

Naples event

Victim shares story of violence, hope

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In the minutes before she was to speak to the dozens gathered at an event Thursday for the Shelter for Abused Women & Children, Susan Still prayed.

She prayed to calm her nerves and in the hope that her story of surviving domestic violence would come across.

"I pray and I become a vessel," said Still, an advocate for victims whose story has been featured on 20/20 and the Oprah Winfrey Network.

It was prayer, too, that got Still through her last day in an abusive relationship more than 10 years ago. That day, her husband of 24 years had threatened one of her sons with violence after having spent the weekend sexually and physically abusing her.

"I knew I would die if I stayed any longer," she said.

FUNDRAISING EVENT

Still's speech Thursday was part of the shelter's annual fundraising event at the Naples Beach Hotel and Golf Club. The group hopes to raise \$5.1 million for its operations this year. The shelter is one of only two in the state that does not receive funding at the county level.

Attendees gasped when real footage of Still's abuse played over two screens at the front of the room. Many were moved to tears as she spoke of the relentless verbal abuse she suffered at the hands of her husband. The video showed Ulner Lee Still smacking his wife, threatening to knock her teeth



SCOTT MCINTYRE/STAFF

Susan Still waits to speak at the Shelter For Abused Women and Children's "Shelter from the Storm" luncheon at the Naples Beach Hotel and Golf Club on Thursday. Still told of extensive physical and mental abuse that she said resulted in her ex-husband being sentenced to 36 years in prison. It was the longest sentence ever imposed in New York state in a case of domestic violence that did not result in the death of the victim, she said.

out and calling her stupid no less than 23 times as he forced his 13-year-old son to record the exchange.

"How many times does someone have to call you something before you believe it?" Still said to the audience.

Still's story made national headlines when in 2004, her former husband was sentenced to 36 years in prison, the longest sentence imposed in a New York domestic violence case in which the victim lived.

On the night she decided to leave, Still prayed her husband would leave her alone the next morning as she got ready for work. Most days, he criticized her makeup and clothing, looking for reasons to force her to call out sick. Still needed to get to work

that day so she could later visit the police station and report the abuse. She prayed she could make it to her job one more time.

"For the first morning ever, he didn't come anywhere near me," she said.

LEFT WITH LITTLE

Still told the men and women gathered to imagine having to leave their home, all of their belongings and their jobs with only the cash in their wallet.

"The pit in your stomach you're feeling now is probably one-thousandth of what I felt," she said.

Still took her children to a shelter where they provided beds, food, toothbrushes and, most importantly, a safe place to catch her breath.

"It was there that I

found time to figure out the next move," she said.

Still urged attendees to donate to the Naples shelter because she said it offers victims with few resources and fewer options a haven and a gateway to a better future.

"Give generously today so you can change and elevate lives," she said.

The Shelter for Abused Women & Children opened in 1989 with 20 beds and has since expanded to 60 and now includes a kennel for families' pets.

"Every adult, child and pet has a right to lead a life free from violence and abuse," Executive Director Linda Oberhaus said.

As of Thursday, the shelter was housing 27 adults, 13 children, three dogs and four birds.

Festival to celebrate Immokalee success

By Maria Perez
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The first Celebrate Immokalee festival is scheduled for Saturday as an event to celebrate everything the community offers and its achievements.

"We are celebrating the accomplishments of the people in the community," said Cherryle Thomas, a festival organizer with the Immokalee Chamber of Commerce. "We are going to celebrate all cultures and diversity."

Bernard Barnhart, president of the Immokalee chamber, said from children to football players, Immokalee neighbors have many successes.

Immokalee residents work in many sectors, he said, and the community has a lot to offer, like the Lake Trafford marina, the raceway and the casino.

"The reason that we are doing our festival is to show people that we are more than one thing," he said. "Let's create something that brings all Immokalee together."

The Celebrate Immokalee festival will be held at the Immokalee Airport Park on Saturday from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Lipman's 5K run will begin at 8 a.m., with proceeds supporting a backpack giveaway in August. A Junior Fun Run will take place at 9 a.m. inside the Airport Park.

At 10.30 a.m. the festival parade will start at Ninth Street North and Main Street. It will end at the park.

There, barbecue vendors will compete for the title of King of the Grill and other food vendors

The proceeds will fund scholarships for Immokalee High School graduates who want to pursue further education and, for the first time this year, aid the top readers in fifth grade.

will also sell their specialties. There will be music, from mariachis to Spanish opera, dancers from local schools, games for kids, and a flag football tournament.

Instead of a pageant, jurors will choose this year a Miss Lady Indian, who can have any talent, such as wrestling, playing the trumpet, running cross country or being in the flag line, Barnhart said.

The proceeds of the festival will fund scholarships for Immokalee High School students who graduate and want to pursue further education and, for the first time this year, aid fifth-graders who are among the top readers of their classes, said Thomas.

Students earn credits for every book they read during the year, the amount depending on the complexity and length of every book.

The children with more credits will get one of the monetary awards.

Thomas said they want to encourage students to read at an early age.

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