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Former victim helping abused

Posted By Gord Young

Karen Hayes knows there were people who cared and wanted to help while she was trapped in an abusive marriage.

But she realizes how difficult it must have been for her friends and family members to witness the signs of abuse and not know what to do.

"My family was scared of making it worse," said Hayes, noting those closest to her stayed away to avoid her husband, fearing the abuse would escalate if they were to interfere.

She isn't certain her six-year marriage, which she broke away from more than a decade ago, would have ended any sooner had there been someone to lend an ear when times were tough. But Hayes is convinced having someone around to simply listen would have made it easier to cope with the abuse.

That's why she's taken on the role of community co-ordinator for a new campaign aimed at teaching the public how to recognize and support victims of domestic violence.

"We're trying to provide support to the supporter," said Hayes, noting the campaign has taken on a unique approach to addressing the problem of domestic violence.

Launched Saturday at Northgate Shopping Centre, the Neighbours, Friends and Families campaign is a provincewide initiative involving the province, Ontario Women's Directorate and Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and

Children in London, Ont. It's being led locally by a committee of people committed to addressing violence against women.

"Traditionally, most programs have focused on the abused woman, ignoring or failing to reach out to the abuser," said Hayes, noting the campaign also includes tips about when and how to talk to abusive men.

She said talking to an abusive man, however, should be done with extreme care so as not to increase the risk to his partner or any children who may be in the home. Hayes said it's also important to be empowering and respectful toward an abused woman.

"An abused woman is told what to do every day by her abuser. We must not be another person dictating to her," Hayes told a crowd during the launch, including Mayor Vic Fedeli, Nipissing MPP Monique Smith, Nipissing-Timiskaming MP Anthony Rota and Police Chief Paul Cook.

A series of public forums will be held at various locations in the district between Feb. 12 and June 10 as part of the campaign. In addition to pamphlets and other literature distributed within the community, more information is available at 474-1031 or online at www.neighboursfriendsandfamilies.ca.