

THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

We can prevent domestic abuse

Ontario campaign encourages awareness

By Susan Clairmont

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Domestic abuse is not a private issue.

It is not something to be sorted out behind closed doors. To be left for someone else to deal with. To be forgiven or excused. Or to be ignored until a woman ends up dead. Before virtually every domestic murder in this province, there are warning signs that violence is about to happen.

And still, nobody intervenes.

Nobody reaches out.

Nobody helps.

We would not do that with children. Our society has become increasingly vigilant in the way we try to protect our young people. We have passed laws saying we shall report suspicions of child abuse.

We have agencies that hear the concerns, investigate them and do what is right for the child. We have a cultural mindset that believes it is the responsibility of each and every member of our community to keep our youngest people safe.

So why is it so different for women? In too many cases, women in abusive relationships are left to save themselves. Or not. The rest of us don't want to interfere. Or make a mistake. Or become involved. Or put ourselves at risk.

It's time to change that.

With the launch of a new provincial campaign called Neighbours, Friends and Families, we are all being encouraged to recognize the signs of domestic abuse and know what to do if we should see it happening. The high profile campaign is sponsored by the Ontario government, Ontario Women's Directorate and experts from the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children.

It comes in the wake of the shocking conclusions of the 2002 Domestic Violence Death Review Committee Annual Report to the Chief Coroner of Ontario.

The report studied 25 domestic homicides and concluded that each one of them was preventable. That there were sufficient warning signs that could have caused someone to step in and take action.

"It's about engagement," says Clare Freeman, executive director of Interval House, a shelter for abused women and their children.

"Don't do the bystander thing, letting someone else take care of it."

In the days before women's shelters, more women were being murdered by their husbands, Freeman says. That rate dropped once abused women had somewhere safe to go, but the effect was that society began to believe the problem of domestic abuse had been solved and so began to "tune out" the whole issue.

People need to be re-educated about spousal abuse because it does still exist, in every neighbourhood of our city, says Detective Chris Kiriakopoulos of the Hamilton Police Family Violence Resource Unit.

"Sometimes domestic violence involves marginalized people" and so others don't see it.

Other times it involves people with great status in the community who hide what is going on in their home out of shame.

And while 90 per cent of domestic abuse involves men abusing women, it can also include any number of other possibilities, including men being abused by their female partners (a woman was arrested this week for allegedly murdering her husband on Picton Street in Hamilton), children being killed during episodes of domestic violence (this weekend marks one year since Jared Osidacz, 8, was stabbed to death by his own father when the boy tried to break up a fight between his dad and a new girlfriend) or in same-sex relationships.

In extreme, emergency situations, a neighbour, friend or relative should call police for help, but just extending friendship to an abused woman is also helpful. Invite her for coffee. Ask how you can help.

Encourage her to leave her partner safely.

Offer to provide child care while she seeks help.

Offer your home as a safe haven and do not let her partner in.

The Neighbours, Friends and Families campaign includes television ads, brochures, and a website at www.neighboursfriendsandfamilies.on.ca

"Domestic violence is a social problem," says Freeman. "It needs a social response."

Susan Clairmont's commentary appears regularly in The Spectator. sclairmont@thespec.com 905-526-3539

Warning signs of domestic abuse

He:

- * puts her down
- * does all the talking
- * checks up on her all the time, even at work
- * tries to suggest he is the victim and acts depressed
- * tries to keep her away from you

She:

- * is apologetic and makes excuses for his behaviour or she becomes aggressive and angry
- * is nervous talking when he's there
- * seems to be sick more often than most people and misses work
- * tries to cover her bruises
- * makes excuses about why she can't meet you or tries to avoid you

For help:

Interval House Crisis Line. 905-387-8881

Assaulted Women's Helpline. 1-866-863-7868