

July 16, 2010

Op-Ed

Domestic Violence, It's More Than A Headline

High-profile cases of domestic violence will always attract headlines. As readers, we are often quick to make judgments based on what is being told to us by the media. We are even quicker to judge and criticize the actions of victims. (Something many people thought went out of style in the 70's.)

Nationally, we are reading headlines about a celebrity and his violent verbal and physical outbursts towards the mother of his young daughter. Fans did not want to believe Mel Gibson, their beloved action hero, could possibly be guilty of the allegations being made by his ex-partner. But then a series of recordings, some concerning death threats were released. Yet, fingers are still being waived in her direction by people wondering what she did wrong.

North Dakota is not immune to these high-profile headlines. Statewide we have been ambushed for over a year concerning two separate incidents of domestic violence surrounding a State Legislator. The two incidents occurred less than a year apart. Some seem to have forgotten that he plead guilty in the first instance. The latest incident is causing headlines due to the victim recanting her statement. Readers are not familiar, however, with the thousands of other stories that exist within North Dakota of domestic violence; stories which do not make the front page of the paper. Each story is unique, with one commonality weaving them together. That common thread is one of sheer terror felt by victims of domestic violence.

While there are circumstances surrounding this case that we do not know, there are many characteristics of domestic violence that are very clear. Domestic violence involves a pattern of behavior rather than a single isolated incident. Prosecutors have a responsibility to respond carefully and proactively to domestic violence crimes in order to ensure the safety of victims and to hold perpetrators accountable. Survivors recant allegations of abuse, more often than not, out of fear of retaliation from their abusers, not lack of evidence. The public should be mindful that a domestic violence perpetrator seeks to control the victim without regard to the victim's well being and often without regard as to whether or not children are spectators. This abusive condition necessitates that prosecutors carefully listen to the safety concerns of victims. Prosecutors have a unique opportunity, through effective early intervention, to prevent future incidences of domestic violence, including homicides. By relying primarily on the evidence collected by law enforcement rather than solely on the victim's testimony, the prosecutor may be able to reduce the risk of retaliation by the perpetrator against the victim and increase the likelihood of a successful prosecution. Statistically, women are at most risk of death when leaving an abuser. In North Dakota, there were eight domestic violence related deaths in 2009. Nationally, three women die every day at the hands of a current or former intimate partner, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

Violence in an intimate relationship is different from other acts or threats of violence. Domestic violence involves elements of control, domination, and manipulation as primary goals. Physical, verbal, emotional, and other forms of abuse are simply tools to accomplish these primary goals. Domestic violence perpetrators often carefully pick the time, place and means. In some instances, abusers are respected members of their communities and are violent only in the home "behind closed doors."

Through years of efforts, survivors now have many options, from reaching out to a hotline or domestic violence program, to obtaining a court order of protection, to staying in a shelter, to exploring options involving support groups and other services. Victims of domestic violence employ tremendous courage and resilience in their daily lives. The most important message for victims to hear as we are inundated with celebrity headlines is simply this: You are not alone. Help is available. If you or someone you know is a victim of domestic violence please contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline number at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233).

Tessa Sicble
Public Relations & Communications Coordinator
ND Council on Abused Women's Services/
Coalition Against Sexual Assault in ND