

Program aims to transform domestic-abuse victims into survivors

By Michael Lollar

Thursday, October 1, 2009

When Lia White was asked to paint a T-shirt to represent the domestic violence she survived, she made it look like a Memphis tourism shirt, but with a few twists. Instead of barbecue ribs, it depicts "Southern-style broken ribs."

Instead of the House of Blues, her shirt portrays the "House of Black and Blue."

White's shirt is one of 90 to be displayed as part of a "Clothesline Project" today with six community organizations presenting a 5:30 p.m. program on turning domestic-abuse victims into survivors. The program at Lindenwood Christian Church is a kickoff of Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

Abuse survivor Susan Still of New York, a woman whose dramatic story was featured on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" and "20/20," is scheduled as featured speaker, telling how she finally escaped an abusive husband. The man had forced one of his three children to videotape the beating that finally led her to flee. With the video as evidence, her husband, also charged with abusing the children, was sentenced to 36 years in prison.

White, 28, coordinator of youth programs and wellness at a Memphis nonprofit agency, will be on a panel as part of the program. She first experienced abuse at the hands of a husband, then with a boyfriend. She has had stitches, bruises and a bite on her cheek that left a mark for two months. She once was left unconscious. In spite of that, White says, she doesn't want people to think of her as a victim.

"It's about how I survived. I made it out. There is help," she says.

Her T-shirt incorporates dark humor as a statement: "I'm a very strong person because of what I've been through. I got counseling. I have healed, and now I'm able to give back."

White volunteers at the YWCA as an assistant to the court advocate for domestic violence: "This is my way of trying to help fix the domestic violence problem."

She cringes when people ask her why women put up with abuse as long as they do.

"It's a tragic cycle. It's manipulation, a whole entire brainwashing effect," she says. The husband swears it will never happen again. The woman wonders, "Where am I going to go? What am I going to do?" The woman starts to rationalize, "Well, he hasn't killed me. At least, I still have a roof over my head."

"He can get you to believe that you deserve to be abused. Meanwhile, he's isolating you from your family and friends, breaking down your self-esteem," she says. "No one wants to believe the person they love is some kind of monster."

White got out of the abusive relationship with her boyfriend in 2005, staying with a friend. The friend helped her decide to take control of her life.

"My friend said, 'What am I going to tell your mother when he kills you?' " she says.

It is the kind of help that Deborah Clubb, executive director of the Memphis Area Women's Council, hopes today's program will inspire.

"We want victims' stories to show that victims can become survivors," she says. "We want the whole community to understand that if you have a victim still at home or at work that you can help her become safe, to get out of a deadly life-ruining environment."

The majority of domestic-abuse survivors are women, but men can be victims of women or of partners in same-sex relationships. They have the same right as women to report abuse to police or to seek help through the Shelby County Crime Victims Center. Clubb said meager resources have focused on finding shelter for abused women and children, but "if someone wants to have something for men they're welcome to do it. We are paying attention to men and will get there as soon as we can."

The collaborative presenting the program is made of the Memphis Area Women's Council, Operation Safe Community, the Family Safety Center, Memphis Area Legal Services, the Shelby County Crime Victims Center and the Memphis and Shelby County Domestic Violence Council.

One major step in helping victims deal with abusive relationships was formation of a Domestic Violence Court, Division 10 of General Sessions Criminal Court, which began Sept. 1 as the county's exclusive venue for domestic-violence cases. Prior to that, domestic-violence cases were spread among seven court divisions. Now, a defendant accused of abuse will face the same judge each time a new complaint is filed.

Shelby County statistics show domestic violence accounts for more than 55 percent of violent crimes in the county, including about 15 percent of all homicides. Last year, 35 of the 146 local homicides were domestic cases. About 4,000 criminal cases of domestic violence are opened each year.

Clubb says she actually hopes to see a rise in domestic violence cases in the short term.

"It would be an indication that people are actually reporting the cases," she says. "We want more people to report it rather than staying at home and taking it and taking it and taking it."

Then, like White, they can look back at their experience and say, "I'm not just a girl who got beaten up by her boyfriend. I'm so much more than that."

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Erase Domestic Crime program

Where: Lindenwood Christian Church, 2400 Union, Stauffer Hall

When: 5:30 p.m. today

Admission: Free and open to the public

More information: Go to the Web site erasedomesticcrime.com for a list of community resources and advice to deal with domestic violence.

T-shirt exhibit: T-shirts painted by domestic abuse survivors in the "Clothesline Project" will be on display during October at the Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, 3030 Poplar.



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