. Mitchell says that many people who work with domestic violence victims have been victims at one time like herself. All staff members are required to participate in the Step by Step program before they will conduct any counseling sessions. Like Mitchell, Eboni Belfield, who is the Step By Step coordinator, has been affected by domestic abuse.

"The first thing we (communicate) to the kids is that it's not your fault," said Belfield. "I have no problem sharing my story anymore. It does make them feel a little more comfortable talking to me because they know I know firsthand what it is because I've come out of it."

A Balm in Gilead Enrichment Center also offers assistance with hospital support, in-state and out-of-state relocation, employment, education, affordable housing and community referrals.

Willard Tanner, vice president of the A Balm in Gilead Enrichment Center board, has been in the trenches of domestic violence prevention and rehabilitation work. Tanner is also a program facilitator with the Forsyth County Department of Public Health's Fathers and Friends Program.

"People are just tired of being tired. The men are tired of the situation continuing to perpetuate itself, and certainly the women are because they are the ones being affected along with the children," said Tanner.

For more information, contact JoAnn Mitchell at 682-4446 or e-mail her at abalmingileadwsnc@hotmail.com.



Tanner

Act

from page A2

Voting rights experts around the country are mobilizing just in case.

Ted Shaw, director-counsel and president of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, warns of tricks leading up to reauthorization.

Any argument that the full act should be permanent or should require nationwide coverage could be fatal to anti-discrimination protections, says Shaw.

Shaw was one of the facilitators during a two-day "Renewal Kick-off Campaign" and national conference on the Voting Rights Act, last week held by the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund.

Conference Executive Director Wade Henderson says he was encouraged by Sensenbrenner's support, but that's not enough.

"We're also talking about restoration of the act's vitality to where it was when it was reauthorized 23 years ago in 1982," Henderson said. "Our objective is to move the discussion in that direction."

Retired Judge Nathaniel R. Jones of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit said citizens must also watch Democratic members of Congress who negotiated the "nuclear option," compromising in order to confirm conservative federal judges.

"Those who wink and nod at this result may rightly be called upon to defend against the charge of being enablers and accomplices to the repealing of key sections of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act," Jones said.

U.S. Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.), former chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, pointed out that Election 2000, when 4 to 6 million votes were lost because of violations or faulty machines, showed how easily a vote can be nullified.

"In 1965, I saw people standing in unmovable lines, trying day

after day to pass the so-called literacy test," he said. "Those tests are gone, but the unmovable lines re-emerged in the elections of 2000 and 2004. Those challenges to equal access made it clear to the average American citizen that we have not fully escaped the chains of our dark past."

It is because of the confusion during Election 2000 that the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law has established a commission to hold hearings around the country, gathering evidence to use for possible strengthening of the act.

Although the pre-clearance clause pertains to mostly Southern states, the bipartisan National Commission on the Voting Rights Act is gathering evidence of ongoing racial and language discrimination in voting nationwide, says Barbara Arnwine, executive director of the Lawyer's Committee.

The committee is chaired by longtime LDF attorney Bill Lann Lee, a former assistant attorney general for civil rights, and former U.S. Rep. Charles McCurdy Mathias Jr. (R-Md.), who helped draft the bill.

"What people really thought was that most of the evidence was probably pertaining mostly to the South. They've mostly been amazed. They've got testimony from Massachusetts, New Jersey, Alabama, Texas, Arizona, Minnesota, and Wisconsin," she said.

Meanwhile, a pre-march Town Hall meeting will be held at 5 p.m. Friday at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta.

The march — which will also focus on workers rights to organize and ending the war in Iraq — is developing into a "real rainbow coalition," Jackson said.

"The response has been tremendous. In this rally, the NAACP is coming big time. Bruce Gordon will give his first major speech. The Urban League, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the National Counsel of La Raza, the Congressional Black Caucus, the Latino Caucus, and the AFL-CIO have all committed to participate," Jackson said.



Lee

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