

Written for and featured article in the Phoenix, Fall 2009

Burning Bridges

By Deb Landry

Even though it has been several years since her divorce, Michelle still wakes in the middle of the night from nightmares of her past life, only to realize that she is free from the physical pain, anguish and feeling of utter fear and horror from her eleven-year marriage to Tommy, her high school sweetheart.

“It doesn’t just go away,” she said. “It took everything I had in me and years of counseling to escape and cope with my low self esteem, emotional pain and the ability to trust another man. The bruises go away but the emotional pain is everlasting.”

Her divorce from Tommy wasn’t a mutual agreement or irreconcilable differences. It was a break away from the life where she was captive to a man who promised to love, cherish and protect her.

Michelle remembers the first time Tommy hit her. He had always been jealous, making negative comments about her appearance and analyzed her conversations to others, especially with other men, always questioning her intentions. However, it wasn’t until they were into their second year of marriage and she was pregnant with her second child that he lashed out at her physically.

“Tommy grabbed me and pulled me towards him. Screaming in my face, he threw me down a flight of stairs. The only thing I could think of as I fell was holding my belly tight so not to injure my baby, but I had no control. Fear and gravity carried me to a place that I could have never even imaged. I was shocked and full of fear.”

“He was so sorry for what he had done and I forgave him, I was convinced that I was to blame for not having the laundry folded and put away as he wanted. He told me I slipped and he didn’t mean to let me fall. I owned up to my part in the situation and felt that in the future I needed to tow the line. Feeling like a child for disobeying their parents, I tried even harder to please my husband, the man I loved and trusted with my life.”

“He didn’t hit or even verbally abuse me for weeks after that incident, but once he started again, it never stopped. There seem to be no reason for the abuse. Drunk or sober, happy or sad, it was my fault and he had all the answers and excuses.”

The abuse went on for eleven years, sometimes daily, sometimes months in between. “I was so ashamed that I couldn’t tell anyone. Talking about it was never an option I thought I had. It was part of my life just like cooking dinner, laundry and taking care of the kids. The one thing I knew in my heart was that I didn’t have a choice, or so I thought at the time.”

“One night he was drunk and playing around with his rifle. The kids were asleep and he was waving the gun around their bed wanting to shoot out the window. For the first time the fear and rage overtook me. I needed to protect my children; it wasn’t about “us” anymore. I remember Tommy coming after me with the butt of the gun as I begged him to stop. The next thing I remember was my father in law standing over me with a wet cloth on my eye, trying to pick me up from the floor.”

“Nothing was said or done, I didn’t go to the doctors even though I had a black eye and the left side of my face was lacerated and swollen with a golf ball size goose egg. “They” agreed Tommy would be arrested if we got medical attention. His father took all his guns that night.”

“Tommy always reassured me that no other person could ever love me. How could they? My medium framed, 130-pound body was disgusting and I was lucky that he loved me. He had me convinced that even my family didn’t love me.”

“I attended college part time for years. Tommy said I could go if it didn’t interfere with our life and my responsibilities. My desire to better myself left little time for sleep, but I was determined to finish school and get a job. Some how I thought working would stop the abuse, and in some ways, it did. Tommy never hit me from the neck up again. That didn’t stop the verbal abuse, beatings, rape and the horrible threats of death if I tried to leave.”

“I would daydream of what it would be like to live without Tommy. What if he died? Then I would finally be free. I knew he would never let me go. He would always tell me that if I ever left him, he would find me and kill me and I believed he would. When the movie, *The Burning Bed* was released, I realize the agony and terror I lived was happening to other women. The support systems and awareness programs were not available like they are now. I had a choice. I started thinking that maybe I could live a different life.”

“At work, I would try to figure out how to live on my own, how much money I would need and how I could hide without Tommy finding me. The hope chest my grandmother gave me was secretly stuffed with three of everything in preparation for our escape.”

“My parents were never happy about my relationship with Tommy, so I was compelled to let them think the marriage was perfect. I finally remember getting up enough courage to talk to my mother about the abuse, thinking she would jump at the chance to save me. I sat at her kitchen table sipping a cup of hot tea, shaking in fear. As the kids were playing in the other room with my dad, I told my mother about the years of abuse and that I needed to get out of the relationship before something terrible happen.”

“And then something happened that left me paralyzed and stunned. She told me that I didn’t want to be divorced, what would people think? I should at least stay until the kids graduated from high school.

