

Gloucester men work to beat the bullies

The news from Gloucester left me shuddering in its wake. Since the four years that I've spent time there, some force has clearly been brewing within the shorelines of that ocean town more powerful than any "Perfect Storm."

Last year, Gloucester became the second city in Massachusetts to declare itself a Domestic Violence Free Zone. To bring home the message, on Feb. 9 at 2 p.m. a billboard was scheduled to go up on Railroad Avenue, a Valentine's Day card from the men to the women of Gloucester, saying "Strong Men Don't Bully."

Local women, many of whom are drowning in private agonies behind closed doors, can now look up at this public proclamation with the names of 485 Gloucester men in the background and see an unusual sign of hope. And local men can look up and choose to have their names added to the list, joining forces with a cross-section of all the men in the city who are speaking out and putting an end to the silence which condones domestic abuse.

I'd witnessed small victories against the tide before. In 1998, I sat in the Gloucester court with a woman whose former boyfriend had violated a restraining order against him. Shaking her finger, she looked squarely at the judge and said in a gentle but determined voice: "Use your power, judge, I beg you. I gave this man every chance. I believed him when he said he would change. Now, with every footstep I hear behind me, I am afraid. I cannot stop my nightmares. Please judge, take the crimes this man has committed against me seriously." And the judge did.

Mostly though, the women I met when I was a volunteer at HAWC (Help for Abused Women and their Children) had to cling to each other for support. In

SITTING IN

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the weekly women's support group, women of all ages and financial means shared their common stories of broken dreams, and their fears for themselves and their children. I remember well the day the child-therapist came to the group to offer counsel.

In the candlelit room, freckled-faced "Jane" spoke of her award-winning 16-year-old daughter's sudden withdrawal. Burying the pain of witnessing her father's abusive behavior for years, her daughter was now talking about her feelings through her dog. Pretty "Erin," who looked like the girl next door, sobbed that her 3-year-old son bit her on the thigh and broke her skin, and she had to get a tetanus shot the day before her 30th birthday. She knew it wasn't his fault, yet it reminded her of how her husband violated her in every way.

"Mary" sat hunched over as she questioned taking out a restraining order on her own son. Wracked with guilt, knowing her son was only mimicking her ex-husband's behavior, she was terrified for herself and her other children.

And how could I forget hearing of 5-year-old Melinda's pictures of her mother with blood all over her, or watching 3-

year-old Johnny throwing his toys in the playgroup screaming, "Bang, mommy, bang bang, daddy?"

These memories made me gasp not only with sadness but also with my own fears for our communal well-being. I was aware of the national statistics: 3 million women are battered a year — domestic violence being the leading cause of injury to women. And I was equally well aware of the prognosis: 50 percent of boys who witness violence

will become batterers and 50 percent of the girls will become victims.

How would the cycle of violence be broken when witnessing domestic violence is the single best predictor of juvenile delinquency and when 85 percent of men in prison come from violent homes?

But I didn't foresee Gloucester's stirring sea change. According to HAWC's Gloucester Program Coordinator, Nicole

Richon-Schoel, in 1997 Mayor Bruce Tobey appointed a committee to assess the health needs of the city. Thus emerged the Coalition for the Prevention of Domestic Abuse. Police, clergy, schools, hospitals, youth and senior centers, child development programs, Gloucester Prevention Services and others have joined together to address the root causes and devastating emotional and financial effects of domestic violence.

Nor had I spoken to Willy Green-

baum, heard the conviction in his voice. A Gloucester art dealer who has spear-headed Men for HAWC, Greenbaum told me that Gloucester Men Against Domestic Abuse is in its fourth year of grassroots efforts to stop a culture of domestic violence and has grown to almost 500 men.

"The change in what it means to be a strong and healthy man is going to happen one repair shop, one coffee shop, one office, one locker room at a time," says Greenbaum. "We're finding ways to say we cannot be strong and be abusing women or children.

"We have been silent way too long," he says. "Many men are grateful for the chance, they feel relieved to finally say what men and women and their sons and daughters need to hear. Women have spent 25 years doing the heavy lifting — creating shelters and hotlines, state and federal budgets and education and empowerment groups — but only men can actually change the culture which keeps causing this terrible tragedy."

Richon-Schoel once told me of her vision for an integrated community approach to stopping domestic violence. I can only guess what it might have been like for the five women most recently murdered on the North Shore to have had a lifeline of community support held out to them.

The lives of future generations may well be on a different course, thanks to the vision, courage, and hard work of Richon-Schoel, Greenbaum, the local institutions and the 485 men whose names on a billboard may signify at last the "perfect groundswell" necessary for our common safety.

For more information call HAWC at 978-283-8642. Lanie Pryor writes about North Shore issues and people and is a frequent contributor to *Sunday*.

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