

# HouseLine

House Of Ruth Maryland Changing Attitudes. Saving Lives.

March 2012

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**Administrative Office:**

**(410) 889-0840**

**24-Hour Hotline:**

**(410) 889-RUTH**

**Legal Services:**

**(410) 554-8463 (888) 880-7884**

**Línea en Español:**

**(410) 889-7884 (Oprima 8)**

**Maryland Relay: 711**

**FAX: (410) 889-9347**

**Website: [www.hruth.org](http://www.hruth.org)**



HOUSE OF RUTH  
MARYLAND



## Changing The Tide

For Sue Brown, the House Of Ruth Maryland's Community Child and Family Therapist, the toughest obstacle to doing her job is dealing with the universally accepted mindset that visitation is a parent's unalienable right. For years, she's tried telling the courts that it's not always in a child's best interest to spend time alone with a father if that same father has committed acts of domestic violence. Those pleas have often fallen on deaf ears and almost always been hotly contested by the other side's lawyers citing "that no violence was ever directed at the child." Now, with the help of House Of Ruth attorneys, Judy Wolfer and Deena Hausner, that mindset may finally be changing.

In December, Wolfer and Hausner, along with Brown, wrote an article for the Maryland Bar Journal entitled, "The Kids Are Not Alright." The article cited growing evidence that children in domestically violent households witnessed a lot more abuse than was previously imagined and suffered debilitating long-term psychological and cognitive effects because of it. "That article," said Wolfer, "was like dropping a pebble in the pond and now the ripples are being felt far and wide. The courts do care about the kids and I think this was a message they were ready to hear."

Within days of the article being published, Wolfer and Hausner were invited to present to a group of 110 domestic violence lawyers from around the state. Right on

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the heels of that came a presentation to the Baltimore City Bar Association and plans are already underway to have it be included in future judicial trainings. "Often as part of custody and visitation hearings, judges will ask the child if he or she was personally abused by Dad. We're saying you need to ask a second question," explained Wolfer. "You need to ask whether the child ever witnessed the abuse." It may seem like a subtle distinction, but it comes as a huge departure from the way things have been handled in the past. But according to Wolfer, Hausner and Brown, the proof is pouring in that witnessing violence does, indeed, damage kids. In fact, one recent study actually likened a child's brain after witnessing abuse to that of a combat soldier experiencing post traumatic stress disorder. "We're not trying to say that Dad can never see his kids again," said Wolfer, "but maybe at this point, visitation is not the best move. Or at least let's look at what kind of visitation makes the most sense."

In the past any suggestion that fathers shouldn't be allowed visitation has set off a ground swell from defense attorneys and fatherhood groups. However, as House Of Ruth is quick to point out – no one is advocating for a "forever" edict, but instead a nuanced approach that takes the onus off parental rights and instead protects the kids. Judges have the ability to order counseling, even parental training in cases where they think it's advisable. As Wolfer points out, "Bottom line, we need to help men be better fathers. The big carrot to doing it this way? It may be our best chance of finally breaking the inter-generational cycle of violence."

*If you'd like to read "The Kids Are Not Alright" visit [hruth.org](http://hruth.org).*

## Letter from Executive Director

Dear Friends,

On any given day, if you were to visit our shelter – or, for that matter, any domestic violence shelter in America – you would immediately notice two very striking things. First, every room and every bed is filled to capacity. And second, the majority of bodies filling those rooms and beds are children...infants, toddlers and teens that have been forced to go on the run either for their own protection or that of their mother. Yet, when domestic violence statistics are released, those children are not included in the final tally. Historically, the mindset has been: if the children weren't directly abused, then they haven't been affected. Nowhere is that more evident than during subsequent custody and visitation battles.

For years, our child therapists have been arguing that you don't have to be directly in the line of fire to be impacted by bombs falling nearby. Today, more and more research is proving that to be true. Children see, hear, and sense a lot more than they often let on and, if not addressed, that can lead to lifelong cognitive and psychological issues. It's time, actually well past time, that we accept that children growing up in violent homes are also victims. They may not appear on police reports or emergency room lists, but their scars are just as real. Acknowledging that means we need to look at a host of things differently – starting with visitation. A parent's rights should never outweigh a child's well being, and that message needs to be heard far and wide, loud and clear.

In this issue, we talk about the fact that the tide may finally be changing. We are hopeful that's true because, from where we sit, smack on the front lines, every estimate of the number of people affected by domestic violence should be multiplied by two, three, or more to include the thousands of children who are forced to live with fear, guilt, anger and lost innocence.

