

# HouseLine

House Of Ruth Maryland Changing Attitudes. Saving Lives.

October 2011

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HOUSE OF RUTH  
MARYLAND



## One Tragic Sunday

For many people, Sunday is a day to sleep late and enjoy a long, leisurely breakfast. For others, it means getting up and off to church. Yet for one 10-year old boy in Prince George's County, Sunday represented neither of the above. Instead it was the day he was going to visit his father. A court-ordered visit that would take place under close supervision at a safe and neutral spot – the Family Crisis Center in Prince George's County.

On a seasonably warm Sunday morning this past May, the young boy got up, got ready and then joined his mother and aunt for the ride over to the Center. When they pulled up, the boy and his mother got out of the van. Witnesses say that before the two even had a chance to step onto the curb, a man approached on a bicycle and pulled out a gun. Some say the gun was pointed at the boy, but his mother stepped in front of him, shielding his body with her own. What is undisputed is the fact that the man then pulled the trigger. In the chaos that followed, the boy jumped back in the van and his aunt drove off. The man then walked up to the woman who was lying wounded on the ground and pulled the trigger again before climbing back on the bike and riding away. A few hours later, a suspect was arrested and charged after a shoot out with the police. The suspect was the boy's father. He was rushed by ambulance to the same hospital currently fighting to save the life of the boy's mother.

*"In high conflict cases, you have to plan for the worst. There is a very real need for supervised visitation centers, but just putting up a sign on a storefront doesn't make it safe,"* says Judy Wolfer, Managing Director of the House Of Ruth's Legal Clinic. Currently, the only major metropolitan areas in Maryland that offer supervised visitation centers are Prince George's and Baltimore Counties. *"In Towson, the Center is staffed by social workers and located within the courthouse so every father has to go through a metal detector,"* explains Wolfer, *"Does that eliminate all risk? No, but it certainly puts another level of protection in place."* **Continued on page 2**

*One Tragic Sunday, Continued from page 1.*

Wolfer believes that more centers are vital, but some refinements and best practice policies are necessary. One of the simplest precautions a center can implement is having the man arrive first – and once inside, then notifying the woman and child that it's safe to enter. That policy was not in place at The Family Crisis Center at the time of the shooting, but has since been adopted.

Montgomery County's center closed three years ago; however, judges in that jurisdiction have come up with a rather innovative alternative. In cases where they deem the danger quotient to be unusually high, they will order visitation to be held in the presence of off duty police officers and determine which parent will pay for their services. Wolfer is currently handling a case for one victim whose ex-husband has appealed that ruling.

While some people think once a couple is separated, the danger is over – the research and evidence prove otherwise. *"After separation, the risk to the woman increases dramatically. Studies say the danger is much greater for the woman than her children – but tell that to Lisa Spicknall or Dr. Amy Castillo, both of whom lost their children at the hands of jealous, vengeful fathers,"* says Wolfer.

While some might debate the need for centers in every jurisdiction, no one can dispute the very real need for better safety nets to be in place. As Wolfer explains, *"At least 40% of the cases the House Of Ruth's legal clinic handles are high conflict and call for some sort of supervised visitation. Bottom line, whether those visits are supervised by a family member, off duty police or an official visitation center, if we don't plan for the worst-case scenario, then we're not doing our job. And even worse, we're gambling with women and children's lives."*

For years, the child therapists at the House Of Ruth Maryland have been trying to convince the courts that, in some cases, visitation should be suspended altogether. Those arguments often fall on deaf ears. One rather ironic sidebar of the Prince George's County shooting is that it took place on Mother's Day. How sad that a day meant to honor the role of motherhood has instead become a poignant symbol of the dangers thousands of Maryland women currently face.

# Letter from Executive Director

Dear Friends,

I recently came across an audiotape that we use in domestic violence trainings. Although I've listened to this tape a hundred times before, it never ceases to horrify me. On it, you hear a man screaming and threatening his wife. You can hear her whimpering in the background and you know the threats are all too real. But what's most chilling is the knowledge that this tape was recorded by a five-year old boy. A boy who will never be counted in victim stats or included in any list of lives affected, but who nonetheless will bear the scars forever.

