

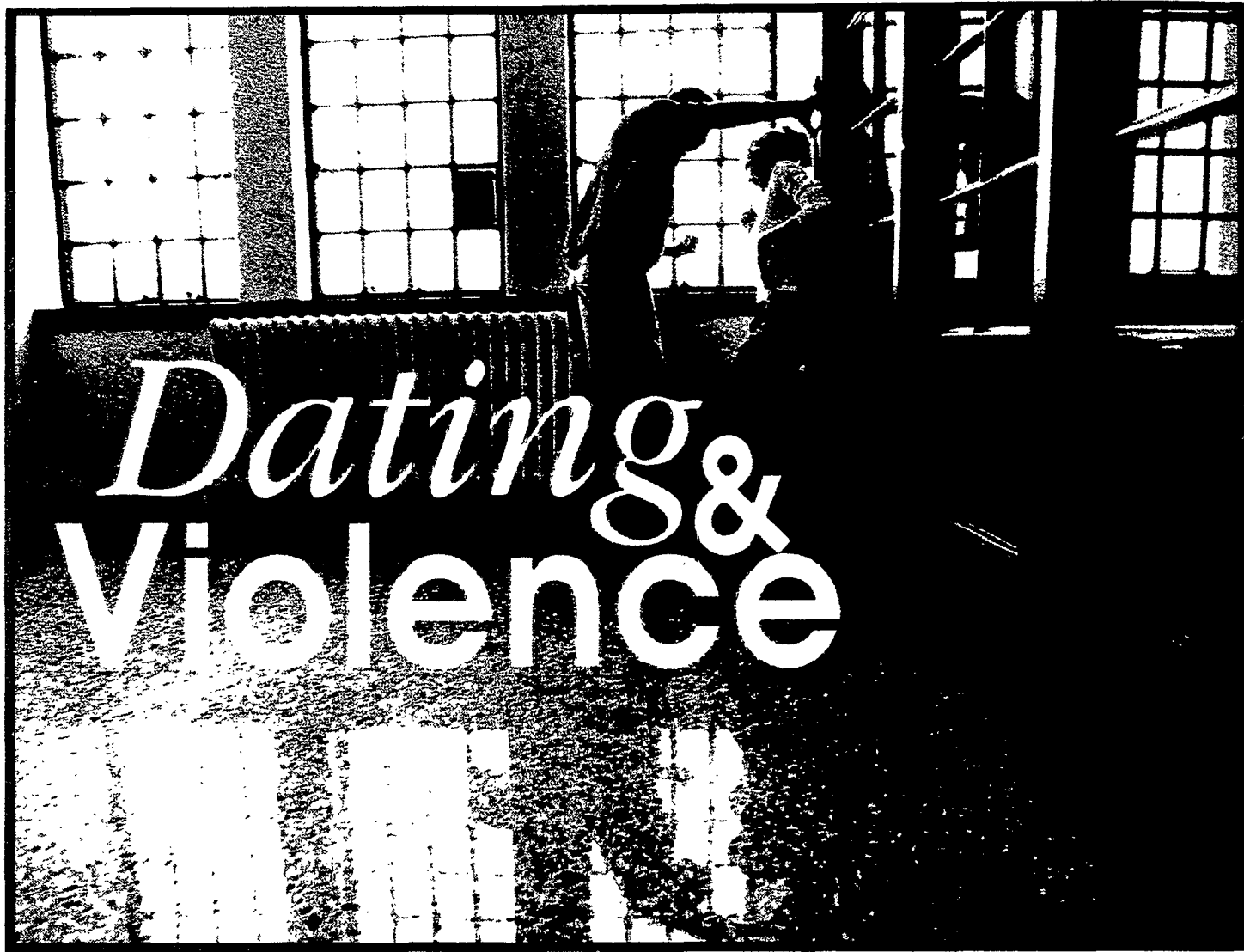
# MOVIE

Coming next week: Transition to college

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**T**he words sound strange together, but violence in the teen dating scene is a reality, according to a number of experts on abuse.

For example, in November, the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* published the results of a University of North Carolina study that surveyed 5,000 high school students in South Carolina. The researchers found almost 15 percent of the girls surveyed and 10 percent of the boys reported severe dating violence in the past year.

