

HouseLine

House Of Ruth Maryland Changing Attitudes. Saving Lives.

March 2011

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Spring Luncheon,
Tuesday, May 10, 2011



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HOUSE OF RUTH
MARYLAND

Odd Man Out

Even if you're at an age where it's difficult to remember what life was like in elementary school, it's impossible to forget the one overriding rule of being young.

You desperately want to fit in and you never want to give your classmates any reason to view you as different, or even worse - strange.

For children left homeless because of domestic violence, that involves a delicate balancing act between the truth and a fuzzy kind of fiction. A fine line that's essential both for their own safety and for their ability to adapt to what, in many cases, means a new school and new friends. In other words, a whole new world of hurdles that often starts when the school buses arrive at the shelter each morning.

"Kids don't mean to be, but they can sometimes be hurtful. They don't understand why everybody doesn't live in a regular home with parents and those kinds of questions can send our kids into a spiral," explains Pia May, Children & Youth Services Manager at the House Of Ruth Maryland. *"We work very hard to help them deal with their feelings and the trauma they've seen, but we just can't control what happens outside of the shelter. They're just kids and in spite of the violence, many still miss their dads and don't understand why they've lost him, their home and everything they knew."* **Continued on page 2**

Odd Man Out, Continued from page 1.

At any given moment, there are as many as 50 children living in the House Of Ruth's shelter. Each shares a single room with their mother, as well as any sisters and brothers. They have very little privacy, must adhere to strict rules and are coached to be deliberately vague about where they live. Some are able to continue at their old schools, while others – for safety reasons – are forced to start anew with none of the familiarity of their past lives.

"One thing you see is how quickly the kids who live here bond together," says Pia, "Even the youngest ones seem to recognize the security of being with other kids who understand and accept the situation for what it is."

There's no debating that there's a stigma felt by victims of domestic violence. An unspoken cloud that hangs over victims heads that somehow, some way, it must be their fault. That stigma is even more pronounced in children. Most of the children we see have covered for their father's abuse for years. They've deliberately shied away from having friends to their homes and are all too aware of what a sudden mood change can mean. Yet, it's the children who are also the most resilient. We see it every day in the relationships they form and the friendships they make while living at the shelter.

When you're young, the last thing you want is to be considered "different," yet for a number of hours each day while in the company of others just like themselves, these children become the norm. Perhaps that's why when our families eventually move on, the most heart-wrenching good-byes are usually the ones shared by the children.

Letter from Executive Director

Dear Friends,

At some point, you've probably heard the statistic. One in every four women will be a victim of domestic violence sometime in their lives. For many, it's a number that's been bandied about so often, it no longer has much impact. However, it starts to take on a more chilling perspective when you compare it to another notable statistic: One in every eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer.

These days, it seems we all know someone – a sister, mother, friend or colleague – who's battled breast cancer. Can you say the same for domestic violence? Can you list all the relatives and friends and co-workers who have been victimized by someone they love? The answer is probably – no. Not because they don't exist, but because most choose to bear the shame in private. Not surprising, considering that even today, there continues to be a stigma attached to victims of domestic violence. A cloud that lingers, even if the actual words are never said: "What did you do to provoke it?" "Why did you get involved with him in the first place?" "Why didn't you just leave?"

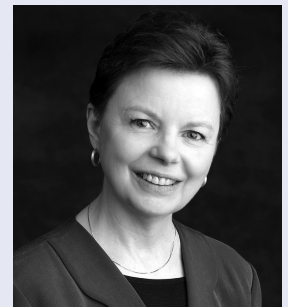
In my lifetime, I've seen century-old attitudes change around things we once took for granted. We've gone from a society with ashtrays everywhere to a world where smoking is hardly allowed anywhere. We've graduated from the multiple Martini lunch as status symbol to DUI as anathema. Yet, we still consider domestic violence something that reflects as badly on the victim as it does the abuser.