There are some who think that domestic violence is an issue between two consenting adults. Nothing could be further from the truth and to believe that, negates the hundreds upon thousands of children whose lives and futures hang in the balance. The nine-year old girl who is forced to call the police on her own father. The teenager who sleeps with a hammer under his pillow because he's convinced his father will break in one night and kill them all. The two young toddlers, who have to watch, strapped in their car seat, while their father shoots their mother. The stories are too many to recount, but they are the stories the courts often forget when they decree that a father has the inalienable right of visitation.

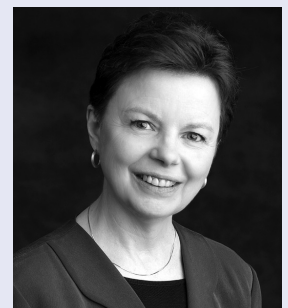
Certainly, as a general rule, fathers should have rights. But when that father has proven himself to be a danger, those rights need to be reexamined. When he's made threats, those threats need to be taken seriously. Every day, our child therapists are put in the difficult position of having to prepare children for visits they both dread and fear.

In this issue is a story of one of those visits. It may be unique in its brazenness – a shooting at a supervised visitation center – but the dynamics of what happens when power and control are lost can be seen in thousands of families across Maryland right now. When are we going to acknowledge that kids are victims, too? When are we going to put their wellbeing and their safety above that of someone with the title of "father"?

Sincerely,



Sandi Timmins  
Executive Director



Sandi Timmins



## An Unexpected Gift

*"Your request for a protective order has been denied," snapped the man at the court commissioner's office. "There's no proof that he's any danger to you."*

*"Are you kidding?" exclaimed Christina. "Does he have to kill me before anybody's willing to help?"*

Even after all these years, Christina can still recount – verbatim - the conversation she had that day. It was an afternoon in late 2007 when Christina and her sister had traveled to an office in Baltimore in order to apply for a protective order against her estranged husband. His behavior had become increasingly erratic and his sudden appearance at their apartment earlier that day had left her nine-year old daughter terrified and in tears. Christina's request was summarily denied.

Less than nine hours later, Christina was asleep with her daughter next to her and her one-year old son alongside in his crib when a noise made her open

her eyes. *"All I saw was a man's figure standing at the end of my bed, but I knew it was him. My kids were still asleep so I got up, walked to the living room and closed the bedroom door." He had entered through a second floor window and Christina pleaded with him to leave. When he refused, she tried to call his family on her cell phone and that's when the struggle broke out. "My daughter had woken up, and before he grabbed me, I was able to slip her the phone. He had my arms and legs pinned so tightly, I couldn't move – but she knew exactly what to do. She went back into the bedroom and called the police."*

Ironically, one of the police who showed up that night had answered a previous call from Christina, but by the time he'd arrived – her estranged husband had already left. This time, there was no denying the situation. A broken window and bruises up and down Christina's arms bore out the fact that the danger

quotient had risen to a new high. *"The police asked if I wanted a temporary protective order and offered to take me right then and there." Unlike her experience earlier that day, this time Christina was granted a temporary protective order. It was a few days later when she went to court to follow up that she met someone from the House Of Ruth Maryland. "A woman approached me and asked if I needed help. I said yes, I don't know anything about this process." Ashley Sikora at the House Of Ruth Maryland's Legal Clinic took up the cause and represented Christina in her protective order hearing and, subsequently, her divorce and custody cases. The relationship may have happily ended there had it not been for the fact that a few years later, Christina found herself working at the Harry and Jeannette Weinberg Foundation. "Each year as part of our workplace giving campaign, the employees get to submit proposals as to who they think should receive a grant. There was no question, mine was the House Of Ruth Maryland." This past July, staff from the House Of Ruth Maryland joined approximately 80 others at a luncheon where Christina spoke before awarding the House Of Ruth a check for \$10,000.*

It was the first time Christina had ever publicly shared details about her experience. Today, she is happily remarried and worries only about the scars the past may have left on her children.

