



VOICES against VIOLENCE

In recognition of Domestic Violence Awareness month, the Messenger is launching a new series that seeks to put a face on domestic abuse and intimate partner violence.

Jennifer's ex tried to convince her, others she was crazy

She finally left, but the abuse continues through court system

By TESHA M. CHRISTENSEN

Jennifer* grew up in a loving, two-parent household in the suburbs. She didn't think she was in an abusive marriage but she knew that after five years and two kids, she had to get out. On the day he started screaming at her in front of her mom, she decided she'd had enough. She kicked him out.

It was only later that someone gave her a label for what she had experienced: domestic violence or intimate partner terrorism.

"I was so naïve," admitted Jennifer, age 41. "I am an example of someone who is educated and grew up in a loving home, but had no idea that emotional, financial, or psychological abuse existed – or what it was."

A business and French major, Jennifer had gone back to earn her master's from Carlson in business management. She dated Dave* for two years and they got

married in 2011. Their son was born in 2013, and their daughter was an infant in 2016 when they split up.

No, she didn't see any signs

"The number one question I get is 'Did I see any signs?'" Jennifer pointed out.

"No I didn't. That question isn't helpful. People think I went to Vegas and married a douchebag. When we first started dating, he came across as very alluring." He was well-groomed, took care of himself and was attractive. "He didn't fit the mold of what I thought an abuser would be," she said.

Now, Jennifer knows she's the typical victim. "We're all helpers," she observed. "We're all pleasers."

When they were dating, Dave might mention that his back hurt. She was quick to call the chiropractor for him to schedule an appointment. She'd feel good that he felt better. "Five years later, you're exhausted from doing everything for him and not helping yourself," Jennifer said.

JENNIFER'S EX >> 5

FOR SOUTH HIGH STUDENTS: Homecoming or Climate Strike



About 200 South High students walked out of school on Friday, Sept. 20 during the Global Climate Strike. Carrying signs, they headed to the Blue Line train station at Lake and Hiawatha to travel to St. Paul's rally. (Photo by Tesha M. Christensen)

By MARGIE O'LOUGHLIN and TESHA M. CHRISTENSEN

The 200 students who left South High School to be a part of the Global Climate Strike on Friday, Sept. 20, 2019, were not allowed to participate in their homecoming football game and related activities that night.

Because of that, senior Claire Hennen made the tough choice to not attend the strike so that she could go to her last homecoming pep rally during

seventh hour.

It wasn't an easy choice to make, and she's frustrated by the district's decision to prohibit students from returning to school grounds for events later in the day.

"I care about climate change," said Hennen. "It affects us, but people don't give us the chance to say anything."

She added, "That's why I think older people need to step up for us."

Students strike despite MPS policy

Despite the school district's policy, many students at all grade levels participated in the Global Climate Strike held three days before the UN Climate Summit in New York City.

Protests were held in more than 150 countries around the world to demand transformative action to address the climate crisis.

SOUTH >> 3

New athletic field with lights at South High

Families can finally watch home games at updated South High

By TESHA M. CHRISTENSEN

Thanks to South High parents and students who pushed the district to upgrade the field for 20 years, South High's teams can finally play night games.

Scott Schluter was part of the group that made the final push towards making this a reality for South High. His two children attended South High, and that's when he realized what bad shape the field was in and

how unsafe it was for athletes. The old grass field was usually a mud field, and players had to avoid the dangerous storm grates on the corners. Much of the track was torn up and jagged parts exposed concrete underneath.

"If you see something you believe could be better, not only say something, but do something positive to help create that outcome," encouraged the 28-year Ericson resident. "You might not be able to do everything, but you can do something."

For him, it was hearing from another soccer parent that the district was not planning to

construct a better athletic field as promised nor did it intend to switch the field to a north-south layout in July 2016 with land it had bought and cleared just north along E. Lake St. Instead, the district planned to erect a brand new \$29 million, 87,000-square-foot educational building at E. Lake St. and 21st Ave. The new building replaced the adult basic education (ABE+) facility being torn down to make room for a new Hennepin County Service Center and related multi-use development at Hiawatha and Lake.

FIELD >> 3



Dessa comes back to Longfellow with memoir, ice cream

PAGE 2



Check out our new special section AGING WELL

PAGE 8 & 9



Rain gardens improving water quality in Nokomis

PAGE 16

Jennifer's ex tried to convince her, others she was crazy

DEFINING ABUSE

Domestic violence (also called intimate partner violence (IPV), domestic abuse or relationship abuse) is a pattern of behaviors used by one partner to maintain power and control over another partner in an intimate relationship.

Domestic violence does not discriminate. Anyone of any race, age, sexual orientation, religion or gender can be a victim – or perpetrator – of domestic violence. It can happen to people who are married, living together or who are dating. It affects people of all socioeconomic backgrounds and education levels.

Domestic violence includes behaviors that physically harm, arouse fear, prevent a partner from doing what they wish or force them to behave in ways they do not want. It includes the use of physical and sexual violence, threats and intimidation, emotional abuse and economic deprivation. Many of these different forms of domestic violence/abuse can be occurring at any one time within the same intimate relationship.

It's not always easy to tell at the beginning of a relationship if it will become abusive.

In fact, many abusive partners may seem absolutely perfect in the early stages of a relationship. Possessive and controlling behaviors don't always appear overnight, but rather emerge and intensify as the relationship grows.

Domestic violence doesn't look the same in every relationship because every relationship is different. But one thing most abusive relationships have in common is that the abusive partner does many different kinds of things to have more power and control over their partner.

~ From www.thehotline.org

Gaslighting: A form of psychological manipulation in which a person seeks to sow seeds of doubt in a targeted individual making them question their own memory, perception, and sanity. Named after a movie called "Gaslight."

Coercive Control: An act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten victims.

SUPPORT GROUPS

Cornerstone Services -

Ongoing groups meet regularly for women, children and men
24-hour helpline: 952-884-0330
cornerstonemn.org

Domestic Abuse Project -

Sessions offered regularly for women, men and children
612.874.7063 ext.232
www.domesticabuseproject.com

CALL FOR HELP

Day One MN Emergency Crisis

HotLine: call or text 1.866.223.1111

LGBTQ Domestic Violence Hotline

612.824.8434

Teen Dating Violence Hotline

866-331-9474, LovelsRespect.org

Native Domestic Violence Helpline

844-762-8483

>> from 1

He always came across as a victim, even from the start – something she knows now should have been a red flag. His family life was horrible. He believed everyone was mean to him at his job. When he took a class, he leaned on Jennifer to do the work. All of his past relationships failed because of the women he was with. Things were

never his fault.

Jennifer used to think that being abused in a marriage meant black eyes and physical beatings. But Dave never hit her.

He engaged in gaslighting behavior, telling her she was misremembering what he'd said and pretending that other things never happened. When they moved into their newly-built dream house in the suburbs, a fixture in their master bathroom

didn't work, so Jennifer had to use a bathroom down the hall to blow dry her hair. It was a bit of a hassle. One morning, tired from a night awake with her baby, Jennifer absent-mindedly plugged the blow dryer into the outlet – and it worked. She excitedly told her husband about it, and asked when he had fixed it. "It always worked," he responded. "What are you talking about?"

Jennifer remarked, "He tried to make me feel crazy."

During an argument, he would go on and on, and keep her up late. Other nights, he'd wake her up every two hours. She was exhausted. When she'd finally leave the room for a break, and then come back ready to talk anew about the 3.5-hour-long conversation they'd just had, he'd look at her and deny it occurred. At other times, he'd refuse to talk about something unless she could remember word for word exactly what he'd said previously – down to the right pronoun.