Each year, thousands if not millions turn out to support breast cancer survivors. As one of those survivors, I can tell you, it's an act that gives me great comfort and inspiration. My hope is that one day, we will also see that kind of outpouring for victims of domestic violence – a threat of a different sort, but one that is every bit as devastating to the lives it touches.

Sincerely,



Sandi Timmins
Executive Director



Sandi Timmins



Being Arrested For Calling The Police

When the Federal Government launched a program called Safe Communities, the idea was to enforce deportation of immigrants who had been convicted of a violent crime. In theory, it's a good one. However, the way it's implemented in Maryland through an agreement between ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) and the Department of Corrections has become problematic for many immigrant victims of domestic violence.

Deportation is now left solely to the discretion of ICE resulting in deportation proceedings for people primarily charged with minor crimes, even after those charges were dropped. Recently in Prince George's County, two women who called the police during an incident of domestic violence were arrested and immediately placed in deportation proceedings. In Baltimore County, there have been a number of cases where when the offender was arrested, he was immediately turned over to ICE for deportation rather than face charges in court. By eliminating the court process, the victim loses the ability to "collaborate with the court system," a requirement that enables her to apply for a U.S. visa.

No Hablo Español

As they file into the room on a cold Tuesday morning, a few are carrying small babies while others have left their toddlers in the care of volunteers outside. Most of the women seem to know each other. As they find seats, they nod and smile, but it's also obvious that I'm the interloper in the group. Aside from the differences in our hair and skin coloring, it's also the way I butcher the word, "Hola," in my attempt to say hello.

Today, I'm here to observe one of the weekly support groups at Adelante Familia, a program for Spanish-speaking victims of domestic violence that is now part of the House Of Ruth Maryland. As Blanca Picazzo, one of the program's client services managers introduces me and explains why I'm here, I nod and smile and realize in that instant, I'm an observer who can't understand a word of what I'm hearing.

Latinos are the largest, fastest-growing minority in America, however that's a fact I didn't know when I chose French as a second language a hundred years ago in school. However, the women are very gracious and respond to my "Hola" with a chance to practice their own smattering of English. With the ice now broken, Blanca gets down to business. While I can't tell you the details of what was said – I can tell you that even with the language barrier, it's evident that no matter where you were born or what language you speak - domestic violence destroys the lives of women and children. It's apparent by the sadness in their voices and the look in their eyes. Yet, at the same time, there's a sense of strength and hope in this room that's almost palpable – ironic since these victims face even greater obstacles than most.

They are not only isolated by their abusers, they are also held captive by their language, their culture and, in many cases, by their fear of a system they have been taught not to trust.

The clients range in age from 20 to 40 years, each with multiple children. Some are here legally, others not – but virtually none speak English. That makes their abuser's hold over them all the more powerful. *"Report me and you'll be sent back to Guatemala."* *"Call the police and they'll take away your children."* These are women who have every reason to be afraid and the men who torment them know it all too well.

Last year, Adelante Familia worked with a few of their clients to try and obtain visas. An effort that takes a great deal of determination and a huge leap of faith since the mere act of applying doesn't guarantee success and instead, could mean a one way ticket back to the country where the abuser's family is waiting, with virtually no safety net in place. Both Blanca and Jesus Rivera, who runs Adelante's Abuser's Intervention Program say, among their 400+ clients, there are also cultural differences to contend with. The culture in Mexico is one of major machismo, whereas abusers from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala tend to be more violent and more apt to be involved in gangs. All of which makes the road forward a difficult one for the victims gathered here today. The only sure way out is by gaining the ability to work and support their children - which explains why a recent announcement that one victim had been granted a visa caused a counselor to exclaim, *"Now is your time to start dreaming."*



The Call That Hit Home

Carol Bernstein is no stranger to the rollercoaster of emotions that come from being on the Hotline full time, but there are certain calls that hit home a little harder. It's either something in the caller's voice or details that are unusually horrific that make that person someone you just can't forget. For Carol, it was a woman who called a few days after Christmas.

