



Photo Illustration by Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

Teens conceal abuse in dating relationships

By Barbara Ann Homick
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — For the adolescent dealing with an abusive relationship, masking the situation involves more than just covering the bruises, according to a Rochester woman working to stop dating violence.

As the coordinator of the Dating Violence Program at Alternatives for Battered Women in Rochester, Kate Washington said young people don't want to admit they are involved in an abusive situation because they're afraid of being judged.

"Many young people will deny that it is happening — even deny it to themselves," said Washington.

Yet, if battered teens knew the frequency of the problem, they might feel more comfortable seeking help, Washington said.

"Often people don't report dating violence because of the shame," she explained. "They have to know it is much more common than they think."

Last year, Washington spoke to more than 2,000 Rochester-area students, including youths at East, Pittsford Mendon and Victor high schools. She said she was approached by students dealing with abusive partners at each of the schools she visited.

"I have never been to a class where a student hasn't been in an abusive situation," remarked 38-year-old Washington. "I am amazed at how many kids are experiencing this or know someone who is."

A former teacher at Nazareth Hall, St. Thomas the Apostle and Holy Cross schools, Washington said she received no response after contacting all five Catholic high schools in Rochester about the program last year.

"Maybe they don't think it is appropriate to have this program in their schools," remarked Washington, who added that she remembers some Catholic school students telling her about their abusive relationships.

Questions concerning dating violence are rarely raised at Our Lady of Mercy High School, according to Charla Kucko.

The director of enrollment and public relations at Mercy said students have voiced concerns over the issue only a few times during the past two years. At such times, Kucko said the school's guidance counse-

lors addressed the problems.

"If a student raises a question that a counselor can't handle, then they would make the necessary referrals to agencies such as ABW (Alternatives for Battered Women)," added Kucko, who said dating violence appears to be more common on college campuses than in high schools.

But Washington said dating violence is very common at the high school level. In fact, the Dating Violence Program was started two years ago when counselors — who had been talking to students about domestic violence — began taking students' questions about violence in their dating relationships.

ABW now offers the two-day program for junior and senior high school students. Washington gives a brief introduction about the program on the first day. She then shows a video about dating violence before leading a discussion on the film.

"We discuss student reactions to the cycle of violence and why people stay in violent relationships," said Washington, who noted that abuse can be psychological, physical and/or sexual.

In addition to a broad discussion about abusive relationships, the second day of the program deals with ways to foster and maintain healthy relationships.

When Donna Ecker gave a presentation to the youth group at St. Joseph's Church in Penfield last fall, youths were amazed at the magnitude of the problem. Although some of the students initially made jokes

about the issue, the codirector of Bethany House said the mood quickly changed when she began giving statistics on abuse.

"It was like I dropped a brick," said Ecker, who helps run the Catholic Worker house of hospitality for homeless women and their children.

Ecker noted that if violence is allowed at age 15, it will only carry over into the next generation. When people make jokes about dating violence, she added, abusers fail to see the seriousness of their problem.

Washington, however, disagreed with Ecker's contentions about using humor when talking about abuse. The ABW coordinator said she allows students to deal openly in their discussions, even if it means cracking an occasional joke.

"Using humor can be a way of expressing something they have experienced themselves," noted Washington.

One of the topics Washington discusses is how peer pressure relates to abusive relationships. Some teens will do anything to be accepted, she said.

"Some teens think they get status from being involved with someone, and they may endure the violence to keep that status," said Washington.

She noted that a teenager having difficulties at home or not doing well in school may feel a sense of powerlessness over problems. The teen may then compensate for that lack of power by using physical force in a dating relationship.

Washington noted that abuse does not

discriminate when it comes to gender. Among teenagers, the problem is just as likely to happen against males as females, she said.

She emphasized, however, that the stereotypes young people learn from their teachers and parents have a tremendous impact on their relationships.

Fairy tales, for example, provide rigid roles for youths, according to Washington. In stories such as Cinderella, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, the powerful woman is always the wicked female while the docile, helpless woman is the heroine, she said.

"Those women are looking for their prince charming to spirit them off to a wonderful life," said Washington. "They transfer their independence to meet their needs."

Washington instructs teens involved in violent relationships to talk to someone they can trust.

"Getting out is of paramount importance," she stressed.

Monica Bradbury, who attended Ecker's program at St. Joseph's, said education is a crucial strategy in preventing abusive relationships. Teens need to know about the seriousness of the problem, she said.

"It wasn't graphically frightening to hear about it, but it was frightening to know it happens so often," the Bishop Kearney sophomore said. "Just to know society is that way is what is really shocking."

Magazine drive underway to benefit BK students

IRONDEQUOIT — Students at Bishop Kearney High School launched their annual Magazine Drive on Sept. 13 with a pep rally in the school gymnasium.

Kearney students are selling more than 65 magazine listings this year, including *Good Housekeeping*, *TV Guide*, *Reader's Digest* and *People*.

Students will also be selling a selection of approximately 200 cassettes and compact discs.

All proceeds from the magazine drive will benefit educational programs at Bishop Kearney.

The drive will run through Oct. 4. Call Sister Alma Statt at 716/342-4000 for information.


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