

Even One Is Too Many

Lamorinda's history of domestic violence prevention and response

By Laurie Snyder

"Too many women continue to live in fear in their own homes ... and too many families have had to mourn the loss of their loved ones. It has to end - because even one is too many." - President Barack Obama

When Myra Belfiore sat down at a Junior League meeting in the late 1970s, she knew only that she would be learning about how one nonprofit was helping others. Junior Leaguers have been hearing such talks in towns across America since 1901, and holding mother-daughter teas to raise funds for the arts and hospitals since the 1930s.

But as Marya Grambs began speaking, Belfiore realized that she and her fellow Lamorindans were being asked to open a door that many Americans would prefer stay shut. Grambs founded the first domestic violence shelter on the West Coast, La Casa de las Madres, and headed C-A-L-L, the forerunner of the Battered Women's Alternative (BWA) and STAND! For Families Free of Violence. Back then, one of every two American women could expect to be battered, and C-A-L-L was confronting the epidemic with just one telephone line and three volunteers.

"The woman sitting on either side of me, could it be?" Belfiore looked - and wondered at a statistic she had never heard before. By the time Grambs finished, she says, "Our chapter members were anxious to volunteer."

"Women in Lamorinda knew what they were hearing was wrong, and knew they were in a position to help," says Orinda City Council and Junior League member Amy Worth. "They had the resources and time. Motivated by altruism, they also had credibility. Law enforcement was still grappling with how to handle battery, and government wasn't even addressing the need for trauma care. They used their financial and political resources to bring people together in a way that had never happened before."

By 1977, one of the area's first domestic violence hotlines was housed at an inconspicuous apartment on Mt. Diablo Boulevard in Lafayette. By 1978, the Bechtel Wives Club was on board. BWA applied for larger and larger grants and opened its first emergency shelter in 1979. By 1981, Junior Leaguers were preparing policy papers to help local officials grasp the impact of violence on county residents. "They created an organization that was nimble and could adapt as they learned more

about the issue," says Worth. "BWA added therapy services for children - and for the abusers."

"It takes about three times for an abused woman to leave," Belfiore explains. "She leaves and comes back, and leaves and comes back before she is finally able to say, 'This is the straw.'" She recalls one former client who endured episode after episode of abuse - until she realized the violence was also affecting her son. "He was starting to think it was okay to hit women. That's when she got out."

In 1985, Moraga resident Rollie Mullin took the helm at BWA. "Rollie was one of the finest women I have ever known," says former Junior League president, Marsha Servetnick. A former math teacher, she was deeply spiritual and quietly persuasive. "Rollie helped BWA to become family centered, growing its budget from \$500,000 to \$2.5 million." Thanks to a major gift from Dean and Margaret Lesher, BWA was able to make more apartments available for women and children in crisis by launching the Margaret Lesher Transitional House and Employment Center.

Servetnick, who served on the boards of both BWA and the Animal Rescue Foundation, also helped advance the movement. Dubbed "the mother of the Rebuilding Lives Luncheon," she borrowed the fundraising idea from a friend in Seattle. "We told people, 'There's no need to buy a new dress or a suit. You'll be in by 11:30 and out by 1.'" That first RBL took place on Nov. 4, 1993. Today, it is an important source of funding for STAND! - and a life-affirming event in which men and women stand side by side to say, "We will end domestic violence in our lifetime."

Belfiore and Servetnick have the following message for anyone experiencing domestic violence: "There are people in your community with open arms who will help you. Don't be afraid. Reach out to your neighbor, reach out to the agency. You're a beautiful human being. You don't deserve to be hit."

For more information about the annual Rebuilding Lives Luncheon Oct. 9, visit: www.standffov.org.

You Can Break the Cycle of Violence:

Locally, call STAND! for confidential advice: 1-888-215-5555. Nationwide, use the National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233).

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Look Around:

- 1 out of every 4 women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime.
- Nearly one-third of female homicide victims listed in police records were killed by an intimate partner.
- Up to 60 percent of perpetrators who batter their partners also abuse children in the household.
- Boys who grow up witnessing domestic violence are twice as likely to abuse their own partners or children later in life.
- Prior to domestic violence incidents in which the victim or perpetrator was murdered, up to 80 percent of the men involved had physically abused the woman beforehand.
- 1 of every 12 women and 1 of every 45 men have been stalked - 81 percent of those stalked by a current or former partner were also physically assaulted by that partner with 31 percent also sexually assaulted.

Source: Domestic Violence Fact Sheet, National Coalition Against Domestic Violence: www.ncadv.org.

'Company' The Musical at Town Hall Theatre

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The play also works very well visually. With choreography directed by Jennifer Perry, Collard, with his long-legged streamlined silhouette, dances with grace, and so do his partners during the play's several group dance routines. There is also a very realistic karate duel between Megan Ihle (Sarah) and her husband, played by Vince Perry (Harry). And Roster set the piano on stage, with music director Margaret Halbig playing all evening long while the actors use the piano as a prop, turning around it, and sometimes even sitting on it.

All 14 performers have strong acting and singing skills. Susie Shepard (Amy) performs one of the funniest scenes as the hysterical bride-to-be. Shepard has a great sense of comedic timing and pushes her script to the maximum effect. On a completely different note, Jill Gould (Joanne) gives a chilling interpretation of the rich alcoholic wife; her desperation filters through her singing voice. It will give you goose bumps.

"Company" runs through Oct. 11 at Town Hall Theatre, 3535 School St., Lafayette. For more information, visit www.townhalltheatre.com.



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