Sincerely,



Sandi Timmins  
Executive Director



*Sandi Timmins*



## The Kids Are Not Alright

- Children ages 0 to 5 years are more likely than older children to be present during incidents of domestic violence
- Infants in homes where parents are violent may sleep poorly, scream excessively and have disrupted feeding patterns, resulting in poor weight gain and developmental delays
- Young children are particularly vulnerable to the harmful effects of domestic violence because they have not yet formed the ability to cope with trauma
- Adolescents who witness domestic violence at home exhibit shame, betrayal and rage and may cope by running away, cutting classes and dropping out of school, and using drugs and alcohol



## Start Running

Join us for this year's MAC Half Marathon & Two Person Relay, presented by Advanced Radiology to benefit the House Of Ruth Maryland, Saturday, May 19 at 8:00 a.m. on the NCR trail in Freeland. For more information (and a little motivation to start training) Kayla Newton at [knewton@hruthmd.org](mailto:knewton@hruthmd.org).

# Bully Behavior

The first people to notice were the staff at the House Of Ruth's after-school program. The 10 year-old boy had been a resident of the shelter for a while, but lately, his behavior seemed to have changed. He was becoming increasingly aggressive and seemed to enjoy bullying the other kids. Gretchen Tome, the Shelter's Children's Therapist went to talk to his Mom. "I thought it was going to be a difficult conversation, but she welcomed it. She immediately told me – yes, he is having some difficulties."

After getting the mother's approval, Gretchen began to work with the boy on a weekly basis. She started by just talking about what trauma means and then slowly elevated the conversation to coping skills, i.e., what do you do when you get upset?

When the conversation eventually got more personal, the boy pulled back. "He said it made him too sad to talk about the past," explained Gretchen. "I told him that talking about it won't make the bad feelings go away, but it will make them smaller." That simple statement along with a suggestion by Gretchen that he use a creative outlet to express his bad memories proved to be the key that unlocked the door. After being given a number of options from poetry to drawing, the young boy chose to tell his story in book form. Over the following months, Gretchen became therapist, typist and photo assistant as the two of them created his life story page by page.

The young boy and his mother had come to this country to be reunited with his father. The move had come after months and years of letters and photos of the home they'd share, and emotional pleas for them to all to be together again. Once they arrived, the abuse began almost immediately. As the book took shape, a host of revelations and feelings surfaced. One of the most poignant was his memory of the day he and his mother left their country for the U.S.. The whole family had come to see them off and one relative hugged the boy so hard and so long, he thought she'd never let him go. As Gretchen said, "Imagine how this boy must have felt. He came here with all these hopes and dreams and instead, he got violence. No wonder he felt angry inside."

The book is nearly finished and judging by the reports from shelter staff, the behavior that set off alarm bells is much less evident these days. "With kids at this age, we're not talking about therapy for the rest of their lives, but instead long enough to help them understand their feelings and develop mechanisms to cope in the future." Soon the book will be shared with the boy's mother and then the three of them will sit down to talk. "We're not done yet, but just this past week he told me that he doesn't feel so sad and so mad anymore. Truly, that's the best thing any client could ever say to me."



## Fraternizing With The Enemy

Although the Gateway Project, the House Of Ruth Maryland's abuser intervention program is located on the same campus where victims come every day for legal and counseling help – it might as well be in a different country. Off the beaten track and accessible only via its own entrance, it is a continent away from the general workings of the House Of Ruth Maryland. In fact, the gulf is often so wide that Gateway staff usually find themselves fighting an uphill battle to gain any understanding of, let alone compassion for the men they see on a weekly basis. So it's understandable why there was such trepidation when Gateway participants were determined to be the subjects of a new House Of Ruth video. This was tantamount to not only coming face-to-face, but fraternizing with the enemy. And for four weeks this past fall, that's exactly what we did.

On weekends and evenings, we met up with a number of men who had been charged and convicted of brutal acts of domestic violence in order to interview, record and film them. Although each was paid a stipend for their time, they didn't know that when they volunteered. In fact, in some cases, we had to actually insist they take the money so that the release they signed would be legal. They showed up, one after another, anxious to tell us their life stories. With tape recorders running, they told us about prison stays and crimes committed. They told us about gang life and the circumstances that led to their arrests. But it was when they talked about their own childhood that the enemy finally became human. Suddenly the man sitting across the table was no longer the abuser, but instead the abused. For a few minutes, they were

children again recounting stories of guns, abuse, abandonment and violence at the hands of their fathers – a surprising glimpse into how future abusers are made.

