

National focus on domestic violence hits close to home in Park County

Emily Clingman, Editor | Posted: Friday, November 14, 2014 1:42 pm

For three days, Karla lived in her car in a church parking lot while exploring her options. Leaving behind a well-paying job and most of her belongings, Karla decided there in that car, that she would not go back to her violent boyfriend ever again.

Her abusive parents abandoned her when she was a teen.

“I’ve been on the streets since I was 13,” Karla said. “I’ve got experience with this.”

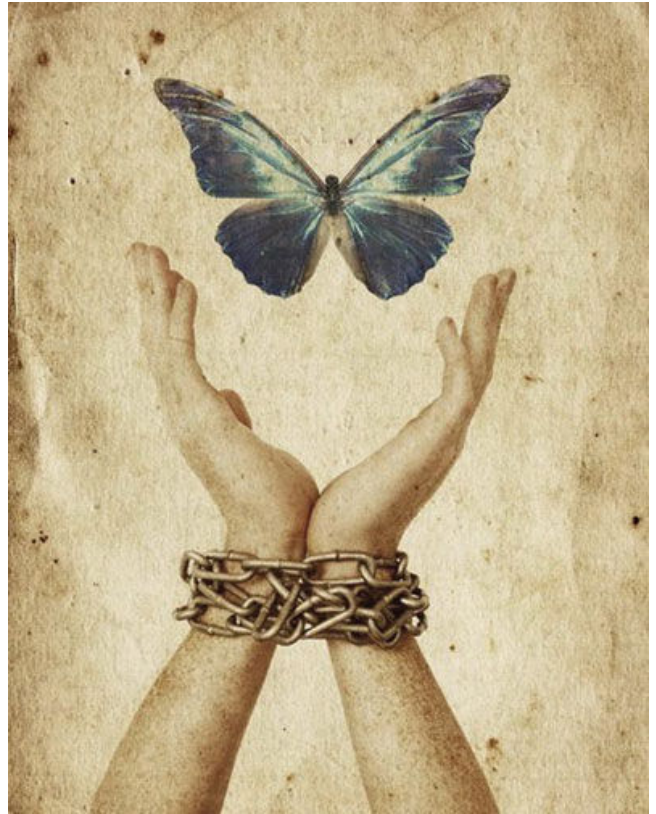
But that weekend, in her car, she was on the run and also facing another challenge, something that inevitably made her more vulnerable. Karla was two months pregnant.

Where to turn

Eventually, Karla reached PeaceWorks Inc. in Bailey, the only organization in Park and mountain Jefferson counties that provides shelter, and a 24-hour hotline and programming for people experiencing domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking and other relationship crimes. It’s also the only shelter in the region that accepts pets.

It’s a monumental task covering 2,700 square miles – for PeaceWorks – always being on call and equipped to offer specialized assistance to each client. Calling the hotline or speaking with someone directly at the organization is a private matter and often the first step a victim makes.

“Often when victims are suffering a violent situation at home, they are afraid to make a move because they don’t know what will happen if they call the police, file a protection order or leave the relationship, for example,” said PeaceWorks Executive Director Janet Shown.



Freedom from abuse

Women can escape and overcome abusive relationships. Organizations like PeaceWorks, Inc. in Park County provide the safety and support that victims need in order to rebuild their lives. Without support from the community, PeaceWorks faces a shut down. (Photo courtesy of mymendingwall.com)

In 2013, 94 people were provided some sort of service from PeaceWorks and 40 victims, including women and children, were housed temporarily at its Mountain Peace Shelter. Thirty to forty percent of shelter residents are children.

So far, in 2014, 181 people were victims of domestic violence, which were recorded by the Park County Sheriff's Office. But, because PeaceWorks serves people from two counties, who often have not reported their situations to the police, the number of victims in the area is assumed to be higher.

Just leave

Violence in a relationship can go unchecked, sometimes for many years, for just as many reasons. When it's discovered that someone has been involved in such a relationship, especially if the discovery was a result of a serious injury from the abuser, outsiders often question why she (or he) didn't just leave.

It's not that easy.

"It was a toxic relationship," Karla said about her boyfriend. "He had a personality disorder and was an addict."

Karla didn't understand the nature of addiction. She thought she could help him, she said, but instead, only enabled him, which spurred a cycle typical in abusive relationships.

It often starts with the honeymoon phase. Their love for one another is genuine. They are happy and have fun together. But, tension builds and the abuser lashes out, verbally or physically. The victim might be shocked the first time this happens and out of love for her (or his) partner, there is forgiveness. They return to the honeymoon phase until tension builds again and the cycle continues.

Abuse comes in many forms: verbal, physical, sexual and economic. It also includes any behaviors that frighten, intimidate, terrorize, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure or wound someone. It's about power and control. If an abuser believes he (or she) is not in control, he or she uses power to maintain that control.

When victims of domestic violence decide to leave the relationship the perpetrators recognize that they are losing control. This can be the dangerous phase of the relationship, and the victims may experience strong fear for their safety, along with the safety of any children and pets.

While Karla's boyfriend never actually hurt her physically, he was verbally aggressive and often threw things at her or around the house.