Feeling poorly, the woman had gone to the doctor to have some tests done and while there, discovered she had contracted a STD. When she confronted her partner and informed him that she was ending the relationship, he pulled a gun and threatened to kill her if she even thought about leaving. He was arrested a short time later. However, the day the woman called the Hotline was the day she learned that he was being released. Understandably afraid, she wanted to know whether the shelter was an option and, if so, what would life be like for her and her two, young daughters.

After conducting a Lethality Assessment, Carol found herself warning the woman she was a Risk Level One. The gun incident hadn't been the first – earlier in the year, he had choked and beat her so badly while she was pregnant that she had delivered a stillborn baby. That assault case resulted in a “nolle prosequere” and her request that he receive counseling was never acted upon.

Like so many victims of domestic violence, the woman still loved her abuser. Although she knew she needed to end the relationship, she was also tortured by the fact that her daughters, never having actually witnessed the violence, adored him and begged her to continue the status quo.

As Carol worked to coordinate services with her colleagues in other House Of Ruth programs, the family was temporarily placed in a motel. While there, the House Of Ruth provided her with legal representation to obtain a Protective Order and assigned a client services coordinator to give support and implement safety planning. Ultimately, the woman decided to forgo the shelter option in favor of relocating outside of Maryland. The House Of Ruth provided referrals and assistance with traveler's aid, and the client and her daughters left Maryland a short time later.

“You could look at this situation and say, this one had a happy ending – she's safe and she's alive,” explained Carol, “but I still think of her daily. Has she been able to truly move on? Has she come to terms with the loss of her baby? And has she been able to mend the relationship with her daughters or are they still angry at her decision to leave? People always say, ‘why doesn't she just leave’ but for every victim, leaving brings its own set of unique and often complicated challenges.”

A SPECIAL THANKS TO:

- All those who participated in our Adopt A Family program - thanks to you, hundreds of battered women and children experienced holiday magic
- Kairos Baltimore for organizing a *Shop For Mom Night* so that each child living in shelter had a present to give his or her mom on Christmas morning
- United Way of Central Maryland volunteers for helping our moms wrap presents for their children
- Monyka Berrocosa, owner of mycity4her.com, for re-stocking the wonderful game room for children at our shelter
- The Baltimore City Fire Department for visiting with special surprises for the children
- Swirnow Building Systems for providing Thanksgiving dinners to our clients and their children
- Barbara Dennis, Claude Dennis, and students from the Baltimore Freedom Academy for delivering the Swirnow turkey dinners
- Everyone that hosted a Wish List Drive and stocked our shelter with items we so desperately need

Making Domestic Violence Its Own Crime

As the 2011 Legislative Session gets underway, there are a number of bills in the offing that could make life considerably safer for victims of domestic violence. One of those is to create a separate crime of domestic violence. Not only would passage mean enhanced penalties for a defendant convicted of a domestic violence assault, but it would also allow for easier tracking of these cases and a greater level of accountability. Judges, court commissioners, probation officers – all would be fully aware if a defendant had been convicted of domestic violence assaults in the past. If Maryland passes this bill, it would certainly not put us on the cutting edge as 44 states already have some form of a domestic violence assault crime. *If you would like to be kept up-to-date on pending legislation and help advocate on behalf of victims, please contact Dorothy Lennig, Director of the House Of Ruth Maryland Marjorie Cook Legal Clinic by emailing: dlennig@hruthmd.org.*



A January Opening

If you were going to open a retail business, there are not many months worse to do it than August. Unless, of course, you're talking about January – the time when everyone is over-spent and over-extended, coupled with that other small detail of snow, ice and sleet storms. So it was certainly with some trepidation that Ruth's Closet, the House Of Ruth Maryland's new social enterprise, opened its doors for business on January 4, 2011.