Those moments were broken only when we asked about their children – at which point, the mood would shift from darkness to light. Each talked about their determination to have their own kids grow up differently. Over the course of those weeks, we came to believe them. We also came to feel protective of these men and how they would eventually be portrayed. In this issue, there are a number of articles about kids who witness violence. We know there is a generational cycle to abuse. We know, through the work of the Gateway Project, that child witnesses, particularly boys, often become abusers themselves. We hope you'll read these articles carefully because if more actions aren't taken on behalf of these children, we have already gotten a glimpse of where they might be headed.

*To view the finished video, visit [hruth.org](http://hruth.org). Funding for this project was provided by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families/ Grant #90FR0092 administered by Maryland Department of Human Resources, Office of Grants Management.*





## Spotting An Abuser Instantly

Because there is no such crime as “domestic violence” in Maryland, it’s often difficult for judges and others in the criminal justice system to identify chronic abusers. Why does that matter? Domestic violence, by its very nature, reoccurs. If, for example, a judge had known that the last three 2nd degree assault convictions had been DV-related, he or she might not be so quick to release a defendant on his own recognizance. In fact, it was that very conversation that initially motivated Dorothy Lennig, Director of the House Of Ruth Maryland’s Legal Clinic, to help draft new legislation that flags any crime that’s committed against an intimate partner. “I’ve heard a few judges say that when they see a bunch of 2nd degree assaults on someone’s record, they just assume it’s bar room fights,” says Lennig. “That means they’re not thinking about whether there’s a woman out there who might be in danger if this guy is released.” It wasn’t long after overhearing that statement that Lennig found herself in a training session with new Court Commissioners. “We presented them with hypotheticals and the first thing they asked was whether these were DV assaults. It was clear that having that information could change how and what they ultimately decided.” The problem, currently, is that getting that information isn’t something that’s done quickly or easily. In many cases, the only way to know for certain is to read the original police report, which is not usually part of the court file.

“With the passage of this bill, criminal justice stakeholders will be able to instantly distinguish between defendants with histories of domestic violence and defendants who get into altercations with strangers,” explained Lennig. “With this information, court commissioners, law enforcement, judges, prosecutors and probation agents will have the ability to hold abusers accountable and help make victims of domestic violence safer.” A new level of accountability and, perhaps, for the first ever – an accurate picture of just how prevalent domestic violence really is in Maryland.

*If you’d like to receive regular updates on pending legislation, email [dlennig@hruthmd.org](mailto:dlennig@hruthmd.org).*

## A SPECIAL THANKS TO:

- The individuals and companies that participated in our Adopt A Family program. Thanks to you, hundreds of battered women and children experienced the holidays.
- Park Moving & Storage for donating a Go-Mini pod for use during the holidays
- Ki Ki Brown and 92Q for donating handbags to our shelter residents
- Monyka Berrocosa, owner of [mycity4her.com](http://mycity4her.com), for hosting the Jingle Bell Pajama Party to re-stock the game room for children at our shelter and raise funds in support of our programs
- The Baltimore City Fire Department for visiting our shelter with special surprises for the children
- Swirnow Building Systems for providing Thanksgiving dinners and Barbara Dennis, Claude Dennis, and students from The Sons Academy, Inc. for delivering the dinners to our shelter
- Accents Beads and Renee Tatusko for donating the fees from a beading class
- Expressway Office Solutions, Sorso Café, Donna Kunkel and Jazzercise Fitness Center of Pasadena, and all others who hosted a Wish List Drive and stocked our shelter with items we so desperately need
- Maryland Association for Health Care Recruiters for collecting donations on our behalf
- University Of Maryland College Park Cheerleaders for hosting Shop for Mom Night
- Nelson Coleman Jewelers for their Secret Santa surprises

## 2nd Annual High Heels for Hope

June 9, 2012 • 1pm – 4pm

Driving Range at Pine Ridge  
Hosted by WJZ’s Jessica Kartalija

*Proceeds to benefit House Of Ruth Maryland.  
Visit [hruth.org](http://hruth.org) for details.*



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2201 Argonne Drive, Baltimore, MD 21218

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# HouseLine

**Writer**

Sande Riesett

**Design and Production**

Debbie Saag

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## Take a Walk Inside the WHITE HOUSE



As the Presidential campaign heats up, join the House Of Ruth Maryland for an insider's perspective on what happens at the White House and on the campaign trail. This year's guest speakers, Chief Washington Correspondent for the *New York Times*, David Sanger, and NBC Presidential Historian, Michael Beschloss, will share their unique perspectives on the American presidency: past, present and future.

**Friday, April 20, 2012** • 11AM – 1:30PM • Marriott Waterfront Hotel • 700 Aliceanna Street, Baltimore, MD 21202

**Co-Chairs:** Olwen Modell & Amy Newhall

Tickets are \$150 per person. For ticket information, please contact Cheri Parlamen at (410) 554-8446