



Sault Ste-Marie: Dec 7, 2007

Women remember Montreal massacre; Cycle of abuse leads to end of relationship - Sault woman

Posted By Corina Milic

The first time her boyfriend grabbed her arm in anger, he apologized for a month.

"It escalated from there to the point where he was holding whatever he could find to my throat and choking me, and it was always when he was drunk," said Amanda Ridley, 27.

The Sault Ste. Marie resident said her abuser was a sweetheart who treated her like gold the first six months of their relationship. Then she moved away for school with her two-and-a-half-year-old daughter and 23-year-old boyfriend.

"It's always the little things, so you forgive it.

Once you see the (abuse) cycle that's when you can finally get out," she said. She finally left the relationship four and half years later.

Thursday Ridley and a local abused women support group joined the Algoma Council on Domestic Violence for National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence.

Dec. 6 commemorates 14 women murdered at l'Ecole Polytechnique de Montreal in 1989 and falls within Woman Abuse Prevention month.

During a short ceremony at the civic centre, Ridley sang a song she wrote, called Walk Away. Fourteen roses were placed in a vase to remember the women who died 18 years ago.

The Algoma Council on Domestic Violence also used the event to launch a campaign they hope will end women's abuse in Algoma District, called Neighbours, Friends and Families.

Residents don't realize how much domestic abuse exists in the Sault, which makes identifying and helping victims of violence difficult, according to Monique Rollin, a domestic violence co-ordinator with city police.

"It's public education. (Local) police respond to four to five calls of domestic incidents per day, 50 per cent of which usually end up in arrest," said Rollin.

When someone is arrested for domestic violence - for example, assault, but also mischief or damage to property - there is a history of domestic incident reports, she said.

But police can only react to situations; neighbours, friends and families need to be proactive. Verbal and emotional abuse may not be criminal offences, but Rollin said police can direct women to resources that help them escape bad situations.

That's something Jennifer Bridgewater found out one day last June when she called the police station and left her abusive partner.

Verbal and physical abuse started as soon as Bridgewater, 24, moved in with her boyfriend just over a year ago. But she didn't immediately recognize it for what it was.

"I had to give him receipts to prove what I purchased. He was throwing things, locking me in closets in my house until I apologized. Ignoring me," said Bridgewater.

"The day I realized I was in over my head and needed help was the day I contacted the police and got my family to pick me up. I'd been physically abused that day and it scared me to the point where if he could do this to me now, it would only get worse from there."

The police put Bridgewater in contact with Algoma Family Services and the Victim Witness Assistance Program. She was appointed a social worker and "right from the first day she gave me hope."

Witness assistance workers explained the legal processes and court systems involved in charging her abuser.

When asked why she didn't leave earlier, Bridgewater said abuse is not something people like to talk about - it's embarrassing.

She had pushed her family and friends away and her partner made her think no one would believe her story, said Bridgewater.

"Abuse is very silent. It just takes place between the victim and abuser so lots of people don't see it. It takes place behind closed doors."

When she did leave, Bridgewater said, she was amazed at the resources available to her. The Neighbours, Friends and Families campaign aims to bring those resources out of the woodwork, providing communities with information, strategies and tools to recognize abusive warning signs and support abused women.

"We don't want to get there after you get punched. We want you to get help before you get punched," Rollin said.

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