

Victims break their silence

By Laura Kenyon

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It may seem convenient to believe that in pristine New Canaan — with its manicured lawns, brick sidewalks and Norman Rockwell-esque families — domestic abuse doesn't happen.

But hidden by wrought iron gates and stone walls are the stories behind 111 purple ribbons currently lining the downtown — one for each domestic dispute recorded here in the past year.

"There are women in this town who continue to be isolated and abused," said Robert Doran of the New Canaan Domestic



Violence Partnership. And while some residents pretend to be unaware because they feel it's private or embarrassing, he said, empathy is no match for action.

Hoping to crack the silence and expose a truth many choose to ignore, two residents recently spoke with the *Advertiser*, under the condition of anonymity, about the abuse suffered at the hands of their ex-husbands.

In both cases, they married for love, sacrificed careers and dreams to raise children, and were physically beaten, emotionally abused and financially controlled for years.

"These women are incredibly strong and despite everything that has happened to them, their children

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excel," said Partnership Chairman Dede Bartlett, "and that speaks to the extraordinary survival skills of both of these women."

Shattered trust

Acquainted with a total of at least eight residents in town in similar situations, Erin* and Bridget* spoke of wives who have been slapped; kicked; strangled; choked; smashed into walls; locked outside in winter without a coat; pushed down stairs; slandered and beaten in front of their children; humiliated in public; blamed for situations over which they couldn't possibly have control, and forced to account for each dollar and minute spent during the day.

"You would be shocked, I mean truly stunned," said Erin regarding the number of residents in this situation.

Asked how the abuse begins, she said sometimes the abuser acts like Prince Charming before the honeymoon, sometimes the attacks start early but the marriage goes forward due to pregnancy, and sometimes it is a progression of verbal abuse and financial control that escalates to violence.

"It can be so many things," she said.

"I might have seen a little bit of a hot temper," recalled Bridget, for whom the physical abuse took years to manifest, "but not to that degree that you would say before you got married and had children that this person is abusive."

"A lot of the markers of it are control," said Erin, from financial domination to "what you wear" and "the length of your hair."

"Most survivors will tell you that the abuse does not start prior to marriage, that it begins very slowly and that it can begin with possessiveness," said Bartlett, citing an aversion to having other people around. "This is very destructive and very

flattering."

"Many women report that the abuse does not start until pregnancy," she added, "when a woman's attention is not on the husband as much as it is on the developing baby."

"When it first happens," recalled Bridget, "you think it's just that one time and you work on it. And it happens again, and before you know it it's been a couple of years and you're behind the eight ball."

Many people who never experience domestic abuse say they would leave after the first hit.

But when children are involved and financial threats are made, said Bridget, "You want to do what's best for your children" — or, in hindsight, what you think was best at the time.

sons, including fear of being alone, inability to support themselves, concern for their children, financial isolation and the fact that "on many levels they love the man that they're married to, the father of their children. They just want the abuse to stop."

And sometimes it does, for a brief and shining moment.

Holding back tears, Bridget described a period during which the attacks stopped and she thought her husband had returned.

"I thought he got it," she said. "I thought he understood... that he wasn't going to do it anymore, [that it was] a fresh new start."

But eventually, Bridget found herself again being beaten in front of

"I am still his prisoner. And that's the end game. He loves the control."

Describing her marriage as a "roller coaster," Bridget said her ex-husband never acknowledged that what he did was wrong.

In his view, she said, "there would always be a reason: 'You pushed me to it.' 'I was trying to stop you from leaving.' 'You didn't support me.'"

"He never apologized," she said, but would come home with flowers or gifts or grand ideas for a vacation to cover up the hurt. Wanting to keep the family together, she usually gave in, telling herself: "Maybe it's OK. Maybe it's going to go away."

For Bridget, the physical abuse could take place several times over as many months, then stop for a year.

For Erin, it came in spurts but the verbal attacks were daily.

"I was told I was stupid, I was a moron, I did not understand anything, I could not do anything... in front of my children," she said, adding that eventually even she began to believe it. "It's scary how much you remember verbatim."

According to Bartlett, women stay in these relationships for many rea-

her children, as they screamed and yelled for their father to leave their mother alone.

For both of these women, the final straw came during a life-threatening attack of elevated violence. For many, it involves a rampage, a weapon, a "fall" from a great height, and/or a trip to the emergency room.

Recalled one victim: "He dragged me by my hair and threw me down the stairs. That's when I said he's going to darn well kill me."

Twisted ties

But as these women soon found out, breaking free is not the end of the story.

From the threat of being dragged back into court at any time, to not knowing when he'll send the alimony check, to letting abusers "prove" they've changed by taking a class, to offering multiple loopholes — both feel the system is "broken."

Worried about possible bankruptcy, one victim told the paper: "One of the weird things about this situation is he still has control over me... I am still his prisoner. And that's the end game. He loves the control."

Domestic violence



"They go on and live a different life and leave the family," said another. "It's different for women because they're under physical, financial and emotional control with these men."

When things go awry and they finally have the courage to leave despite not having worked in decades and still having children to take care of, asked Bridget, "What are you gonna do now?"

Calling the current economic downturn "particularly brutal," Bartlett said many survivors have left careers to be mothers and no longer have up-to-date marketable skills. It is a "gap" in service that someone must fill in.

In addition, battered women are often forced to choose between exposing their husbands' actions, knowing they will lose their job, or keeping some sort of income for the family.

"There are many areas in terms of the law and in terms of working with the courts where things need to be improved," said Bartlett. "We have come a long way but we still have a long way to go."

While not necessarily the case several years ago, Bartlett said the New Canaan Police Department is "extremely well-trained" in dealing with domestic violence — evident in a decreasing dual arrest rate, which often signifies an inability to separate the offender from the victim.

The force has gone out of its way to "make amends for past lapses," she said, and is now one of the best in the state.

Another stride was the recent creation of a domestic violence docket

court in Norwalk, including a full-time domestic violence prosecutor and investigator.

Still, according to Domestic Violence Crisis Center (DVCC) Executive Director Rachelle Kucera Mhera, the dismissal and nolle rates in domestic violence cases in Norwalk and Stamford courts are a concern and must be lowered. Right now, she said, if an abuser doesn't re-offend in a year, the case will be dismissed and the slate wiped clean.

"There certainly must be greater offender accountability," she said. "Behavioral change takes a lifetime."

The DVCC and Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence are currently reviewing the criminal system to determine what changes are needed, Mhera said, urging residents to write their state legislators advocating change.

"This needs to be a priority," she said. "And judicial training for victims of domestic violence or understanding of the issue should be not only mandatory but monitored."

Considering state law allowed men to beat their wives with rods thinner than their right thumbs 40 years ago, Mhera stressed that things are getting better.

"In social environments, in casual conversation, people would refrain from talking about domestic violence," she said. "We never called it a crime. People know what that is now."

Editor's note: The names of the victims have been changed to protect their identities.)