Everything was always Jennifer's fault.

He'd hide her computer mouse or her keys. After she looked through the entire house, she'd find the item in the room where she had started, the room where he was.

He spent all their money and racked up credit card bills, buying things for himself but not Jennifer or the kids. "It was always about him," said Jennifer. He was arrogant and entitled. At one time when they were strapped for cash, Jennifer agreed to give up a hobby for the month and let him take the \$200 to attend a family event without her. He blew that and more at a casino – and never said thanks. He earned thousands in cash at side jobs, telling her he made less than he actually did. He quit a well-paying job and relied on her to cover their living expenses.

Every house they ever lived in had holes in the walls. He'd punch the walls or throw items at the walls. "He would hit other things that hit me," said Jennifer, even when she was pregnant. In fact, she's learned that abusers often intensify when a woman is pregnant or they have a child because the attention isn't focused on them anymore. When she was pregnant with their son, she shut a door and he kicked it open, hitting her so hard she fell down. When she'd tried to leave a room, he'd stand in the doorway and block her exit.

Sometimes she'd call Dave's mom to come help. She found out later that his mom had helped remove the guns in every house he had ever lived in. That's the kind of information she wishes someone would have told her before they got serious.

Dave said a lot of put-downs, Jennifer recalled. When she called him out on the mean things he had said, he'd retort, "Kidding, just kidding! You need to learn how to take a joke." He tried to isolate her from family members and friends. He bullied and manipulated and lied, while showing her just enough affection here and there to give her hope.

These incidences didn't happen every day. "This type of abus-

er will play the victim and then seem 'normal' for awhile before another incident," observed Jennifer. "Each time I would make excuses for his behavior and there would be many days in between the next incident. The longer I was with him, the shorter the time in between incidents became. In the beginning it was maybe only monthly, if that. By the time I left, it was probably every other day."

Significant incident

On the day Jennifer had finally had enough, it wasn't that it was worse than it had ever been, but that the thousands of straws piled together finally broke the camel's back. They had an infant, and he wouldn't her sleep. So her mom came over so that she could get more than 45 minutes every three hours. Jennifer laid down and Dave came in to change the garbage can in their room, upset that she wasn't cleaning their house. Then Dave insisted they run errands. Jennifer gave in, got up, and left with Dave. When they finally got back home, she was beyond exhausted. He started yelling at her in front of her mom.

"Because my ex showed his behavior to my close family member, it become real and I something I had to get out of," said Jennifer.

Abuse affects kids, too

To help resolve disputes after their divorce, they were assigned to a parenting consultant (PC) with the understanding that they would split the fees equally. They did an intake together, and then meet separately with the PC, who immediately referred Jennifer to the Domestic Abuse Project (DAP) in Minneapolis after seeing the interactions between the two of them. "When he said that to me, I was so confused. Because he's so mean to me verbally in the things he says?" Jennifer recalls asking. "I didn't quite get it."

But she did start a 16-week support group at DAP in late 2016, and it was life-changing. When she heard the stories that the other women in her support group told, she couldn't help but cry. "They all said something that was just like my life," said Jennifer. "It was freaky." One in three women have been in an abusive relationship, which means that Jennifer is far from being alone in her experiences.

She admits, "I feel ashamed and stupid that I should have known better, but also so glad and strong for getting out. It also was important to hear that these men, more than likely, will not change. I stuck around for a long time hoping he would change... that never will happen."

In her support group, Jennifer learned that abuse isn't just physical and verbal. It's also psychological, sexual, financial, and emotional. And it doesn't just affect the mom when a dad engages in intimate partner terrorism. It negatively affects the kids, too, and those issues continue after the divorce.

"When I left my abuser my kids were tiny (newborn and

Jennifer was surprised to find she was among this statistic:

1 in 3 women experience domestic violence by their partners



Thanks so a support group, Jennifer now recognizes how the desire for power and control led to abuse by her ex.



Jennifer never reported her ex-husband to the police. She hoped he would change. She wanted to give her kids a happy family. She didn't understand why he acted how he did.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IS ONE OF THE MOST CHRONICALLY UNDERREPORTED CRIMES

25% of all physical assaults
20% of all rapes
50% of all stalking

committed against females by their partners are reported to the police

And for the number of cases that do get reported...
on average a woman will be assaulted by her partner/ex-partner

35 TIMES BEFORE REPORTING IT TO THE POLICE

According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence

Jennifer's ex tried to convince her, others she was crazy

>> from 5

3-years-old). My son had already started having issues with anxiety," said Jennifer. "During our separation and long process to divorce, my son developed emotional trauma/PTSD. He has issues learning and issues with memory. He has regressed and speaks in 'baby talk,' and gets frustrated easily. Overall, both kids are extremely attached to me – and have to sleep with me at night."

Both have a lot of emotional issues compared to their peers and have trouble focusing.

One of the things that Jennifer learned during her support group really sticks with her: "If you help a mom, you help the kids."

No justice in family court

Jennifer has not found justice in the court system. Instead, Dave has continued to abuse her, changing some of his tactics but not the controlling behavior and disrespect that drive his actions. "He can be as abusive to me as he wants and there are no repercussions," Jennifer said.

When it came time to sell their dream house after the divorce, he moved back in and refused to cooperate with a real estate agent in order to put the house on the market. He wouldn't respond to emails about the sale. Jennifer didn't have enough money to pay the bills due to the financial abuse and had to move back in with her parents. The high cost of continuing legal bills means that she's still living with her parents.

Mediation didn't work. "It didn't matter what I said, he said no. He was that entitled," said Jennifer.

When it was time to exchange the kids, he would give her an address in Blaine. Then he would tell her they were actually in Chanhassen. And then he'd say they were in Woodbury. If she responded that he could drop them off at her house, he'd refuse and insist that she come to him. A PC advised her to do that anyway, and then go home and wait. But she struggled with her kids' needs, to eat and go to bed and not be pawns in a game of power and control, and how to balance those things. Today, she's protected somewhat by an order to exchange the kids at a local police station, thanks to a

PC ruling.

There isn't much she has to say that's positive about the court system she's now been involved in for three and a half years.

Jennifer has been shocked that the court system recognizes that Dave is abusive and has mental health issues, but has still granted him overnights with the children. "When people hear just a portion of my story they assume I have full custody," she observed. "People outside of divorce have no idea that custody equals three things: physical, legal, and parenting time."

Jennifer and Dave have shared joint physical and legal custody since their divorce, which means they have to reach decisions together on things like education and health. "He always wants more parenting time because if he gets it, he pays me less child support," said Jennifer. Dave currently has their 6 and 4-year-old for two overnights once a week, 24 hours at a time. Jennifer is concerned about her kids during that time as their dad doesn't always feed them, refuses to take them to a doctor when they have a fever, "forgets" about occupational therapy appointments, leaves them sitting in poopy pants, and ignores safety issues.

"I picked up my son one day and he had a Cascade dishwasher pod in his mouth," recalled Jennifer. When she said something about the dangerous poison to Dave, he yelled at her. "Don't tell me what to do on my parenting time!"

When she asked the PC about it, she was told, "Something needs to happen for something to happen." In other words, the child needs to be hospitalized, require surgery, or die for the court system to restrict his parenting time. "The slogan should be 'Reactive not proactive,'" said Jennifer, who wishes that the courts would put the well-being of children first and enforce the statutes that limit parenting time and custody in cases of domestic violence.

