

The ACTivist magazine

Neighbours, Friends and Families Campaign Launches

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December 6th represents an opportunity for Canadians to consider the women and girls for whom violence is a daily reality and to remember those who have died as a result of gender based violence. It is a day on which communities can consider concrete actions to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls.

Prior to the Neighbours, Friends and Families campaign launch, a moment of silence is held to remember and honour the women who have lost their lives to male violence. A candle is lit to signify a collective hope and vision that everyone can work together to intervene in situations of women abuse and thereby stop and prevent the death of more women.

Deb Ashbee is at Queen's Park today to talk about the importance of recognizing the warning signs that can lead to violence against women. She's not a textbook professional but a woman trying to deliver a message.

On October 27th, 2005 her best friend, Sandra Schott, was abducted from her home and murdered by a man – her husband - who professed to love her deeply.

“There are three children, Derek, Alyssa and Nicholas, who should have their mother here to tuck them into bed each night,” says Ashbee. “Sandra's abusive relationship with her husband is proof that signs exist and that the failure to recognize and deal with them can result in the loss of a beautiful life.”

Ashbee says Ed (Sandra's husband) was an angel when she first knew Sandra but slowly his true self came about.

“If we'd made arrangements to go shopping or have coffee Sandra would call at the last minute to cancel,” says Ashbee. “Ed called the shots and he was physically abusive to her. The signs were there. Unfortunately, we didn't know how serious it could get.”

“We need to understand that risk is dynamic and changeable,” says Tim Kelly, Executive Director, Changing Ways. “As his behavior becomes more frequent and intrusive, the risk may be increasing too.”

A lot of people think that when the relationship ends, the abuse ends too.

“In fact, that's one of the highest abuse times,” says Kelly. “So we need to be more connected to those people and more supportive rather than see the separation as an end to the abuse.”

“Often our reaction to an abusive man is ‘he’s a jerk, leave him alone’,” says Kelly. “But there are opportunities to engage abusive men in a meaningful discussion about what you’re observing.”

“Some men don’t see a lot wrong with what they’re doing,” says Barb MacQuarrie, Community Director, Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children, The University of Western Ontario.

But December 6th, 1989, when 14 women were murdered at Montreal’s Ecole Polytechnique, defined the issue of male violence against women and brought to light that a large portion of violence is committed by men against women and girls.

MacQuarrie says that since 1989 we have better funding for rape crisis centres, more shelters, better police response, mandatory charging and police officers who understand the issue.

She says that many abused women feel like they’re the only one being abused, that nobody has any idea what it’s like.

“Isolation is always a dynamic of abuse,” MacQuarrie says. “Try to break through that isolation and give the abused woman the sense that she’s not alone.”

“Lots of things have happened since 1989 but there’s still far too many women being killed by their partners or ex-partners,” says Colleen Purdon, Coordinator for the Grey Bruce Domestic Violence Coordinating Committee. “But ultimately nothing is going to change unless ordinary people change the way they think about this.”

“After the fact, we often hear people say ‘if only I knew what to do’, ‘if only I knew how to help’ or ‘he was a nice guy and who would have thought he would have done something like that’,” says Wendy Komiotis, Executive Director, Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children. “Our message is that woman abuse is preventable and that information and supports are readily available.”

Unfortunately, we live in a society where what happens in people’s relationships and homes is seen as a private matter.

“But violence is everyone’s business,” says Komiotis. “For abused women and children it could be a matter of life and death.”

She says it’s important that we recognize that different communities deal with violence in different ways and that we learn the values and norms within those communities.

The Neighbours, Friends and Families campaign recognizes that violence against women happens at the community level and solutions must include community based strategies that consider everyone’s safety.

Violence against women often occurs next door, down the street, at the corner and under our noses.

In many cases, women have connections in their community. So the campaign's goal is to educate everyone to know the warning signs and how to support a woman experiencing abuse.

Individuals are encouraged to act if they suspect a woman is being abused.

“For safety and privacy speak to her alone,” says Komiotis.

The campaign encourages everyone to learn the thirteen warning signs of women abuse and twenty three risk factors around women experiencing abuse or currently in an abusive relationship in order to understand what is happening and be able to intervene.

“There's been a real shift to looking at preventative resources,” she says.

Neighbours, Friends and Families has created two public service announcements as well as brochures and safety cards, widely available across the province and on their website at neighboursfriendsandfamilies.on.ca.