I was devastated, it had taken me years to work up to this conversation and to admit that just maybe I should make the prison break, only to be shot down by the one person I thought would understand.”

“One morning I called in sick to work. As soon as Tommy left, I packed the kids in the car with all our clothes and the contents of the hope chest, stopped at the bank, withdrew my four hundred dollars in savings, and drove away. “

“My oldest daughter once told me she was surprised to find out from her friends that not all fathers hit mothers. I was so sad and ashamed that I had put my children through this nightmare. I thought I was the master of disguises and no one knew what was going on. Everyone knows though, or at least they suspect, it’s just that nobody tells.”

his is a true story, the names were changed.

Say Something....

A Community Response to Domestic Violence in Maine

At Thornton Academy in Saco, a clothesline ran across the atrium with adages on handmade yellow t-shirts reflecting a new nationwide initiative to increase public awareness and education of teen dating violence.

Teen dating violence is just one sign of domestic violence and young adults are now taking a stand to fight against this nationwide epidemic.

In Maine, domestic violence occurs every day. It is an epidemic-affecting individuals in all communities. Regardless of age, gender, economic status, race, religion, or educational background, domestic violence knows no boundaries, not even in our schools, daycare, and churches and with the children, your child may be playing with.

Our state does an amazing job assisting its citizens with nine full service programs, a 24-hour hotline and awareness programs. With the economic crisis though, domestic violence programs are not only suffering financially, they are reporting a significant increase in incidents and are in dire need of funding, volunteers and support.

***Awareness is only
effective if one takes
action***

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (www.ncadv.org) defines domestic violence as willful intimidation, physical or sexual assault, battery, and-or other abusive behavior perpetrated by an intimate partner against another, which can result in physical injury,

psychological trauma, and sometimes death. Last year in Maine alone, 68% of homicides were DV related, with 12,243 individuals seeking services, and 39,811 calls made to hotlines.

Children growing up in homes with DV have a significant increase in externalized behavioral problems, developmental delays, and inadequate social development. Boys who are exposed to their father's abuse have the strongest risk factor for transmitting violence behavior to their adult partners and children.

Children exposed to DV pay a high price and live in constant fear. Some of the signs to look for in children from abusive homes are similar to children who are physically abused. The results of trauma can show up as anxiety, shame, low self-esteem, depression and unexplained anger.

Some ways to be an active DV bystander is to express verbal affection and support, listen, report suspicious behaviors or incidents to the authorities, get educated on the facts, speak up and talk to your legislators.

Julie Colpitts, LCSW Interim Executive Director at the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence, stated that all nine sites in Maine participated in this year's national census last September and the report can be viewed at www.nnedv.org/census.

You may be wondering why, during the holiday season that I would write a column on such a sad, serious subject. Tis' the season for increased reporting due to the stress of the holiday and school vacations. One Maine country reported that the Monday of a school vacation week is when reporting incidents increase significantly for child abuse.

Awareness is only effective if one takes action and you could be saving a life. If you need help or guidance, call the Statewide Domestic Violence Helpline at 1-866-83-4HELP or visit www.mcedv.org.

Deb Landry is a children's author, freelance writer and parenting coach specializing in social awareness behaviors and character education. She is a member of the team that authored the Maine State Best Practices in Bullying and Harassment Prevention Manual and is a certified trainer. She is the Editor in Chief of breathe Maine and has been featured on NBC, CBS, national Women's Day radio, and several publications including Raising Maine, Seventeen, and Child Magazine. Visit her at www.deblandry.com and www.breathemaine.org.

List of Centers in Maine

ABUSED WOMEN'S ADVOCACY PROJECT (Oxford, Franklin & Androscoggin Counties)
P.O. Box 713, Auburn, ME 04212-0713 • Admin: 207-795-6744
Hotline: 1-800-559-2927 or 207-795-4020 • Fax: 207-795-6814 • e-mail: awap@awap.org •
www.awap.org

BATTERED WOMEN'S PROJECT (Aroostook County)
421 Main St., Suite 2, Presque Isle, ME 04769 • Admin.: 207-764-2977 • Hotline: 1-800-439-2323
Fax: 207-764-8631 • e-mail: dbaiettibwp@hotmail.com

CARING UNLIMITED (York County)
P.O. Box 590, Sanford, ME 04073 • Admin.: 207-490-3227 • Hotline: 1-800-239-7298 or 207-324-1802
Fax: 207-490-2186 • e-mail: caring@gwi.net • www.caring-unlimited.org

