

Serving needs for victims of domestic violence, trafficking



Making a Difference
Joe Landon
Guest columnist

Today, during National Domestic Violence Awareness Month, we have good news to share for the women and children who live in Immokalee who fall victim to domestic violence and human trafficking.

The Shelter for Abused Women & Children in Naples is doing an amazing job serving the needs of victims of domestic violence and human trafficking and has for years. Last year alone they provided 24,389 nights of shelter, dealt with 2,243 calls to their crisis hotline and created 18,406 safety plans.

While residents of Immokalee are being ably served by The Shelter's Immokalee Outreach Office, victims of abuse in Immokalee must currently travel 45 minutes to Naples for safe shelter. Many don't have transportation and may be reluctant to be that far away from their support systems like jobs, schools, friends and family.

Kaydee Tuff, the shelter's communications manager, tells us that "many more survivors of domestic violence and human trafficking would seek shelter if it were available in their own community." And Tuff laments the fact that "today many return to unsafe circumstances rather than travel to Naples for emergency shelter."

While the services of the Immokalee office have grown exponentially since it was established 21 years ago, and although the Immokalee office has been recognized as a national model for the wonderful work being done there, a recent needs assessment demonstrated a growing need for a separate shelter to be built there.

"This much-needed shelter will soon become a reality," said Linda Oberhaus, Shelter CEO. "It is a project that has been in our plans for several years. But a \$3 million lead gift from Naples philanthropist Shelly Stayer allowed us to fast-track this project, which will save and transform many lives."



IMMOKALEE CAMPUS
ENTRY RENDERING



The Shelter for Abused Women is planning to build a 15,000-square-foot shelter in Immokalee, thanks to a \$3 million gift from Shelly Stayer, the owner of Johnsonville. SUBMITTED

Fundraising has been underway since October of 2016 and thus far the RISE campaign, as it's called, has brought in \$9.2 million toward a goal of \$10.8 million to break ground. RISE, by the way, is an acronym for Respond to the need, Inspire others, Support the mission and Empower survivors. The overall fundraising goal is \$15.8 million.

Zoning for the 32-bed, 21,000 square-foot Shelly Stayer Shelter in Immokalee was approved by the county this month, and groundbreaking will take place in the spring. According to Oberhaus, the facility will feature three main areas: a section to accommodate the long-term therapeutic needs of vic-

tims of human trafficking; a section to shelter victims of domestic violence; and a section dedicated to Immokalee outreach.

So, what will having a shelter in Immokalee mean as far as its residents are concerned? A lot, says Norma Rodriguez, Immokalee outreach manager. "Victim families in need of safe shelter have historically been underserved in the Immokalee community. We are hopeful that a stay at The Shelter will provide families with the safety and support they need to create peace in their lives and break the generational cycle of abuse," she stresses.

Women who've been helped by The Shelter in Naples are certainly grateful for its existence. One former resident credits The Shelter for saving what she calls her most beautiful new life. "I have

never felt more loved than there," she adds. Another calls The Shelter a "light in a dark place for me." And yet another thanks the people who run The Shelter for providing her soul with a sense of safety.

Should you wish to support The Shelter for Abused Women & Children's mission to prevent, protect and prevail over domestic violence and human trafficking, or if you'd like to donate to the Shelly Stayer Shelter directly, visit www.naplesshelter.org. Volunteers are needed, as well.

Joe Landon is a communications consultant having retired as executive director of communications for the Collier County School District. Send suggestions for future columns to JoeLandon@Outlook.com.



Linda Oberhaus

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