"It's sad because the system is so reactionary. Instead, when abuse is proven, all custody should be given to the non-abusive parent, and the abusive parent should need to earn their way back," said Jennifer. "Sadly, I do not see the system changing."

It doesn't take long for Dave to get mad and fire a PC, leaving



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Jennifer to pay the bills. It takes about three months or longer to get another one, and things are pretty difficult during that time as he refuses to follow any previous agreements.

'You need to get along for your kids'

Jennifer has been frustrated when they get a new professional involved in their family as each time they tell her they will be drawing a line in the sand and moving forward, and that the past is in the past. She believes that what has happened before is important to know to understand what they've already done and what their situation is, but is told to essentially forget about the past. Move on.

And so it keeps repeating itself.

It's a situation that's common enough to have its own term: domestic abuse by proxy or post-separation abuse, as in domestic abuse through the kids after the couple has split up.

The police in her city know them by name because of how often Dave has called complaining that she is withholding the kids from him when they're sick or when it's not actually his parenting time. He threatens and yells at Jennifer and her parents regularly at their home. But it is never enough for the police or courts to take action. Recently, their new judge told them he wasn't going to restrict Dave's involvement despite his threats and parental negligence because "he loves his kids."

Jennifer often hears the refrain, "You need to get along for the sake of your kids. You guys need to figure this out for your kids."

She asks, "How do I?"

Editor's note: *Names changed for protection.

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SURVIVOR STORIES

ALLY is a beautiful, independent, charismatic woman who is a single mother and full-time student and paralegal.

However, her life wasn't always like this.

She spent many years in a very emotionally, mentally and physically abusive relationship, living day-to-day in fear and constant turmoil. The good news is that Ally managed to make the decision that some abuse victims don't get to make: She left her abuser.

The bad news is that things got worse then. Her abuser's rage grew, and he began stalking and harassing her on a 24-hour basis. He tried to kill her several times. And then he and his family began an eight-year court battle to take custody of their daughter away from Ally.

And then, finally, some really good news. Ally survived the repeated attempts on her life, and she won the custody battle for her daughter. Today, Ally is thriving, stronger and smarter than ever, relishing a life of freedom and peace after abuse, her daughter at her side.

BEA and dating abuse.

The first day of high school was terrifying for Bea. She couldn't find her friends, so instead she met a new girl who smoked marijuana and had older guy friends from another town. One of those "older guys" became Bea's boyfriend. He was 19, she was 14.

In retrospect, the signs of dating abuse were there, but back then, there weren't words for it, people didn't know what it was or how dangerous it could be.

Bea's boyfriend's behavior was flattering to her at first: He was charming and smooth and jealous, called her all the time, bought her her own phone, asked her to call him from school to "check in." Their relationship moved fast, too fast, and soon the boyfriend was controlling Bea – what she wore, what she did – and isolating her from family and friends. Eventually, it was just the two of them.

Sometime Bea stayed in her room all day, wearing a pink robe her boyfriend had bought her. She cried a lot and whispered and pleaded with him on the phone. Then he would pick her up to "go to the mall."

One day, Bea told her family she was pregnant. Her mom drove her to get an abortion. It was the worst day of her mother's life – and maybe Bea's as well.

Things went on for a long time, until Bea was 19. Then, somehow, thankfully, the relationship ended.

Bea is in her forties now. She is a family therapist with a master's degree, has three children and owns her own home. The experience with dating abuse as a young teenager left Bea with emotional scars that don't show and physical scars – cigarette burns on her arms and long scars from self-inflicted cuts on her thighs – that do. But she is, finally, happy.

~ Stories courtesy of Domestic Violence Awareness and Action based in Maple Grove at St. Joseph the Worker Catholic Community.

PAINT THE TOWN PURPLE

Citizens are asked to wear purple clothing and to change outdoor lighting and décor at their homes to purple by using purple lights, displaying purple wreaths, or tying purple ribbons to mailboxes, trees or vehicle antenna during Domestic Violence Awareness Month in October.

PEOPLE WANT
MORE

MORE ACCOUNTABILITY
MORE TRUST
MORE NEWS



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What do you love about your community newspaper? What stories would you like to see more of? Got a story tip? Email new Messenger owner Tesha M. Christensen today! Tesha@LongfellowNokomisMessenger.com



Xcel Energy installing new energy-saving electric meters

By MARGIE O'LOUGHLIN

Xcel Energy is installing 17,500 new electric meters across South Minneapolis and Eden Prairie in the next few months.

The new meters will measure customers' electricity use in 15 minute increments, so they can see how much energy they use at different times of the day – and make better-informed energy decisions.

Next April, about 10,000 of those households will switch to a new pricing system. During the two-year pilot program, electric

rates will vary depending on time of day. Electricity will cost more during peak hours (3–8 p.m.), and less overnight. The pilot program is designed so that customers may see some savings by shifting to off-peak energy consumption.

Xcel community relations director John Marshall said, "Our customers want more than just reliable energy. They also want products and services that will help them save money and energy."

XCEL ENERGY >> 12

Peacebuilding Leadership Institute opens first office in Nokomis



Community members and leaders had two reasons to celebrate with Donna Minter, her staff, board, and volunteers last month. The organization Minter started 10 years ago recently won a U.S. Peacebuilding Award for Excellence from the Alliance for Peacebuilding, a Washington D.C.-based international organization. And, after many years of operating out of a storage closet, Minnesota Peacebuilding Leadership Institute finally has a brick and mortar office space. (Photo by Margie O'Loughlin)

'No one will believe you'

Abused for years by her dad and a troubled system, Renee and mom are finally free

By TESHAM. CHRISTENSEN

To the outside world, Fred* was a model citizen who worked at the top of the Hennepin County Social Service department as comptroller.

To his family, he was a dictator who was abusive and impossible to please.

His moods were up and down, he was controlling, manipulative, critical, blaming, cruel, rageful, isolating, hateful, belittling and unethical, recalls his daughter, Renee, now age 57.

She and her mother, Nadine, now 77, finally escaped into hiding in 2007 and go by alias identities.

He was careful to never leave visible marks

As comptroller, Fred was in charge of finances for the Social Services Department and Crisis Management.

"He knew the ins and outs of how to work the system," said Renee.

He'd throw things at his wife and daughter, pulled his wife's hair, and whipped Renee with a belt, but he was careful to never leave any visible marks.

Diagnosed with Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD), anxiety, and depression, Renee doesn't remember much about her childhood. She's blocked out most of the memories.

"But I do remember the feelings they provoked, and how the abuse has affected me," she said.



This series seeks to put a face on domestic abuse and intimate partner violence.



Renee and mother Nadine fought for some normalcy during her childhood despite her father's abuse. Today, they are happy to say they are survivors. (Photo submitted)

'No one will ever believe you'

"Imagine being in an environment so abusive and stressful that as an infant in the womb I did not even want to come out!"

NO ONE WILL BELIEVE >> 3

Celebrate Minnesota as the Peacebuilding power state for all

By MARGIE O'LOUGHLIN

The Minnesota Peacebuilding Leadership Institute (Peacebuilding) received the 2019 Melanie Greenberg U.S. Peacebuilding Award for Excellence from the Alliance for Peacebuilding. Donna Minter, PhD, founder and executive director of Peacebuilding, travelled to Washington DC to receive the award last month.

A local award celebration was held on Nov. 1, 2019, at the new Peacebuilding office (their first), located at 5200 47th Ave.S. In her comments, Minter said, "Isn't it only appropriate that an organization whose name is 'Peacebuilding' should finally have a building?"

