



By Jena Salon
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We want to believe that domestic violence will never affect us or anyone we know and that controlling relationships are a fact of life for “other people”. After all, discussions of domestic violence are often relegated to health classrooms, women’s rights summits, and public service announcements. But the reality is that domestic violence occurs everywhere.

Regardless of race, socioeconomic status, education level, or religion, one in four women and one in ten men will experience domestic violence in their lifetime. Despite its pervasiveness, domestic violence remains a hidden, shameful secret for several reasons. Domestic violence reflects a fracturing of the most sacred relationships we have as humans. Victims living with abuse often believe they are responsible for the abuse, feel alone with the shame, and are trapped by fear. No community wants to believe that neighbors and friends are victims within their own homes.

The lack of broad community acknowledgement, discussion, and support for victims of domestic violence further inhibits individuals to come forward. To admit abuse by one’s partner, a victim must break the often unspoken rules of family loyalty: we protect our families, and what happens within our walls remains private. Finding the right balance between legitimate privacy and dangerous secrecy can be difficult.

The hidden problem of domestic abuse received scant attention in Massachusetts until two shocking, publicly scrutinized murders: that of Jennifer Martell by her boyfriend Jared Remy, whose father, Jerry Remy, is a famous Red Sox play-by-play announcer, and Wayland teenager, Lauren Astley, by her ex-boyfriend a year prior. These brutal murders resulted in the enactment of a new, progressive Domestic Violence law. The law aims to better protect victims 1) through changes in the booking, prosecution, and sentencing of perpetrators; 2) by creating state and local review teams of police, prosecutors, and domestic violence advocates to assess escalating danger for victims; and 3) by requiring more training and resources for law enforcement personnel.

People were outraged and saddened by these murders, but it took months of dedicated advocacy by family, friends, and victims’ rights groups before these events stopped being depicted in the news as one-of-a-kind tragedies. Eventually, the public accepted the murders as belonging within the greater conversation about domestic violence.

Similarly, new, harsher penalties for any professional football player involved in a domestic violence incident were implemented only after Ray Rice, the running back for the Baltimore Ravens, was caught on tape knocking his pregnant fiancée unconscious in an elevator. Public outrage erupted. The National Football League reacted by increasing the original two-game suspension to a six-game suspension for a player's first incident and being banned indefinitely from the NFL after the second offense.

Both the new NFL policy and the new state law are huge wins for domestic violence victims, advocates, and victims' families. Additionally, the recent spate of domestic violence in the military and on college campus continues to make headlines. The convergence of all of these events in a relatively short time has allowed the topic to explode beyond the typical short attention span of other sensational and shocking events. It has opened up the opportunity for extensive public discussions about domestic violence. Continuing this open and honest dialogue is vital if communities want to make a difference in victim's lives.

But it is not enough to talk about domestic violence in general. People still need to take the leap to admitting that this type of violence against women happens in their own communities. Right here in your town. They need to understand that the lasting damage done by emotional and psychological abuse can be even more indelible than physical abuse. They must learn and accept that leaving an abusive relationship is incredibly dangerous and difficult, and leaving a controlling situation should not be forced on the victim. They should recognize that abuse always escalates, and they must not ignore the devastating, long-term impact on children who witness abuse.

Community dialogue moves domestic violence from a shameful event that hovers in the shadows of our cultural consciousness to one that people can combat and prevent. When people talk openly and supportively about the issue, they acknowledge that domestic abuse occurs in their community. Most importantly, when people accept that abuse is *never* the victim's fault, victims and survivors feel safer and can more easily speak up, seek help, and help others. Please keep the dialogue alive. Learn all you can about domestic violence. Ask your schools, clubs, and faith communities to provide speakers and workshops on the topic. You can help by stopping denial and ignorance and by developing a community that is safe, open to listening, non-judgmental, and willing to become part of the solution.

October is Domestic Violence Prevention month. Let's do all we can this month and every month.

Keeping the Peace is sponsored by the Violence Prevention Coalition of Bedford (VPC), a representative group of citizens interested in ending violence in families, communities, and beyond.

Jena Salon is Outreach & Communications Coordinator for Domestic Violence Services Network, Inc, a constituent member of VPC. Bedford's VPC meets the first Tuesday of every other month at 7:30 a.m. at First Church of Christ Congregational, 25 the Great Road, Bedford.

For more information call 781/275-7951.