*"Seeing the effect it had on my daughter and refusing to let my son be raised in the same situation is what finally gave me the courage to leave. Recently, someone asked my daughter if she remembered her childhood. Her answer was – no because I don't want to remember it. Hearing that just broke my heart."*

*The House Of Ruth Maryland thanks the Harry and Jeannette Weinberg Foundation for their generosity, and Christina Laumann for her willingness and courage to share her story.*



## Through International Eyes

The spectators in the courtroom that day were stunned. After sitting through the trial of a man charged with stabbing his common law wife 20 times, wounding her so severely that she almost died of hypovolemic shock, and then trying to strangle her, the man was found not guilty of malice or the intent to kill. Instead, the court found him guilty of a lesser charge of causing serious injury, sentenced him to time served and released him that day on good behavior. It was a verdict that would have gone unnoticed here had it not been for the fact that among the spectators in the Argentina courtroom that day were two Maryland judges, one prosecutor and the Director of House Of Ruth's Legal Clinic. The delegation had arrived four days earlier and since landing in Buenos Aires had met with numerous family court judges, prosecutors and police, the Vice-President of the Supreme Court of Justice and held a videoconference with the high courts of two other provinces. This side trip to Cordoba was a chance to see the process in action and for the observers; it proved to be an eye-opening experience.

The delegation's head, Judge Alan Wilner, retired from the Court of Appeals and current Chair of the Rules Committee, explains, "When it comes to

dealing with domestic violence, Argentina is 20-25 years behind the U.S. They've put systems in place to prosecute criminally, but they don't have all the processes and structures that we do. Our goal in visiting was to help them get from where they are to where they want to be."

At issue is a culture where historically women defer to men. "Because of engrained attitudes – the systems they've set up are not being used the way they hoped," said Dorothy Lennig, Director of the House Of Ruth Maryland's Legal Clinic. "They don't care about learning how protective orders work, what they care about is how to change people's minds."

Much of what the delegation saw and heard was reminiscent of America thirty years ago. Societal attitudes that make it difficult for victims to leave. For instance, abusers are politely referred to as "victimizers" and even when charged with an offense as egregious as the one described above, are granted conjugal visits while in jail. Victims are only allowed admittance to a shelter if criminal charges are filed and once there, not allowed to leave for any reason. Subtle messages that perhaps explain why the victim, the abuser's common law wife since the age of 14, had testified that the stabbing had been the consequence of her own mistakes.

"In some ways, Argentina is a lot further along than we are," says Judge Wilner. "Women have broken a lot of glass ceilings, including the Presidency, yet some attitudes are harder to change." Both Judge Wilner and Lennig say they traveled to Argentina to share ideas, but came away with newfound insights of their own.

"We could learn from the way Argentina makes victims party to the criminal case which allows them equal voice in plea bargaining situations," explains Judge Wilner. Added Lennig, "In Maryland, we prosecute as if all cases are the same and consequently, the state doesn't win many. Maybe if we put additional resources against the cases where there is injury, more perpetrators would end up in jail."

*The House Of Ruth Maryland joined the delegation at the invitation of Judge Wilner, an experienced hand at the global exchange of ideas having led similar delegations to both Russia and China. Sponsored by Fores Interchange, each of the participants paid their own airfare.*

## From Russia With Love

When interviewed for the piece on Argentina, Judge Wilner shared a touching story of his own. During one delegation to Russia, he visited the Mayor of a small village outside of St. Petersburg. While in the Mayor's office, he noticed a handmade, cardboard angel and learned that it had been a gift from orphans living in a facility that the man had personally funded and built. The Mayor insisted on giving Judge Wilner the doll as a goodwill gesture. A few weeks later, the judge was visiting the House Of Ruth Maryland and discovered the angel still in his briefcase. Accompanied by a staff member, he gave the doll to one of the children living at the Shelter. Some say the global economy is moving us closer and closer together, but in this case, so did one small cardboard angel.