"He was always breaking things," she said.

It was an unsteady relationship from the beginning, on and off over the years.

Once she realized her pregnancy, Karla knew she couldn't remain in the relationship. With \$200 in

her bank account and boatload of courage, Karla ran away.

Domestic violence victims are often afraid to leave or don't have an escape plan. Sometimes a religious or moral conviction compels them to stay.

In Park County, victims face rural obstacles. They might not have a vehicle or gas money to escape with. Some victims struggle with leaving behind a pet with the abuser, or their belongings.

Isolation is one way for an abuser to maintain control. Living remotely lessens the chance of neighbors becoming aware of a violent situation.

It's difficult to reach victims with information about domestic violence and available resources and services when they are confined by geography, lack of communications (including adequate Internet connection and cell phone coverage), safe roads, regional transportation systems, and mountain weather, more so than those in metropolitan areas, according to PeaceWorks' year-end narrative for the Colorado Department of Human Services, completed by Shown.

"It would take major infrastructure changes in transportation and communication networks to help PeaceWorks meet these needs," Shown reported.

It would never happen to me

Mary Pat Bowen, director of Victims Services at the Park County Sheriff's Office, said domestic violence can happen to anyone. It is prevalent across all races, ethnicities, age groups, sexual orientations, gender identities, religions, socio-economic statuses, family backgrounds, countries of origin, and education levels.

"'I would never allow that to happen to me,' is a common argument from people who haven't experienced domestic violence," Bowen said. "Women especially, are very hard on other women."

Victims also judge themselves, she said.

"They think, 'If I just would have tried harder.'"

Bowen explained that there are also societal expectations of women to keep the peace. She also said that sometimes children are used as pawns in the abusive relationship, and the victim needs to be strategic about avoiding or lessening abusive incidents in the home.

If victims decide to make a break, statistics show that it takes seven to nine times to leave. It's a cycle.

Patty Lucy, victim advocate with the sheriff's office, said the focus is on intervention.

"Responding to a crime is immediate intervention," Lucy said. "The best time to reach them is in that moment; traumatic, yes, but a perfect time to communicate because the perpetrator is not there (because he or she has been arrested)."

Sheriff's office advocates accompany the police officers on a domestic violence call. One thing

advocates address initially is a safety plan, asking victims if they have somewhere to go or what they want to do. Advocates distribute folders containing lists of phone numbers for resources, information about domestic violence, a safety plan worksheet and information on what happens after a perpetrator is arrested.

“It all goes back to safety, safety, safety,” Lucy said. “We try to leave them with all of the resources they could possibly need.”

They don’t try to persuade a victim any one way or another though.

“Each person knows their support system and safety options better than anyone else,” Lucy said.

Why do abusers abuse?

It’s tempting to blame abuse on alcohol or substance abuse. While those factors can exacerbate an already volatile situation, Lucy said that’s not the root cause of abuse.

“Lots of people drink and don’t beat each other up,” she said.

It’s more about societal acceptance, Lucy said. Watching famous people like singer Chris Brown or Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice skirt around punishment for committing relationship violence influences society.

“If they are resistant to facing responsibility, that attitude trickles down to the general population,” Lucy said.

Violence in video games or certain religious beliefs, or just the belief that it’s none of my business also contribute to widespread acceptance of domestic violence.

Lucy said that education is essential to get the word out about domestic violence and that her office and PeaceWorks both have educational programming available to anyone in the community, free of charge—schools, churches, neighborhood associations or anyone.

“People like to vilify victims, like there’s something wrong with these women,” Lucy said. “Instead of focusing on the perpetrator.”

It takes a village

“I don’t really share much about the guy or that negative part of my life,” Karla said. “What I’d like to share is that I own my own home, am an entrepreneur and a happy single mother.”

Because of PeaceWorks, Karla was able to live in the shelter for a time and had access to counseling and tools to help her build a new successful and safe life. It’s not just PeaceWorks or the victim advocates in the sheriff’s office that provide assistance, according to Shown. There are other organizations in the area, like the Mountain Resource Center, Evergreen Christian Outreach or Blue Spruce Habitat for Humanity, that offer specialized assistance to survivors that are looking to move

forward.

“Those of us in the mountains collaborate and leverage our resources to provide wrap-around services to help survivors make a new life,” Shown said.

“Karla used all the resources available to her,” she said. “We were able to respond and help her not only to survive, but to thrive and I feel good about that.”

With \$350-400,000 annually in operating expenses, PeaceWorks is in a constant struggle to stay in business.

“What we really need is money right now,” Shown said, though donations of any kind, including printing supplies, maintenance skills, or volunteer time is indeed helpful.

In a radius of 2,700 square miles, closing down the shelter would be detrimental.

“This is their last hope,” Shown said. “If they come to the shelter, they have no other options, and we want to be here to help them.”

It’s been five years since Karla sat in that church parking lot, determined to make a better life for her and her child.

Asked what she’d say to anyone facing a domestic violence situation, she said, “My hope in sharing my story is that you don’t have to stay in a vicious cycle and there is a way out. You don’t have to fear running for your freedom and you don’t have to stay because you think you can’t do it on your own. I made it, so can you.”