

SURVIVORS

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of them. She’s encountered many spouses, boyfriends, girlfriends or partners who have all threatened to take children away from their other halves.

And she’s met lots of children who would begin crying when she laughed, because Brackett has a loud laugh and they associate loud sounds with danger and pain.

“I often ask myself why I do this for a job?” Brackett said. “Ultimately, I do it for the children. For the people. For the challenge. For the chance to work with people and a community that cares. It is a privilege and honor that has been given to me by each victim and survivor when they allowed me to witness their long and slow march toward a better life. And make no mistake, a long and slow march is what it is.”

What it takes to survive

So often, Brackett said, the focus of domestic violence is on the horror stories. Instead, she thinks more focus should be put on what it takes to survive.

Think about the strength it takes a person to wake up every day, sometimes for years, terrified that today will be the day that everything explodes.

Think about the courage it takes a person in a domestic violence situation to call and ask for help when that person is at his or her most vulnerable and desperate state.

Think about the sheer force of will for victims to constantly remind themselves they are worth something, to believe enough in themselves that they can continue even when it seems like everything in the whole world is aligned against them.

Think about the love and hope a person has for themselves that eventually they are inspired to dream new possibilities and then actually follow through by creating a new life for themselves, and often their children.

“Strength, courage, hope and love. These are the attributes embodied in every survivor,” Brackett said. “Those are the things we should be thinking about, especially when we speak with victims and survivors.”

Making a difference

At the end of her speech, Brackett shared advice for making the journey of a victim and/or survivor filled with



Celeste Edenloff / Echo Press
Kristy Brackett, a part-time Long Prairie police officer and director of advocacy for Someplace Safe, was the guest speaker at the Taking Steps Against Domestic Violence event Tuesday evening.

support, safety and love.

► Listen deeply and intently. Too many times, victims have been isolated from others. If they choose you to speak to, listen because your reaction to what they say will have an influence on whether that person decides to share his or her story again.

► Believe what the person is saying. Often it may be hard to believe a person is capable of being an abuser. But the faces of the people you may know are very different behind closed doors.

► Be non-judgemental. Many factors influence a person’s ability to leave an abusive relationship, not least the fact that leaving an abusive relationship is the single most dangerous time for a victim of abuse. 75% of those killed as a result of domestic violence were killed when they were trying to leave.

“It is not your job to judge their decisions, even when they’ve decided to stay,” she said. “It takes an average of seven to 12 attempts to leave before a victim leaves permanently.”

The job of those who support victims/survivors is to make sure the person knows it is not his/her fault, to help the person find resources, to help them make a plan to keep themselves and children safe, and to respect their choices as they are the ones who will have to live with them.

“For those who may be experiencing domestic violence today, you are not alone,” she said. “Leaving may be the hardest thing you’ll ever do, but it will be worth it.”

JUSTICE

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Not doing our job

Soon after McKeig became a state supreme court judge, she toured a prison in Oak Park Heights and saw a board with photos of all who were incarcerated at the prison.

“There were far too many young people on that board who I knew as kids,” she said. “It made me realize we weren’t doing on jobs.”

One of the prisoners really stuck with her. She didn’t use his real name, but instead referred to him as Eagle.

He was entered into the system at the age of 2. He had been physically and sexually abused. The second oldest of seven children, Eagle’s life didn’t get much better as he grew up. McKeig said he was removed and brought back into his home 17 times, eventually being sent to juvenile detention until he was 18.

Shortly after being released he was arrested again, this time for robbery, and was convicted of a violent crime charge. He was the driver in a robbery where a woman was kidnapped and put in the trunk of a car. He was sent to Oak Park Heights for 12 years.

Besides being a child of abuse, Eagle was born with fetal alcohol syndrome and was a very impulsive individual, she said.

“I gave my heart and soul for 16 years for kids like him,” said McKeig. “We had an obligation to take care of him and we didn’t.”

On her mind

McKeig often thought about Eagle after that prison tour, and decided it was time to find out where he was and visit him. She was asked by a staff member what she was going to say. She didn’t know. All she knew was that she needed to see him.

She found out he was in prison, and received his approval to visit.

“He had a strong presence about him,” McKeig said. “Last time I saw him he was little.”

After telling Eagle she was sorry for not doing her job, Eagle started to cry – something she was not expecting.

He didn’t think anyone ever thought of him. He thought he was just a paycheck to her.

“He was not angry. He was shocked,” said McKeig. “He was shocked that somebody thought of him.”

Eagle told McKeig what his life had been like, that he knew he needed to be removed from his home and that his mom was constantly getting beat up. He told her of the time he found out he was a product of rape, when he heard people call him the “rape baby.”

He talked of his violent, alcoholic stepfather and a time when his mom crept up the stairs with a knife in each hand, stabbing each step with a knife, telling his stepdad she was coming for him.

Eagle was afraid his mother was going to get killed.

He told of his siblings – a brother who was murdered at the age of 15 when someone repeatedly ran over him with a vehicle; another brother who was just as violent as his stepfather; and his sisters who were all part of the child protection services system.

“He had all of this weight on him,” she said.

Eagle also told her that he could do something with his life when he left the prison system. She believed him, knowing he wasn’t a violent person and he didn’t have any chemical abuse problems.

“I want to help you. I didn’t do it before,” she told Eagle.

Keeping her promise

Eventually, he was

released from prison and sent to a halfway house. The two kept in contact for awhile. But his time out of prison was short-lived. McKeig again went to visit him in prison. He told her he didn’t do the right thing but that he couldn’t stop thinking about his brothers and went back to the reservation where they grew up, even though it was out of state. He knew the consequences but said it was worth it, because that is when he learned how his 15-year-old brother had been killed.

He thought she would be disappointed. She wasn’t. Instead she asked him what they could do next time so he wouldn’t end up back in prison.

Eagle was released from prison three weeks ago. He had nothing. No clothes. No job. No money. No transportation.

McKeig, keeping her promise to help him, drove to Stillwater to pick him up and bring him back to the halfway house. She got some items he would need. She helped in whatever way she could.

“We have these wounded individuals,” she told the crowd. “He didn’t have a chance. He was born into circumstances that were out of his control. We are still struggling on how to do it (child protection service) better. Eagle is a very bright young man. He has all these abilities but only if someone can help him.”

Eagle isn’t alone. McKeig said he is one of many and that more than 8,000 children a year are placed in out-of-home care.

“We need to put our heads together when these kids are little so we can help them,” she stated. “Think about what we can do instead of letting them get 34, and in prison.”

McKeig said plenty can be done and if people want to share their ideas with her, she’s all ears.

“If you have ideas, let me know,” she said. “I know I have a lot of them.”