



Awareness, Hope and Strength in the Face of Domestic Violence

By Jeralyn L. Lawrence

Domestic violence can afflict anyone—the affluent, impoverished, and every status in between. It is a monster that preys on no particular race, age, gender, ethnicity or religion. It can be latent, wearing one of its many disguises in the form of protection, affection—even love; or it can be more obvious, having weaved itself into a relationship for so long it becomes the norm. The only constant is the fact that domestic violence will change your life forever.

I was fortunate enough to grow up in a household where domestic violence did not exist. It was a home consumed with love and respect, and I witnessed my parents treat one another with kindness, both in their conversation and conduct. My parents have been married for over 50 years and are ridiculously in love to this day. Both in their 80s, they have spent more of their lives with each other than without. Their love runs deep, and they have been the consummate example of a happily married couple.

I knew nothing about domestic violence until I watched the movie, “The Burning Bed,” when I was a teenager. Starring Farah Fawcett, this movie was based on a real-life story of a victim of domestic violence who killed her abuser to spare her life, as well as the lives of her children. Prior to watching “The Burning Bed,” I, admittedly, had no idea that domestic violence was occurring in this country, let alone in the most unsuspecting households. It is incredible how something could be so hidden yet so preva-



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lent in our world. With this awareness, I was inspired to learn more.

I was shocked by the information I would uncover in law school, when writing a paper on Battered Women's Syndrome in my family law class. The statistics were daunting. I became more familiar with the prevalence of domestic violence in our world, and how domestic violence has evolved over the past several hundred years. I read about Dr. Lenore Walker, a leading author who developed the cycle of abuse theory and is now a renowned educator on the hell endured by survivors of domestic violence. I immersed myself in a topic that was once so foreign to me. I read about domestic violence often. I saw pictures, conducted research, and memorized statistics. Yet, nothing would prepare me for falling victim to abuse by someone I thought loved and adored me.

Shortly after law school, I found myself in a relationship with someone who assured me he loved me but treated me worse than anyone ever had. I was called every disgusting name in the book. I was pushed around, physically restrained, and my wrists were twisted and turned until I acquiesced. My abuser would feel the warmth of my car hood to determine how long I had been home just in case he believed I was lying about when I came and went. He tried to convince me every single one of my family members and friends were flawed and were not worthy of our time. He made every attempt to isolate me from those I loved the most, and those who showed me what real love felt and looked like. The greatest irony is that when we first started dating, my abuser praised me for my relationship with those very family members and friends and told me how attractive of a quality it was to be so close with them. In truth, he hated those bonds because they were stronger than my bond to him and they offered me security. He wanted so badly to isolate me, and anything that took my attention from him, he despised.

I lived on the domestic violence roller coaster and cycle of violence for years. The tension building stage, the acute battering stage, and then the "honeymoon" stage would cycle through just as Dr. Walker said they would. Walking on eggshells was a daily occurrence; I would often think if I just changed my behavior, he would be happy and would not lash out. It did not work out that way. The honeymoon phase was always blissful, and I was manipulated into thinking the relationship would remain this happy and fulfilling—that is until one trigger would bring about the tension building stage, the battering stage, the honeymoon stage, and the cycle would repeat.

It was not until I gave birth to my daughter that I had the strength to leave this toxic relationship. One night, I endured some of the most appalling and intense abuse while I clutched my 8-week-old daughter in my arms, and it would change my life forever. That evening I felt my abuser's breath as he stood over me, screaming within inches of my face and calling me the vilest names I had heard. I knew I had to get away from this person and stay away. In my heart, I knew his words did not define me, and they were not words I would ever let someone utter near my daughter again. Every pore in my body perspired as I mustered up the strength to call the police and obtain a restraining order from the person who assured me, he loved me the most.

We were divorced a short time later, but the wounds and scars that relationship caused remain. People have told me they are shocked by my experience, and I am asked, "How on earth could that have happened to you?" The truth is, I really do not know. Initially, I mistook his jealousy and possessiveness as traits that were cute and endearing. I was incredibly attracted to my abuser as well, which added to the complexity of ending the relationship.

As I am writing this, I am asking myself,

what is the point of this article? Other than bearing my soul, the intention is to bring awareness and, perhaps the necessary hope and strength to just one reader. If you are a victim of domestic violence, you are not alone. People will understand your plight and they will believe you. You are not defined by the names you have been called, or the abuse you have endured, and no one has the right to make you feel unworthy. There are people who love you, care about you, and want to help you.

You are at your most vulnerable and in the most dangerous position during the time in which you decide to leave the relationship, so build your village and have a safety plan in place as you break free from this incredibly harmful relationship. Fortunately, there are resources available to you.

My presidential initiative of *Putting Lawyers First* focused on a host of areas in our profession that needed improvement. One enormous area was attorney wellness. As a result, the NJSBA allocated financial reserves to partner with a therapeutic provider for its members and their immediate family to provide resources to address mental health and wellness. We are now in our second year offering this most consequential member benefit with Charles Nechtem Associates. If you are a survivor of domestic violence or enduring it now, please do not hesitate to reach out to CNA. You are entitled to free sessions with your NJSBA membership as part of the Association's Member Assistance Program. These sessions can be the start of your journey to freedom from abuse and help create a new path forward as you claim your life back. Help is available at 1-800-531-0200 or charlesnechtem.com. My hope for anyone experiencing domestic violence is that you find the strength within yourself to leave and begin the next step of what I am sure will be a new beginning of a wonderful and worthy journey. ■