"We are known for being an institute without walls, one that delivers most of its trainings out in the community – but it's great to finally have some walls!"

Tonja Honsey, Peacebuilding board member, incarceration survivor, and member of the Anishinaabe people, opened the celebration with a ceremonial sage smudging. Minter explained that the office space had been a storehouse for ammunition before Peacebuilding moved in, and she welcomed it being cleansed and blessed.

Hennepin County Commissioner Angela Conley included some sobering statistics

"The STAR Training helps people develop resiliency, and gives them options other than revenge."

~ Tommy McBreyer, STAR-Lite graduate

among her personal comments. "Hennepin County," she said, "has between 25,000-30,000 people involved in the criminal justice system, the seventh highest number in the country. The work that you're doing at Peacebuilding should be embedded in the Hennepin County workplace."

Since 2010, Peacebuilding has trained 3,000+ Minnesotans to be more resilient, trauma-informed, and focused on restorative justice. The goal of the signature Peacebuilding training, Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience – the STAR Training, is to learn how to transform psychological trauma into non-violent power.

Minneapolis community organizer Tommy McBreyer completed the one-day version (called the STAR-Lite Training) earlier this year. He said, "The training helped me learn to identify different types of trauma."

ma. Now I'm passing some of what I learned on to the people I serve in my job in the Central neighborhood. It helps them to develop resiliency, and gives them some options other than revenge."

St. Paul City Council member Mitra Jalali Nelson talked about moving to the Twin Cities after working for years as a middle school teacher in post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans. She said, "I started asking right away, who was doing healing circles in this community? Who was doing work with peacebuilding? I found Donna and her organization quite quickly. We need to be investing in programs like this one."

The STAR Training was created at the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding in Virginia. A New York City non-profit requested the training in the aftermath of 9/11, and provided a \$2,000,000 grant to support its development. Minter, who is a neuropsychologist and forensic psychologist, took the STAR Training to add to her skill set. She was so impressed that she decided to bring the five-day training back to Minnesota to share with her community here, and it's still going strong.

PEACEBUILDING >> 8



Development: what's happening in the neighborhood?

PAGE 3



Informal networks promote community building at Becketwood

PAGE 6



Climate activist walks the walk every day

PAGE 12

Family Dentistry



Joan Jakubas, D.D.S.
Jenna Swenson, D.D.S.

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HER STORY IN HER OWN WORDS

After 50 years, she's encouraging others

Editor's note: The text below was from a speech Nadine wrote and gave at two Twin Cities churches during Domestic Violence Awareness Month. We have used just her original first name and not her new name to protect her and her daughter.

My name is Nadine. I am 77 years old. I was married for 47 years. My daughter and I are in a protection program through the Minnesota Secretary of State and share a home. I work three part-time jobs, I assist my daughter who has a chronic illness. I am active in my church and community.

I'm telling my story not because it's unusual, but because one in every three women will be faced with a similar story. It happens in every neighborhood, religion, nationality and workplace. Today in the time it takes me to tell my story over 200 Minnesota women will be abused.

It's difficult to put 50 years into a few minutes.

I married this good humored man who came from an abusive background. His parents and grandfather were murdered by a family member.

We moved to Nebraska, where he was going to college, far from my family and friends. The first week, he came home from school and went into a rage because I fixed creamed corn when I also made gravy. He cleared everything from the table, leaving food and broken dishes on the floor, walls, everywhere. I was shocked! I had never seen anyone do such a thing. This was not the last time.

When I learned I was pregnant, I was thrilled and couldn't wait to tell him. He became very angry, called me terrible names. "How could you be so stupid as to get pregnant!" He grabbed me by the hair and dragged me across the room and pulled out a handful of hair from my head.

We moved to Minneapolis. He became Comptroller of Hennepin County Department of Social Services for 25 years. He learned the system well. At home, he controlled everything. He controlled what, when, where, and if we ate. He controlled when we went to bed and when we got up. Often in the middle of the night, he'd make us get up to do something he wanted done now. He went on lavish fishing and hunting trips, but there were no family vacations.

At Christmas, we opened gifts and ate, if and when he said we could. My daughter and I were nervous wrecks before holidays. His expectations of our daughter were totally unreasonable. Nothing we did was ever good enough. Everything that went wrong for him was someone else's fault.

A friend told me he had purchased three airplanes. He didn't even have a pilot's license. When I asked why, he became very angry. He shouted, "I am the financial expert in the family and I'm not going to let you make the financial decisions. You are so dumb, you think 2+2 = 5. He threatened that he would take my daughter and I'd never see her again. "I have friends in high places. No one will believe you. You are nobody." He threw me against the wall. I had large bruises on my legs, hips and head.

One day, my daughter and I went shopping. It took longer than he thought it should. When I took her home, she had a message on her answering machine that he was coming over with his .357 Magnum. Soon he was at her house yelling and waving a loaded gun at us. We were terrified. We were too afraid to call the police, for fear it would just get worse. I was threatened with a loaded gun on many other occasions.

I started having panic at-



This series seeks to put a face on domestic abuse and intimate partner violence.

tacks every time I got in the car with him. He called me names, swore and yelled at me, and I felt trapped. One day alone he yelled at me over 74 times. I quit counting.

For over 40 years, I managed the accounting practice we started, but I was never allowed to get a salary or any benefits. He said, "I'm the accountant, so it's my money."

When he touched me, my stomach turned to knots. It was not affection. If he showed anything, it was a signal to go to bed with him. If I didn't, I was called crude names and was told I was worthless.

Why didn't I just leave?

- I feared what he would do to my daughter, my family and anyone who helped me.
- I feared that no one would believe me.
- I didn't know who I could trust to turn to for help.
- I felt paralyzed, overwhelmed and couldn't think clearly. All I could focus on was surviving each day.
- I didn't know if I had the strength to leave.
- I was over 70 years old, with not a lot of technical skills or formal education. Who would hire me?
- I had no job, no money, and I had no idea how I would survive financially.
- I feared my church would abandon me.

AFTER 50 YEARS >> 3



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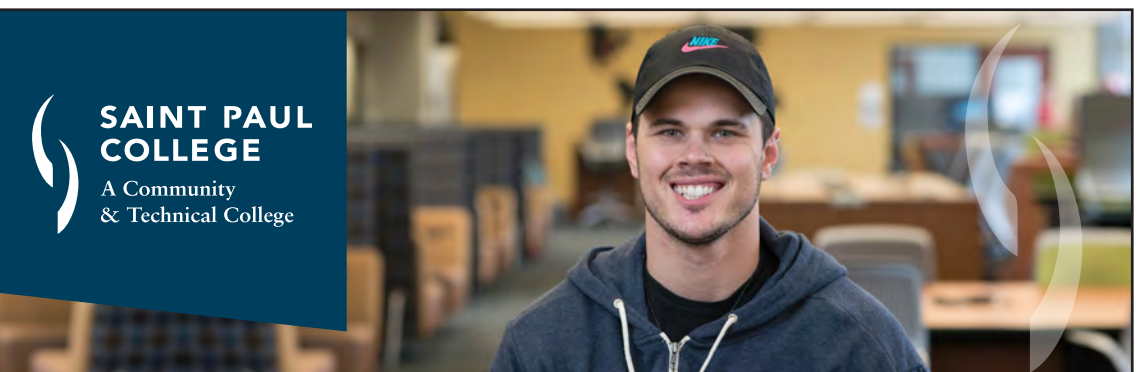
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'No one will believe you'

>> from 1

Renee said. She was a month overdue, and wasn't born until her mother had been induced.

