

Abused Women Now Have An Alternative

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First in series

John, a successful businessman experiences a stressful day at work. His boss reprimands him for making a costly error. With a somewhat deflated ego, John comes home. His wife, Mary has also had a strenuous day. An emergency with one of the children has prevented her from having her husband's dinner cooked. When Mary explains the situation to John, he doesn't want to hear her "excuses" and immediately he lashes out at her and physically abuses her.

The above situation is purely hypothetical. But unfortunately, it is a scene that takes place in American homes at the alarming rate of every 18 seconds. Physical-Emotional abuse of a woman by a man in the home is a widespread social problem.

Once a problem that everyone knew existed, but accepted and kept hidden, spouse abuse, with the attention that it is receiving nationally is forcing the American public to remove the blinders from its eyes. Movies, like "The Burning Bed," and community awareness of the problem are serving as vehicles that demand something be done about spouse abuse.

Because of such changes in the public's attitude of this problem, women who have been abused now have an alternative to staying in an environment where they are brutally mistreated. One such alternative for battered women here in Charlotte is the Shelter.

A protective residence, including six cottages and an administrative office, the Shelter is a safe, emergency place and counseling service for women who either live or work in Mecklenburg and Union counties and who are in physically violent or potentially violent situations with their husbands or boyfriends.

The key phrase to entrance at the Shelter is "physically or potentially violent situations." No woman is admitted simply because she may need to get away from her husband or boyfriend for a few days. There has to be an immediate danger, first and it is family counselor Leslie Boone's job to determine the emergency of a woman's situation.

"When there is a possible spouse abuse problem, the first thing that must happen is that the woman has to call one of the counselors here at the Shelter. We cannot talk with a liaison person. We have to talk to the woman. From that first conversation we make an assessment on whether she can be admitted to the Shelter," informed Ms. Boone. The Shelter's telephone number is 332-2513.

According to Ms. Boone, providing emergency shelter is just one of the many services that the Shelter offers. "A great deal of my counseling is telephone counseling.

Some women just need to know about different resources or referrals that can assist them in their plight or they need a sounding board. The Shelter also provides one-to-one professional counseling to explore options related to spouse abuse and Support Group sessions. These sessions, held the first three Mondays in each month let women know that they are not alone in what they have experienced. Many times a former resident may come back to tell residents that just like she found a solution to her problem, so can they," asserted Ms. Boone.

Up to 20 individuals (3 children, 17 women) can be housed at the shelter at one time. And there have been times when Ms. Boone noted that the Shelter was at its capacity limit. "It's difficult to give an average on how many women seek the Shelter. The number fluctuates greatly. But I have noticed that there are more women at the Shelter during holidays and during the summer than at other times.

Women who come to the Shelter can stay for three weeks. After the first three days of her stay, the woman must be involved in some form of counseling pointed out Ms. Boone. The Shelter is serious about helping women to work out positive solutions to their situations. "A woman can come to the Shelter a total of three times, but after that third time, we can only provide her with our counseling services," remarked Ms. Boone.

The family counselor stated that they adhere to this policy of a three time visitation limit because they don't want the Shelter to be used as a hideaway. "It's pretty clear that after three visits, that a woman is not serious about making any changes in her lifestyle and that she is only seeking a refuge," confirmed Ms. Boone.

Where this woman does realize she needs to leave; many others don't. To reach the point where a

woman realizes she needs help and enlists the services of an establishment like the Shelter is often physically costly for her. "When a woman finally contacts the Shelter, she normally has been in an abusive setting for a long time. The domestic situation is usually pretty severe and ongoing," voiced Ms. Boone.

One thing Ms. Boone has noticed about the women who are abused is that there is no set pattern of woman who seeks the Shelter's services. She reported that women of all ages, races and economic levels, educational, cultural, and religious backgrounds are victims of abusive spouses. The same thing holds true for the abuser. However there was one common feature in these relationships Ms. Boone detected and that is these women tend to look for someone who can take care of them and seem to find men who like to dominate or who have very definite ideas on what a male and female role is.

With all the Shelter provides unfortunately there are some women who go back to their spouses in the hopes of things working out or in the despair of not having a choice. "But when these women return it is safe to say that the violence that they have previously experienced will become worse. This is the time when the man knows that he is in total control, simply by the woman's return.

The Shelter is available for counseling 24 hours a day. It is primarily funded by the United Way and women who are housed there are charged a fee according to her income. The minimum fee is \$1 per family per day. All counselors at the Shelter have a Master's degree in Social Work or a related counseling field and several years of counseling experience.

Since 1979 the Shelter has been in operation and although they help women find solutions to complicated and serious problems, they also want the woman to know one thing and that is no one deserves to be beaten.



Victims of spouse abuse, women who have lived with this horror often feel conflicting emotions towards their mates and a sense of despair and helplessness about their situation. (Illustration By Janice Dalton)

Next Week: The article will focus on Adam - a counseling service for men who abuse women.

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