That violence is defined as being beaten up, hit, kicked or thrown down. Even more students reported having forced sex than reported being physically assaulted. Meanwhile, other studies report as much as 25 to 35 percent of teen relationships are marked by violence of some form or another.

Marla Tschieder, 18, a senior at Webster High School, has talked about dating violence with her friends. A youth leader of the youth group at her parish, Holy Trinity Church in Webster, Marla said she's spoken to some girls over the years who've been maliciously shoved by their boyfriends. Other forms of abuse she's talked about with her friends include verbal punches thrown between couples, cutting

words and demeaning remarks designed by one person to put the other down. Marla said that she would never tolerate any abuse, verbal or physical, from a guy.

"I want one who will listen to what I have to say and respect my opinion and not call me stupid or ugly."

Yet, Marla knows that some teenagers with low self-esteem have a hard time letting go of a relationship that involves verbal abuse or physical violence. Nonetheless, she noted that her peers should be alert to certain warning signs when dating anyone.

"To me, a big sign of a bad relationship is one or both of them are always fighting," she said of couples. "If someone has to lie to their boyfriend or girlfriend when they're going somewhere (without them) or argue over the silliest things, that definitely is a big red flag."

Her youth minister, Nora Bradbury-Haehl, was concerned enough about the topic of dating violence to co-host a workshop on the subject at Our Lady Queen of Peace Parish in Brighton Feb. 29 with Suzanne Schnittman, who coordinates domestic violence programming for the Diocese of Rochester. In addition to her position at Holy Trinity, Bradbury-Haehl is also diocesan program specialist for youth ministry and young adult ministry. More such dating violence workshops for teens, and possibly college-age Catholics as well, may be slated in the future, she said.

At Queen of Peace, Schnittman read from a fictional scenario describing by stages the gradual descent into an abusive relationship between a girl named Heather and a boy named Jason. The 25 parents and teenagers present then split into groups by age and discussed each stage of the relationship and how the girl in the scenario was gradually allowing herself to be controlled by her new boyfriend.

For example, Heather's friendship with her best female friend dissolves as Jason becomes important to her. Her boyfriend begins telling her how to dress and demeans her intelligence, and starts dictating what movies to see together. The scenario culminates with Heather glossing over the fact that David hit his sister, and ignoring other warning signs that he's trouble.

Bradbury-Haehl's discussion group consisted of teenagers who dissected the missteps that Heather took as she allowed Jason to gradually dominate her life more and more. The teens universally saw Heather as someone who failed to take an objective view of her relationship, and who was marked by low self-esteem. On that note, Bradbury-Haehl said she's seen girls change their personalities to accommodate an abusive boyfriend.

"Because having a boyfriend is so important, some of these kids will take an awful lot."

Lynne Boucher, campus minister at Nazareth College in Rochester, added that some of the students at her campus also have struggled with unhealthy relationships. Yet, like Bradbury-Haehl, Boucher noted that it's difficult for some people to even realize that their relationship is harming them.

"It's just a matter, oftentimes, of a long process of discernment."

Dating violence is among the kinds of violence that faculty, staff and students at Nazareth plan to highlight April 18 with a "Take Back the Night" vigil, Boucher said. Beginning at 8 p.m., participants will proceed around campus with candles and stop at various spots where students feel they could be assaulted. One of those spots, Boucher said, will be a dorm room because that's a place where students can feel pressured or forced into having sex.

Dating violence doesn't have to happen, and can be stopped, according to a number of experts. The first step a teen should take is to confide in a trusted adult — a parent, a youth minister, a school counselor, an adult sibling — about the situation, according to Linda Bean, domestic violence prevention education coordinator for Alternatives for Battered Women in Rochester. Bean added that people interested in learning more about dating violence can contact her at 716/232-5200, ext. 230.

Experts agreed it's most important to know that you're not worthy of abuse and that healthy relationships should not be violent. Just ask Marla.

"It's not worth the effort to me to put up with (abuse)," she said. "I'm too busy as it is. To me it shouldn't be a constant struggle to be in relationship."