At three, she was so stressed and nervous that she had failed to thrive. She was underweight and her hair came out in hand falls.

She was fearful all the time, didn't get her needs met, and rarely talked.

"My father controlled everything from when we slept and when, what and if we ate," recalled Renee. She remembers a house full of yelling, name calling, swearing and threats. Plus, her dad threw things and broke them.

"We walked on eggshells constantly in our home never knowing what would send him into a rage," said Renee. One day something might be fine, but the next day the same thing would be a major offense. "His rules were always changing, throwing us off on knowing how to behave to prevent one of his explosions. Everything was always our fault (never his), and we were the cause of everything wrong for him.

"We were stupid, lazy, worthless, oversensitive, crazy, emotional cripples and weak. We were told no one would ever hire us, want us or believe us."

She worked hard to stuff her feelings and emotions so that they weren't used against her.

"Sometimes my feelings became so intense because of not being allowed to express them that I had to find a way to release them," she remembered. "I started burning myself when feelings became more than I could possibly hold inside.

"I felt like a teapot about to explode and the burning of flesh felt like letting off steam."

She didn't start talking in school until junior high. Her grade school teachers were always telling her mother, "She doesn't talk." Her mom wanted to know what she could do. Now they both know that's a symptom of abuse.

Renee remembers that kids at school thought she was stuck up, but she was just afraid to have friends. She didn't want others to know what happened in her home, and felt ashamed and

embarrassed. She didn't want to subject any one to her father's abuse.

She had made that mistake before. She had invited friends over, and Fred accused them unjustly of stealing from him. He caused such a stink in the neighborhood that after that no one was allowed to play with her.

Renee didn't get to do the usual after-school activities that other kids did, and she wasn't allowed to work outside of the house. It was another way to control her and keep her dependent financially upon him.

"He was great at finding a person's weaknesses and using it against them," observed Renee.

If Renee or her mother enjoyed anything, they paid dearly for it. "I never was sure if it was because dad was jealous or if he just really enjoyed making us miserable," remarked Renee.

He anticipated any question of leaving by telling them that no one would believe their story. After all, he was a successful comptroller in the social services department. If they couldn't go there for help, where could they go?

Still paying dearly as an adult

As an adult, the abuse continued although it looked different. When Renee called home to talk to her mom, he would lie and say she wasn't there. He'd threaten Renee that she couldn't have anything to do with her mom if she didn't do what Ed wanted.

When Renee's husband died, she was left to raise her two stepsons, who were initially treated much better than she was because they were males. At first, Fred spent time and money on them, recalled Renee, but eventually he started to use them for his personal gain and the abuse began for them, too.

"He would often make me chose between my stepsons or my parents and extended family," said Renee. "I would end up paying dearly for trying to be a good mom to the boys."

Finally, one day her youngest stepson and the most laid back of the two, did what everyone dreamed about but never had the guts. He punched Fred and left.

Finally, they went into hiding but he used system against them

As he aged, Fred didn't get



While the term, "Domestic Violence" is often used to describe a woman who is physically abused, the reality is, DV is not limited to physical abuse and children are victims whenever DV occurs.

Domestic violence is: Physical abuse, mental abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, legal abuse, financial abuse, stalking, harassment and intimidation.

Children are the victims of DV -- directly and indirectly.

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any better. Instead, he escalated to threatening them with knives and loaded guns. He manipulated or "bought" friends to carry out some of his dirty work, as well.

Finally, Renee helped her mom leave Hennepin County and they went into hiding together in a new county.

They decided to leave at a time in between his rages because they thought he wouldn't be watching them as closely. To their dismay, they discovered that their local police didn't understand that line of reasoning. "I think the victim knows the situation best and when to leave," remarked Renee.

To retaliate, Fred started hiding and getting rid of their assets, along with the things he knew Nadine and Renee cared most about.

"The legal battle in the divorce was a joke," stated Renee. "My dad blatantly lied through the court hearings and was in contempt of nearly every court order. He was rarely held accountable or punished for refusing to obey court orders."

He used the court system to harass them by filing false accu-

sations, wasting their time and money to defend themselves. "Nothing was done to stop him from doing this," said Renee, who is still shocked by how things played out in the court system. "When finally threatened by the courts for jail time, he moved out state so he wouldn't be arrested."

Both Renee and Nadine filed for orders of protection, but Fred appealed them. Renee's remained but her mom's was removed by Hennepin County Judge Bruce Peterson. This was despite Fred pointing a loaded gun at them both during a rage. "Apparently, leaving a threatening message on my voicemail, confronting us, screaming, and pointing a loaded gun at us was not reason to give my mom the OFP because my dad didn't say he was going to kill us (that time)," stated Renee. "Apparently, perpetrators have to tell you they are going to kill you before they pull the trigger."

She was also frustrated by the family court insistence that her mother attend mediation with her abuser in the same room. "How is this going to be productive when the abuser is abusive and controlling?" she asked.

Her parent's divorce was messy, ugly and complicated, Renee observed, and is now studied by law students.

"We found that the legal/judicial system we always believed in is not just. Victims keep getting re-victimized by the system," said Renee. "How do we fix a broken system?"

She advocates, "Get involved, have a voice, educate and contact your representatives!"

Shouldn't be 'Why doesn't she leave' but 'Why does he do that?'

Renee is working to help people understand the dynamics of abusive households and to recognize what's happening.

"I feel most people do not understand abuse or people would not ask why doesn't she leave him? Why not, 'Why does he mistreat someone who loves him' or 'Why is this acceptable in society?'"

She added, "Most people think the abuser is mentally ill because certainly no one in their right mind would behave as the abuser does. But actually, domestic violence is a learned behavior."

Renee has found support and help at the Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women (now Violence Free Minnesota), the Alexander House in Anoka, Home Free Community Program, the Domestic Abuse Project, and DomesticShelter.org. She's also grateful for the various domestic abuse support groups she has been a part of, therapists she's worked with, doctors and some educated priests. She and her mom benefited from the local food shelf and community action groups.

She recommends that others check out the free app Insight-Timer for its meditations, and Lisa A. Romano's talks.

Today, Renee knows that she is still affected by the abuse she's lived through. It is part of how she lives and her relationships with others. She's found it difficult to trust in herself or others. Her self-confidence is low, she has trouble expressing emotions, she replays memories, and doesn't always want to be touched, and can be jumpy, nervous, and easy to frighten. She suffers from a chronic illness.

But she's a survivor. One who is working to transcend the wounds of the past, to learn to love herself, and to be comfortable in her own life. She's got a future filled with hope, laughter and freedom. She believes her future is a gift from God.

* Name changed for protection.
Contact editor at tesha@longfellownokomisessenger.com.

After 50 years, she's encouraging others

>> from 2

What made me leave?

Through counseling, I realized the real danger I was in. Have you ever seen someone with a loaded gun in his hand in such a rage that their face does from red to gray? It was like seeing pure evil. I felt if I didn't leave, I would be carried out in a body bag.

So I prepared to leave

I joined a support group, I prepared a safety plan, I packed a suitcase. When I shopped, I wrote the check for more and hid it. I copied important documents. I opened a checking and charge accounts in my name only.

In November 2007, with very little besides the clothing I had

and the help of my daughter, I went to the Alexander House battered women's shelter with the support of my family and his. They not only provided me a place to collect myself, by assisted me in finding housing, resume writing, resources and support.