## Banking On Immunity

With three offices in Montgomery County, the House Of Ruth Maryland's legal staff handles cases for victims from all circumstances and all walks of life. In recent years, that has included a number of protective order cases involving high-level employees from The World Bank. Owing to the fact that The World Bank has diplomatic immunity meaning subpoenas can't be served on its premises, that has created a unique set of issues. Issues that would have been insurmountable had it not been for the concern and help of The World Bank's administrative team. The organization now works closely with the House Of Ruth to help obtain justice and benefits for the victims. Recently, they took that cooperation to an even higher level. A group of World Bank wives got together and created a quilt, which they then sold to raise funds for the House Of Ruth. Their generous gesture led the organization to invite the House Of Ruth Maryland to participate in its annual workplace campaign. We salute The World Bank for taking such a public stand against domestic violence and supporting the House Of Ruth Maryland.

## Maryland IOLTA Honor Roll

Legal clinics providing civil legal services to low-income Marylanders receive a portion of their funding through IOLTA – Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts. As one of the recipients of this funding, the House Of Ruth Maryland joins the Maryland State Bar Association and Maryland Legal Services Corporation in saluting the following financial institutions for their willingness to pay premium rates in order to ensure legal representation to all.

American Bank • Baltimore County Savings Bank • BankAnnapolis • Carrollton Bank • Congressional Bank • First Shore Federal • Hamilton Federal Bank • HSBC Bank USA, N.A. • MainStreet Bank • Midstate Federal Savings & Loan • Premier Bank, Inc. • Revere Bank • Sandy Spring Bank • Severn Savings Bank • Standard Bank • TD Bank • Vigilant Federal Savings Bank • Virginia Commerce Bank

*For a complete listing of all financial institutions approved to accept IOLTA deposits, visit [www.misc.org](http://www.misc.org).*

## A SPECIAL THANKS TO:

- Key Club at Meade High School for their donation
- Pendleton for hosting a wish list drive in their store at The Shops at Kenilworth
- PCMA for donating wish list items after their Baltimore conference
- Toyota for their \$2,500 donation
- Baltimore's Classic Five, Maroon PR, DSW Shoe Warehouse, SRI Shoe Warehouse and WJZ for sponsoring the High Heels for Hope event at the Driving Range at Pine Ridge Golf Course
- Charm City Payroll Association for collecting wish list items
- Kaiser Permanente for making a donation through Verizon HopeLine
- MAC for hosting their annual ½ marathon to support the House Of Ruth Maryland
- The Allstate Foundation for a generous \$15,000 grant to support Adelante Familia
- The Clearing House Ltd. for their annual Sidewalk Sale benefitting the House Of Ruth
- Knights of Columbus Council #4011 (Father O'Neil Council) for proceeds from the annual Jessica Meredith Jacobsen 5K
- Se Sens Serene for donating proceeds from their trunk show to the House Of Ruth Maryland

## CALENDAR OF EVENTS

**Adopt A Family** begins registration Tuesday, October 11th. For more information, contact Jana Mauro at (410) 554-8448 or [jmauro@hruthmd.org](mailto:jmauro@hruthmd.org).

**One Great Thing event at Ruth's Closet** - October 27

**B-More Bags Trunk Sale at Ruth's Closet** - December 3



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MARYLAND

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# HouseLine

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*If you receive multiple mailings or need to update your address, please call our Development Office at 410-554-8443.*

## Close To 600 People Got Their Mambo On

Thank you to everyone who made this year's Crabaret such a resounding success - including Mother Nature who gave us a picture perfect evening to dine, drink and dance in the BMA Sculpture Garden. Save the date now for next year's Crabaret - July 12, 2012.