FAMILY CRISIS SERVICES (Cumberland & Sagadahoc Counties)

P.O. Box 704, Portland, ME 04104 • Admin.: 207-767-4952 • Hotline: 1-800-537-6066 or 207-874-1973
Fax: 207-767-8109 • Bath Fax: 207-442-0557 • Ptld. Shelter Fax: 207-842-6880
e-mail: familycrisis@familycrisis.org • www.familycrisis.org

FAMILY VIOLENCE PROJECT (Kennebec & Somerset Counties)

P.O. Box 304, Augusta, ME 04332 • Admin.: 207-623-8637 • Hotline: 1-877-890-7788 or 207-623-3569
Fax: 207-621-6372 • Skowhegan Fax: 207-474-6489
e-mail: fvp@familyviolenceproject.org • www.familyviolenceproject.org

NEW HOPE FOR WOMEN (Knox, Lincoln, & Waldo Counties)

P.O. Box A, Rockland, ME 04841-0733
Admin: 207-594-2128 • Hotline: 1-800-522-3304 or 207-594-2128
Belfast area hotline 207-338-6569; Damariscotta area hotline 207-563-2404
Fax: 207-594-0811 • e-mail: newhope@newhopeforwomen.org • www.newhopeforwomen.org

SPRUCE RUN (Penobscot County)

P.O. Box 653, Bangor, ME 04402 • Admin.: 207-945-5102 • Hotline: 1-800-863-9909 or 207-947-0496
Fax: 207-990-4252 • e-mail: sprucerun@sprucerun.net • www.sprucerun.net

THE NEXT STEP (Hancock & Washington Counties)

Hancock County: P.O. Box 1465, Ellsworth, ME 04605 • Admin.: 207-667-0176 • Hotline: 1-800-315-5579
or 207-667-4606
Washington County: P.O. Box 303, Machias, ME 04654 • Admin.: 207-255-4934 • Hotline: 1-888-604-
8692 or 1-207-255-4785
Fax: 207-667-8033 • e-mail: lfogelman@nextstepdvproject.org • www.nextstepdvproject.org

WOMANCARE (Piscataquis County)

P.O. Box 192, Dover-Foxcroft, ME 04426 • Admin. & Hotline: 207-564-8165 • Hotline: 1-888-564-8165
Fax: 207-564-7418 • e-mail: wmcare@wmcare.org • www.wmcare.org

AROOSTOOK BAND OF MICMACS FAMILY VIOLENCE PREVENTION SERVICES:

Office Phone: 207-764-1972 or (Battered Women's Project): 1-800-439-2323

HOULTON BAND OF MALISEET INDIANS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE RESPONSE PROGRAM:

207-532-6401 or cell phone: 207-694-1353

PASSAMAQUODDY PEACEFUL RELATIONS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE RESPONSE PROGRAM:

Hotline: 207- 853-2613

PENOBSCOT NATION: (Spruce Run) 1-800-863-9909 or 207-947-0496

Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault

Hotline: 1.800.871.7741 / 207.626.0660

Area served: Southern Kennebec, Knox & Waldo Counties

Rape Response Services (RRS)

Hotline: 1.800.871.7741 / 207.989.5678

Area served: Penobscot & Piscataquis Counties

Sexual Assault Support Services of Midcoast Maine (SASSMM)

Hotline: 1.800.871.7741 / 1.800.822.5999

Area served: Eastern Cumberland, Sagadahoc & Lincoln Counties

Downeast Sexual Assault Services (DSAS)

Hotline: 1.800.871.7741 / 1.800.228.2470

Area Served: Hancock & Washington Counties

Sexual Assault Victims Emergency Services (SAVES)

Hotline: 1.800.871.7741 / 207.778.0110

Area Served: Franklin County

Sexual Assault Crisis Center (SACC)

Hotline: 1.800.871.7741 / 207.795.2211

Area Served: Androscoggin County

Sexual Assault Response Services of Southern Maine (SARSSM)

Hotline: 1.800.871.7741 / 1.800.313.9900

Area Served: Cumberland & York Counties

AMHC Sexual Assault Services (SAS)

Hotline: 1.800.871.7741 / 1.800.550.3304

Area Served: Aroostook County

Rape Education and Crisis Hotline (REACH)

Hotline: 1.800.871.7741

Area Served: Oxford County

Rape Crisis Assistance & Prevention (RCA&P)

Hotline: 1.800.871.7741 / 1.800.525.4441

Area Served: Northern Kennebec & Somerset Counties