My ex harassed my daughter. He called her doctor and said she was missing and wanted them to help him find her. He had people stalk her, take pictures of her and her home. One of the stalkers strangled and killed a woman three blocks from her house. She and I moved six times in five years to try to feel safe. She sold her home where she had lived for 30 years because she no longer felt safe.

After I left, he did everything

possible to destroy me emotionally, physically and financially. He broke into my house twice, destroying things, got rid of gifts that were sentimental to me, left loaded handguns and ammunition in the house. Had people drive by my house, take pictures, report what lights I had on and who was in my driveway. A dead deer was left by my back door.

He sold our accounting practice to a friend for \$1. He changed titles on properties we jointly owned. He sold a car that was titled in my name, without my signature. He removed me as a beneficiary on all of our life insurance. He filed joint tax returns without my signature and took all the refunds. He took all the equity in our home, even though our line-of-credit required both

of our signatures. He is in contempt of court of nearly every court order. He moved to Arkansas to avoid enforcement by Minnesota courts.

And I thought none of this could ever happen!

In support groups I learned how many women have gone to their pastor or priest and left feeling hopeless, trapped and rejected. It is important to me to share with you my experience with my church. Over the years, I spoke with many priests and basically was told to pray - pray harder - be a better wife, love more, turn the other cheek, be forgiving. But when I left, I went to my priest, his first question was, "Are you safe now?" He told me to contact a shelter and do whatever they told me to do. Each time I went to court, he gave me a blessing and prayed with me. Knowing my church was there to support

me meant everything to me. And I wish every abused woman would have this kind of experience.

How do I manage?

I work three part-time jobs. I've gone to a food shelf. Family, friends, and my therapist pray for me. I have reminders throughout my house: "I am with you always, signed God."

One day at a time, I have seen miracles unfold in my life. I have a roof over my head and I can actually laugh and celebrate holidays. It wouldn't have happened without the support of a shelter, the support of my friends, daughter, family and God's every present help. I know God loves me and I am worthy of peace.

I don't believe I am here to just survive a marriage. I am here to encourage others.



Isuroon: a portal to better health

By MARGIE O'LOUGHLIN

Isuroon is a robust word in the Somali language.

According to Isuroon Executive Director Fartun Weli, it can be used as a verb, a noun, or an adjective. It is also the name of the organization she leads.

She said, "Somali words are conceptual. While the short translation of Isuroon is 'a woman who cares for herself,' the long translation is 'a woman who has gotten everything she needs to be strong, healthy, independent, empowered, beautiful, vivacious, and confident.' The mission of our organization is to be a space where every Somali woman can be all of those things."

Isuroon was founded in 2010 to address the unmet health care needs of Somali women and girls in this community. Through group meetings, one-on-one counseling, and carefully designed teaching sessions, staff offer education on issues including self-care and social connectedness, healthy eating, pre-natal health, the impact of female genital cutting/mutilation, mental health, sexual and reproductive health, domestic and sexual violence, pregnancy prevention, child abuse, understanding HIV/AIDS, and navigating a complex health care system.

Weli and her 11 employees have a lot on their plates. Their resources are available to any Somali woman who wants to improve her health and wellness, and that of her family – to give her the tools so that she can thrive in Minnesota and beyond. Through education and coaching, women and girls learn to manage their health care preventatively, strengthen their economic self-sufficiency, and develop their innate leadership skills.

Isuroon serves a population that likely came to Minnesota from refugee camps. ISUROON >> 9

BARK RANGER PROGRAM STARTING SOON

NPS staff creating new way for people and dogs to enjoy Coldwater Spring

By MARGIE O'LOUGHLIN

The Bark Ranger Program is a joint venture of the National Park Service (NPS) and their non-profit partner, the Mississippi Park Connection. In early January, a cadre of four-legged volunteers and their owners will be sworn in at Coldwater Spring. New recruits to this awareness campaign will pledge to leash their dogs while walking at Coldwater Spring, pick up dog waste, and respect wildlife and habitat restoration.

NPS land manager Neil Smarjesse, leads the habitat restoration crews at Coldwater Spring. He said, "We would like to create a different way for people and their dogs to experience this place. We're adjacent to the Minnehaha Dog Park, but we are not an off-leash area. When dogs are kept leashed, grassland-nesting birds (like the newly returned clay colored sparrow) aren't disturbed. We are welcoming back indigo buntings, Baltimore orioles, fox, coyote, deer, and many other species."



The Bark Ranger trainings on Jan. 4 and 9 will be a great opportunity to engage with staff and volunteers, and to learn more about both the histories and the lay-out of Coldwater Spring. (Photo courtesy of NPS)

The 29-acre site was added to the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area in 2010, with the goal of restoring the landscape to a prairie oak savannah. A major renovation, which included seeding 13 acres of prairie and wetlands, was completed in 2012. More than 1,000 trees, shrubs,

grasses, and wildflowers have been planted on the property.

Paula Swingley is the NPS volunteer coordinator. She said, "People love this place for many different reasons. The paths here aren't straight-to-a-place paths; they meander. It's a place to enjoy the prairie in all seasons.

As part of the Bark Ranger training, there's the added bonus of learning some of the non-visible history of this site. You can still see the Spring House and the ore bins, but there is so much more to learn."

BARK RANGER >> 12

'It should never have happened'



Leigh Ann Block visits the bench in Mattock's Park dedicated to her daughter, Mikayla Olson Tester, who was murdered by her father on Labor Day weekend 2004 at age 5. (Photo by Tesha M. Christensen)

Mother warned officials ex-husband was dangerous before he killed child and himself

By TESHA M. CHRISTENSEN

Mikayla Olson Tester might be a happy 21-year-old woman today if the family court system had listened to the warnings of her mother.

Instead, it's been 15 years since she was murdered by her own father, and the weight of not being believed by the court system still weighs heavily on mother Leigh Ann Block (formerly Olson). She has spent the last 15 years putting together the pieces of this tragedy, trying to figure out how to prevent this from happening to anyone else.

"Fifteen years later I'm trying to protect women and chil-

dren from going through what we did because I can't save her," said Block.

"It should never have happened."

Calculated murder 2 weeks after he took daughter on vacation

It was her father's turn to have the five-year-old on Labor Day weekend 2004, right before she was going to start kindergarten at Randolph Heights School.

The Ramsey County court had given St. Paul resident John Tester, age 41, joint custody and over 50 percent parenting time, over the objections of Block.

IT SHOULD NEVER >> 2

VOICES
against
VIOLENCE

This series seeks to put a face on domestic abuse and intimate partner violence.



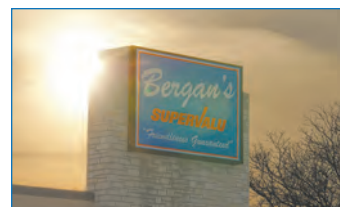
They're reusing household fabrics for a new purpose

PAGE 3



Get a glimpse inside the lives of families navigating education decisions

PAGE 6-7



The sun sets on Bergan's SuperValu as it closes

PAGE 11

'It should never have happened'

>> from 1

Her ex-husband prevented Block from caring for Mikayla and threatened and intimidated them both. But the people she tried to get to protect her and Mikayla failed.

The police, a custody evaluator, mediator, attorneys, Referee Earl Beddow Jr., and Judge Michael F. Fetcsch didn't pay attention to his threats, coercive control or post-separation abuse, and instead gave him the standard custody and parenting time schedule.

"I tried to do everything within my power to protect her but the law was not on my side," said Block.

On that day 15 years ago, when Block answered the door of her home she shared with Mikayla, and saw two St. Paul police officers, she knew the news was bad.