However, there's nothing like the opportunity to find a gem like a pair of Jimmy Choo boots, a Nanette Lapore skirt or a cashmere coat at bargain prices that gets people out of hibernation and back into the swing of shopping. Since the opening of this unique resale boutique, customers have been steadily coming in to browse, buy, donate and chat - the latter being one of the most startling differences about the shopping experience at Ruth's Closet. Perhaps it's the atmosphere itself, the fact that the shop is staffed primarily by volunteers or maybe the knowledge that profits go to supporting programs for battered women and their children, but whatever the reason, there's a real feeling of camaraderie among the shoppers. It was clear the day I visited and stumbled onto a rack of shearling and fur coats donated by customers of Mano Schwartz. Within minutes, I was shoulder-deep in new girlfriends, each of us trying on coats and encouraging others to do the same. You never know who you're going to meet or what you're going to find at Ruth's Closet – it could be new, designer gowns donated by Vasarri or a pair of Manolo's that was gathering dust in someone else's closet. The truly savvy shoppers have signed up for email alerts so they're the first to know what treasures are arriving and when. To sign up, you can visit hruth.org or better yet, visit the boutique located at the back, lower level of Valley Village Shopping Center at 9131 Reisterstown Road on Wednesdays through Sundays.

Ruth's Closet is a social enterprise of the House Of Ruth Maryland. Start up of Ruth's Closet was partially funded by a grant from the Allstate Foundation which sponsors community initiatives to promote safe and vital communities; tolerance, inclusion, and diversity; and economic empowerment. All profits from Ruth's Closet go toward House Of Ruth Maryland services for victims of domestic violence and their children.

Following In Her Father's Footsteps

One of the turning points at every House Of Ruth Maryland Volunteer Orientation is when participants go around the room and say what brought them there. When it was Drayden Peters' turn, she answered, "I'm here for my Dad." Some people might have taken that to mean that domestic violence had somehow touched her family's life, however, nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, Drayden's father, a practicing attorney, had been a volunteer on the House Of Ruth's hotline for the past two years and she was now training to take up his baton. Her father's upcoming departure wasn't by choice, but instead a stipulation of him being appointed to the bench of the Baltimore City District Court. "Both my parents have always stressed the importance of volunteering. Even though being on the hotline can be draining sometimes, I feel good about doing something to help someone else." Having graduated from college, Drayden is now considering following her father's footsteps and applying to law school. However, in the meantime, you can find her at the House Of Ruth one or two shifts a week fielding calls on the 24-hour hotline.

National Volunteer Week is April 10-16, 2011. Drayden is among hundreds of outstanding volunteers who will receive recognition for excellent service to the House Of Ruth Maryland. To become a volunteer, please visit hruth.org or contact Kayla Newton, Volunteer Manager at (410) 554-8449, knewton@hruthmd.org.

Our Apologies

In our last issue, we included a list of donors who had donated \$500 or more during FY10. Our sincere apologies go to Susan Katzenberg for her absence in that listing. We sincerely regret that omission and have put processes in place to ensure it doesn't happen again.



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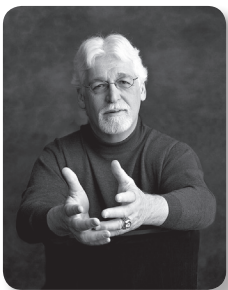
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In Honor Of Our Tenth Anniversary, This Year's Speaker Won't Talk About A Book, But Instead About Real Life.



At this year's Annual Spring Luncheon, there will be no talk of politics, no stories of past Presidents or anecdotes about life on the bench. Instead, our speaker will talk about something much closer to home – how to grow boys into men and ensure the safety of young women. As a former Baltimore Colt, educator, motivator, coach and professional speaker for over 30 years, Joe Ehrmann shares a wealth of insight from on the field and off into what we teach our young people and how that can sometimes result in the kind of tragedy that rocked families from Charlottesville to Baltimore last year.

Tuesday, May 10, 2011 • 11 AM - 1:30 PM

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Co-Chairs: Olwen Modell & Amy Newhall • **Gold Sponsor:** Merritt Properties

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