Breaking the Cycle: Students Help Victims of Domestic Violence

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Breaking the Cycle

Students help victims of domestic violence

The stories are horrifying: Women severely beaten by their husbands, only to return home professing their love. Women forced to have sex under threat of violence — again, at the hands of their husbands. Women living in fear of an abusive boyfriend they’ve kicked out of the house. Battered women trying to make new lives for themselves, evicted from their apartments because the landlord “didn’t want trouble.”

For members of the Domestic Violence Task Force, a group of about 60 UB Law School students of both sexes, hearing those stories is never easy. But through their work as advocates, they’re trying to bring healing to these women’s lives.

Their work has just been recognized by the New York State Bar Association. The task force has been named the recipient of the Law Student Legal Ethics Award for 1992.

The task force has two major components: providing assistance to area lawyers doing pro bono legal counseling at a weekly clinic, and acting as advocates for women seeking orders of protection in family and criminal courts.

As well, the task force has a larger mission: to persuade the public that violence in the home is a concern not just for women, but for all of us.

“I view it as a societal epidemic, but I don’t think everybody views it that way,” says third-year student Catherine Cerulli, who coordinated the Tuesday Night Clinic last year. “The group’s focus is really a call to the community to be aware. This is a serious problem. No matter who you are, you have the responsibility to answer this call.”

Indeed, statistics show that the problem is epidemic. The FBI estimates that an act of family violence occurs every 18 seconds in the United States. Those numbers are frightening enough, but it’s the individual stories of the victims that reveal the human cost of domestic violence. At the Tuesday night clinic sessions, student advocates meet at a community center with as many as nine clients — women who have suffered physical abuse and have sought refuge at Haven House, a nearby shelter.

“We’ve had clients contact us and thank us, saying, ‘You’ve changed my life.’”

Great. “We’ve had clients contact us several weeks later and thank us, saying, ‘You’ve changed my life around,’” Tomkins says.

The task force grew out of student interest at the Law School. Rebecca Eisen, currently a third year law student, learned about a program at New York University Law School which provides family violence victims with assistance. A coalition was formed in September 1990, in which the Women’s Bar Association, Neigh-

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neighborhood Legal Services, Haven House and the Volunteer Lawyers Project investigated how the legal community might be able to better respond to the victims. Studying the issue, they determined that one of the most pressing needs of women in this situation is for free legal advice.

The Tuesday Night Clinic began in January 1991, and the task force hot line (for student courtroom advocates) the next month. The coordinators of the hot line, students Ruth Yashpan and Heidi Redlich, are paid with work-study funds, as is Tomkins, who coordinates the clinic work.

Student participants learn about the psychology and legal issues of domestic violence at periodic day-long training sessions, required before they begin working with clients.

"The students take a lot of pressure off my staff," says Natalie Owens, outreach coordinator of Haven House. "They’re not giving legal advice. What they’re doing is providing a support system for that woman and helping her to access a legal system that women may not see as user-friendly."

Owens says her four-person staff deals with an average of 50 referrals a month. Some months, the number climbs above 100. "A lot of those referrals," she says, "work into clients who need advocacy" — someone to guide them through the bureaucracy of the court system, help them to fill out forms, think through their legal options. "A lot of women don’t know what they need to do or how to do it," she says.

Just getting under way are two new projects by the task force. One is an effort to train student volunteers in the skills of a locksmith; women who’ve thrown a man out of the house need new locks, but can’t always afford a professional. The other new project is right on campus — an effort to reach out to students whose families have been troubled by violence.

Law Professor Isabel Marcus has brought the issue to the classroom in a seminar called "Terrorism in the Home."

"This issue is kind of like an onion," Marcus says. "When you peel back a layer, you always seem to find another layer.

"It’s putting the law in context," she says of her seminar. "What students have got to see is not only the systemic nature of the problem, but the foundations it rests on. I have to give it a sociological and psychological context."

Marcus, too, emphasizes that domestic violence is a problem that cuts across gender lines. It has been women, however, who have shown the most interest. "It’s very hard," she says, "to get the male students to not feel that you’re blaming them as men."

"Family violence affects children, families, husbands, lovers," says Cerulli. "It’s not just a women’s issue, it’s everybody’s issue... some victims have degrees; poor women, rich women, women whose backgrounds are in the legal or medical fields haven’t identified themselves as victims."

Says Tomkins: "Law school can be very frustrating sometimes. A lot of it is book work. The task force provides the opportunity to realize that what we do applies to real life."

Adds Cerulli: "I never get used to hearing the stories. And it never ceases to amaze me what some of these battered women have been through and how they persevere... their amazing courage."