It was the news a battered woman fears most.

"Mikayla is dead, isn't she?"

Block knew without being told. She had received a strange call from her ex-husband earlier that day. He had instructed their only child to call Block and tell her they were going on a journey in a new car.

Tester then took his daughter to a rural Wisconsin road outside of Osceola on Saturday, Sept. 4, 2004, shot her in the head, and then turned the gun on himself.

It was over three years since the couple had split up.

Tester's sister-in-law, Gina, told the *Star Tribune* that Tester had done it to get back at Block.

The Polk County Sheriff's Department called it a "cold and calculated murder" that took months to plan.

"I had warned the courts that Mikayla's life was in danger," said Block, a smart, capable and re-

sponsible woman.

But no one in the family court system believed her in time to save her daughter. The fact that no one in the justice system did anything to protect her daughter still haunts Block.

"Despite a well-documented history of threats to abuse me and my child, my ex-husband was allowed to have unsupervised visitation with our daughter," said Block. "John's abusive behavior did not affect the custody/parenting time decisions. It was clear to me that the domestic violence and threats to harm me and our daughter had no impact on the court."

Mikayla's funeral was held on the day she was supposed to start kindergarten.

Court wouldn't let her protect daughter from father

Block's attorney, Mark Anderson of Burnsville, told the St. Paul *Pioneer Press* shortly after Mikayla was murdered by her father that Block lived for her daughter. "She was a very, very dedicated mother; and she did everything she could to protect that little girl from people, but it was the one guy she could never do anything about because he had court-ordered visitation," observed Anderson.

In their divorce decree, they shared joint legal custody. Tester was granted parenting time of 4.5 hours with Mikayla on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, as well as from 9 a.m. Saturday to 5 p.m. Sunday on alternating weekends. "Even though I had sole physical custody, Mikayla's father had over 50% of the parenting time and spent more quality time with our daughter. I 'agreed' to this arrangement because I had no choice," said Block, after her first attorney, Martha Eaves (SMRLS),

told her to "quit pushing John's buttons." Eaves also told Block that the courts would grant him 50% custody anyway.

Nightmare began after baby was born

Block graduated from Central High School in St. Paul in 1985, the same school her grandparents and mom had attended. She got a good job at Montgomery Ward, and met John Tester a year out of high school through mutual friends.

They dated off and on between 1986 and 1998, when they got married at Como Conservatory because they had a baby on the way.

Block remembers that Tester was competitive and compared himself to others constantly. He really enjoyed boating, and they had lots of fun on the weekends. But it wasn't until she gave up her apartment and moved into "his house" on Palace St. (he never called it theirs even after they got married) to save money, that she felt trepidation about marrying him.

Things started gradually. Like many men, he didn't really start showing his abusive side until their daughter was born when the focus was no longer on him, although Block can look back now and see some earlier red flags.

"It's supposed to be the happiest time in your life when you have a baby," observed Block, "but that's basically when my nightmare began."

From the time Mikayla was born, Block remembers that her ex-husband would get angry at the amount of care and attention Block gave her.

Sometimes he would pin her down on the bed and make her listen to their daughter's screams in the next room.

They both agreed that Block



Mikayla Olson Tester would have been 21 on Nov. 29, 2019. Because of her spirit, her mother Leigh Ann Block is still fighting for other kids in abusive situations with an unhealthy and dangerous parent. She was her mother's "sweetie-girl." Her daycare provider called her Cinderella and brought her to Mattock's Park to play. She called herself "Mika" when she was little because she couldn't say "Mikayla." She loved her family, music, Disney princesses - especially Ariel, dressing up, playing with stuffed "animals," and her cat Smokey. Her mother remembers going on walks with godmother Kris, and Mikayla's blond hair flying in the wind. "Feel the breeze, Mikayla Nicole," Block would say.

would stop working when their daughter was born, and care for the baby, as well as manage the care for Block's dad who was battling Stage 4 carcinoma cancer and lived with them. She was dependent upon her husband, and that was just how he wanted it.

She timed her trips out of the house to fall when Tester wasn't home, and made sure she was back before he was. It wasn't easy, though, as he called her reg-

ularly to make sure she was at home. He wanted to know exactly what she was doing when he wasn't around and who she was with. He followed her from room to room to listen to her phone conversations. She started keeping journals to track what her husband was doing, and asked her best friend to hide them.

He started threatening to kill Block and their daughter on a

IT SHOULD NEVER >> 3

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'It should never have happened' >> from 2

weekly basis, sometimes while holding a large knife in his hand, and mimicking killing motions. Ten minutes later he would deny everything. The gaslighting became more regular.

"He was very smart," said Block. "He never physically left marks."

He told her she was fat and made fun of her crooked teeth. He told her that she'd never find anyone as great as himself if she left him. She remembers suffering from the cognitive dissonance of hearing him talk about how great he was and listening to the terrible things he said to her.

At night, when the baby was hungry and started to cry, he screamed at Block to "shut her up! Some of us have to work."

Due to his rages and his frequent marijuana use, Block avoided leaving Mikayla home alone with him. "It's a horrible thing to not want to leave your children with their father," Block remarked.

At home, Block did all the childcare while Tester went boating or snowmobiling with his friends almost every weekend, but out in public Tester was a duting dad. In fact, five months before he murdered Mikayla, he took her to Disney World.

He tightly controlled their finances, and gave her a paltry \$20 a week allowance. Friends and family helped Block buy diapers and other baby things.

She told herself that she was going to "stick it out" until Mikayla was in kindergarten.

Then came the day in March 2000, when she couldn't stop herself from calling the police because she was so scared. It was a Saturday, and she had planned to buy tickets for "Bear in the Big Blue House." Tester refused to let her leave the house, so she called her sister-in-law to tell her she couldn't go. Angry, Tester ripped the cordless phone out of her hands. She ran to another room to use the old-fashioned wall phone, and told her friend that "things aren't ok right now," and returned upstairs. His behavior was so threatening that she grabbed the cordless phone again, ran out on the porch, and called 911. The phone went dead when he ripped the line out of the wall.

When the three squad cars arrived, Block asked herself, "What have I done? He's going to kill me."

She obtained her first order for protection (OFP), and he was banned from the house except to pick up Mikayla for visits. Angry that he'd been kicked out of "his house" due to an order for protection, Tester filed for divorce. Block had no money for another home, daycare, or an attorney.

Post-separation abuse unchecked

Fearing what Tester would do despite the OFP, Block put a baby monitor in the garage. Tester worked third shift, but one night she heard a noise in the garage and called the police. The cops found him inside with the hood of her vehicle up and a quart of oil sitting by the open gas tank. He told the cops he was just there to pick up some tools. He was arrested for violating the OFP.

The morning after Halloween, Block looked out the window of her new apartment, and

1 in 3 women experience domestic violence by their partners



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her Blazer was missing again. She had changed the vehicle's door key after an earlier suspicious incident, but not the ignition key. She reported it stolen, and three weeks later it was found wrapped around a tree in Rochester. It had been involved in a vehicular homicide when two kids took it on a joyride despite the passenger seat having been cut out.

Shortly after, Block flipped through the notebook she and Tester exchanged with their daughter, recording important details to share with the other parent. Inside, she found the ignition key to her Blazer.

Tester was letting her know he could get to her, despite the OFP and their divorce papers.

Before he murdered Mikayla, Tester quit his job in order to get his child support reduced, and then worked secretly for cash while receiving unemployment benefits.

