

SALUTE: WOMEN OF ACHIEVEMENT: 2009

Work with victims of domestic abuse emerges as theme in three of seven awards

By Michael Lollar

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Africa Gonzalez knew about domestic abuse firsthand. She had been working with the YWCA as director of immigrant women's services when she decided to end her relationship with a longtime boyfriend.

Gonzalez, 36, who works with domestic abuse victims every day, suddenly felt threatened. "It wasn't physical abuse. It was emotional abuse. When I decided to end the relationship, I began receiving threats. It was kind of like a stalking."

In her native Mexico, where Gonzalez was a dentist, it was not unusual for women "to be submissive and doing what men say." But in the United States, she hadn't expected domestic abuse to be as widespread as it is.

Gonzalez, who is co-chairwoman of the Shelby County Domestic Violence Council, is one of seven winners of Women of Achievement awards this year.

Three of the women are being honored for work involving domestic abuse victims. Gonzalez' award is for courage. Nancy Williams, executive director of the Memphis Child Advocacy Center, will receive the award for determination for her work with children who may have been sexually abused. Sonja White, managing attorney for the domestic violence and family law unit of Memphis Area Legal Services, will receive the award for vision for her work through the courts with women seeking protection from abusers.

The domestic violence theme in the awards was not planned, said Deborah Clubb, a co-founder of Women of Achievement and the annual awards. "It was an accident. Each year, nominations come from everywhere. We go through all of those and choose three people in each category, then pick the most compelling and worthy for that year.

"This year, the domestic violence theme just came up three times. These three women

The awards, to be presented March 29 at Holiday Inn University of Memphis, will include four other winners. Third-grader Caroline Turns, who underwent a five-organ transplant, will receive the award for heroism. Community activist Gloria Kahn, a founder of the Public Issues Forum, will receive the award for steadfastness. Downtowner magazine founder-publisher Jodie Vance will receive the award for initiative. And a posthumous heritage award will go to Alma C. Hansen, a Congregational Church missionary who devoted her life to development of the old LeMoyne College from 1922 to 1962.

Gonzalez, who counsels immigrant women, says her own experience with domestic abuse began about four years ago.

"The harassment and threats went on for about a year and a half. When I filed for an order of protection, that helped," she says.

In her work with immigrant women facing abuse, Gonzalez says immigrants tend to be under more stress than the rest of the population. "For some there is the language barrier and the fear of losing immigration status." Gonzalez had 270 new clients last year, and answered about 2,500 crisis calls.

Says Legal Services attorney Sonja White, "When all the dust clears, the bottom line is it's an effort to control somebody. That's the common thread." Male abusers tend to think they are exercising a form of "male privilege," she says, while abused women often think "it's my duty to stay in this relationship."

White says it's relatively rare for a man to be jailed for abuse. "Some of our (female) clients don't want him to go to jail." They fear the man will seek revenge if he is jailed, or the woman refuses to press charges because her family needs the man's income.

At the Memphis Child Advocacy Center, Williams deals with victims who have little or no choice. The center reviewed 2,677 cases last year of suspected child abuse. Most of the cases do not go to trial. In some, there isn't enough proof. Children may not tell out of fear or shame. Williams doesn't know how many of the cases end in convictions, but she does know that of 35 homicides related to domestic violence in Shelby County last year, 14 of the victims were children.

Two-thirds of children "make disclosures" about sexual abuse when questioned, making them eligible for therapy, says Williams. "One of our therapy workers said, 'It's not something they will forget, but it shouldn't define the rest of their lives.'"

The other winners:

Heroism: Caroline Turns, 9, of Germantown underwent a five-organ transplant last June after doctors at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital diagnosed a rare pancreablastoma that had spread to surrounding organs. Caroline is "doing great" nine months since the surgery, said her mother, Marcjana Turns.

Steadfastness: Gloria Kahn, 83, says her latest effort is as chairwoman of the Memphis Committee for Stem Cell Research. "Politics should not dictate science," she said when President Barack Obama signed an executive order lifting the funding ban for stem-cell research. Kahn's work is part of a lifetime of activism, including membership for more than 50 years in the Memphis Chapter of Hadassah. She helped found the Public Policy Forum "as an alternative to the religious right" and, among other groups, has worked with Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Initiative: Jodie Vance, 54, published her first issue of Downtowner Magazine in February 1991. In spite of its name, the magazine has citywide appeal. "It tells the good news about things happening in Memphis and some of the people making a difference in the city." Vance's company also publishes the Downtown Directory, which she describes as "an upscale Yellow Pages for Downtown." The company, which also designs annual reports, just celebrated its 18th anniversary.

Heritage: A posthumous award to Alma C. Hansen, a Congregational Church missionary who devoted her life to development of LeMoyne College from 1922 to 1962 and was its only female acting president.

The details

What: 2009 Women of Achievement Awards

Where: Holiday Inn University of Memphis

When: 4-7 p.m. March 29

Admission: \$25, including reception after the awards ceremony. Reservations due by March 23, with checks payable to Women of Achievement, P.O. Box 820353, Memphis, TN 38182-0353

More information: Call 525-7510

Related event:

Past Women of Achievement award winners and their children will be part of a free 1:30-3:30 p.m. forum Sunday at Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library. Hosted by United Way of the Mid-South, the forum, "Legacy of Achievers," will include honorees Happy Jones (1992), Kathy Kastan (2005) and Modeane Thompson (2007).



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