Tester put Mikayla in the middle of Block and himself, because he couldn't control Block any more as she started a new life with Mikayla. Mikayla started asking her mother distressing questions like, "why is Daddy mean?" One day Mikayla asked her mom if she was going to die. "No," Block told her. "Why do you ask?" "Because Daddy said you were," replied Mikayla. He told her that if mom starting dating that she wouldn't love Mikayla anymore.

He stole and refused to return their daughter's favorite stuffed animal, even though she had trouble sleeping without Hippy. He told their daughter she was fat.

Block was always on alert, waiting for the next thing to happen.

Tester continued to threaten Block and yell obscenities at her during exchanges of Mikayla. But when she told the officials involved in their case – the people she thought were supposed to help her – they didn't give him any real consequences. After Tester tampered with Block's vehicle, he had been instructed to see Mikayla at the Children's Safety Center for supervised visitation. After a month or two, Tester wanted to take Mikayla to a family reunion, and Ramsey County custody evaluator Kelly Gerleman allowed it, despite Tester's threats to take Mikayla away from Block and despite his threats to kill them both. Moreover, Gerleman removed Mikayla from the Safety Center indefinitely. Gerleman told Block, "John needs to be given the chance to demonstrate good behavior."

Block was warned by officials that if she fled with her daughter, she would be arrested for kidnapping. And then, Tester killed Mikayla.

Block called each one of these professionals after Mikayla was murdered, but she never got an apology, nor did any suffer consequences in their jobs for their role in Mikayla's death.

"They failed miserably," said Block. "I didn't get any help. Nobody listened to me. I was not some crazy ex-wife. I was a loving mother trying to protect my child. This is what parents are supposed to do – keep their children safe from harm. There's something really wrong with the system and that's an understatement."

She added, "They were minimizing. I still feel like I'm being minimized because I didn't have any bruises."

Not hit, but still victims of abuse

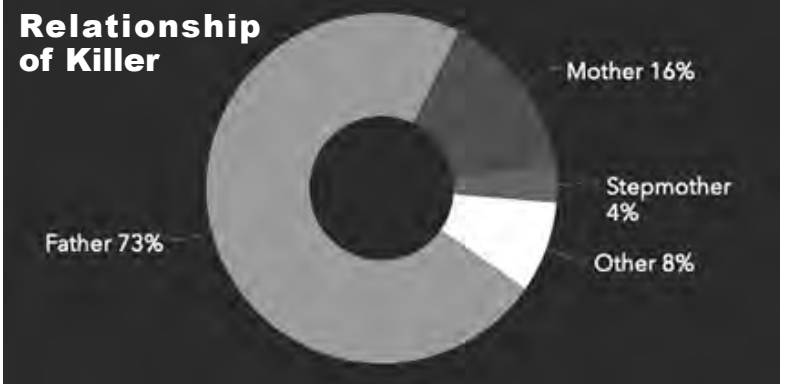
Block is tired of hearing the common myth that "it takes two to tango."

She's tired of the stereotypes about the kind of woman who gets abused. "It doesn't matter how much money you make or your status," she observed. She doesn't think people want to believe that someone with a few kids who lives in a nice house could be an abuser or a victim, but that doesn't stop it from being true.

She's tired of hearing that women are vindictive and make up abuse to get back at their spouses. She's ready for people to start believing women and children.

"Abuse survivors are constantly trying to prove themselves," she observed. "There should be no question." She supports a national resolution, H. Con.Res.72, "expressing the sense of Congress that child safety is the first priority of custody and visitation adjudications, and that state courts should improve adjudications of custody where family violence is alleged" (115th Congress [2017-2018]). This resolution makes it standard to put the safety needs of children first rather than parental rights, and Block and friend Bonnie Roy are pushing for state legislation that will also support putting the safety of children first through the Minnesota Chapter of the Stop Abuse Campaign.

Block began recording her abuse in journals in the spring of 1999, and now it's 2019. Kids are still not being protected, despite the Adverse Childhood Experi-



Graphic courtesy of Center for Judicial Excellence

Four murdered in Minneapolis

19 killed in intimate partner homicides in 2019

On Thanksgiving Day 2019, Raven B. Gant's ex-boyfriend shot and killed her in front of her minor daughter in North Minneapolis. Later, over the holiday weekend, Kjersten Marie Schladetzky, and her two sons, William and Nelson were killed in a triple murder-suicide by their father and Kjersten's ex-husband, David, in south Minneapolis.

Raven, Kjersten, William, and Nelson are Minnesota's most recent confirmed intimate partner homicide victims as of press time on Dec. 21.

On the morning of Dec. 1, David Schladetzky, 53, shot and killed his two sons, William, 11, and Nelson, 8, outside of their home at 2738 Oakland Ave. He then entered the house and shot and killed his ex-wife, Kjersten, 39, before killing himself. Police officers responded to calls of gunshots and found the two boys in the front yard. As officers arrived, they heard shots coming from inside the house. Kjersten and David's bodies were later found inside the home. A divorce was finalized between the two in June 2019.

Randall Watkins, 41, faces a second-degree murder charge for the killing of 27-year-old Raven Gant, who was shot in the back. The Hennepin County Attorney's Office says it will seek an enhanced sentence in this case due to the presence of

the child.

Intimate partner homicides have a devastating impact on children. Children are injured and killed. Additionally, witnessing the murder of a parent due to intimate partner homicide can have long-term adverse effects on children. In the Violence Free Minnesota 30-year retrospective on intimate partner homicide in Minnesota, a child witnessed the homicide of their parent in 22% of the 685 cases from 1989-2018.

"The safety of our children is directly linked to intimate partner violence of their parents," said Violence Free Minnesota Executive Director Liz Richards. "Protecting our children is an essential part of our work to end intimate partner violence. We must find the words – and the solutions – to say that these deaths are the fatal result of power and control; and we can take action as a community to end intimate partner violence."

Raven Gant, and Kjersten, William, and Nelson Schladetzky's lives will be honored at an intimate partner homicide memorial on Jan. 28, 2020, and included in the 2019 intimate partner homicide report to be released on Oct. 1, 2020.

If you are a victim experiencing abuse, contact Day One at 866-223-1111 to connect with services.

Information courtesy of Violence Free Minnesota, formerly the Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women.

ences (ACEs) research on how much kids are affected by threats, intimidation and physical violence.

"I may not have been hit, but Mikayla was still a victim of domestic violence," she said.

"There's still no law that protects children in abusive situations."

Minnesota has nine best interest factors, and only one is related to domestic violence. "The best interest is not putting your children with an abusive father," said Block. She believes that if a parent is abusive, they should not have joint custody. They should not have access to their children.

"I want to be part of a positive change that will prioritize these kids' lives," said Block.

And so she keeps telling her story.

"We shouldn't have to beg for these laws to protect our kids," said Block.

"We need to start looking out for each other."

She has devoted her time to promoting prevention, testifying

at government hearings against 50/50 custody laws, and speaking out so that no more children die because of domestic violence.

According to the Center for Judicial Excellence, at least 728 children have been murdered by a divorcing or separating parent since 2011. Seventy-three percent of the perpetrators are fathers. Many of these children are killed in murder-suicides, as Mikayla was.

In the 30 years that Violence Free Minnesota (formerly the Minnesota Battered Women's Coalition) has been tracking femicides, at least 685 people were killed due to relationship abuse. The youngest victim was just 22 weeks old; the oldest was 88.

"Mikayla was mentally and physically abused by her father, as was I. And we dealt with it basically from her birth in 1998," said Block.

"I don't want any other child to have to go through what Mikayla went through."

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