

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Breaking the cycle of abuse a key factor for The Shelter for Abused Women & Children

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THE SHELTER FOR ABUSED WOMEN & CHILDREN / COURTESY PHOTO
Drawings done by a 6-year-old girl in The Shelter For Abused Women & Children Healing Arts program address the unspeakable — the two drawings were made before and after her therapy at The Shelter.

October is National Domestic Violence Awareness Month — observed by many, and also locally by The Shelter for Abused Women & Children. Its focus includes the effects domestic violence has on our children, its helpless victims.

“Growing up in a home with domestic violence, I personally understand the impact that abuse has on children,” admits Linda Oberhaus, executive director of The Shelter. Her enduring passion is helping those living in homes where domestic violence is prevalent. “It was in those early moments that I developed a deep belief that every human being deserves to live a life free from violence and abuse,” she said.

And she has made it her life’s work to make sure that domestic violence victims get a second chance at life, and that The Shelter’s vision of a community without domestic violence, and one in which each and every home is a safe haven, becomes a reality.

Here’s a sobering statistic. One in every three women will experience domestic abuse in her lifetime. Hopefully, they’re seeking help, but their

children need assistance, as well. This year, The Shelter provided emergency shelter, counseling and outreach services to 350 children ages 5 to 17.

“We help children who have been victimized by or exposed to domestic violence,” says Natalia Gonzales, The Shelter’s clinical services director. “We help them process emotional distress through supportive and therapeutic approaches to treatment. Finding healing early in life reduces the probability of repeating learned patterns in the future and/or suffering from long term post-traumatic stress that can lead to other complications in adult years. Children who have been exposed to domestic violence demonstrate aggressive behaviors like a lack of compliance with discipline, and an inability to regulate emotions such as

anger and sadness. And we find they are going through social and emotional withdrawal while also experiencing low academic performance.”

There’s a concern that girls who grow up in abusive homes are more likely to become victims of abuse in adulthood. And boys are more likely to become abusers as adults.

“When exposed to domestic violence, children may tend to identify with the parent of their same gender and may replicate some of their behaviors as adults,” Ms. Gonzales says.

Through her clinical work, Ms. Gonzales says she finds internal strength and resiliency in the children she treats. “It never ceases to amaze when yet another survivor prevails over domestic violence. Their life is a public declaration that violence does not have the

final word.”

On the positive side, in addition to the counseling, The Shelter provided in-person primary prevention training to 7,243 children in our schools this past year. The Shelter also offers a Healthy Friendships program for middle school students, and a Teen Healthy Relationships program to address the high school dating violence issue.

Ms. Oberhaus firmly believes that children are gaining knowledge about healthy relationships thanks to The Shelter’s efforts. They’re also provided with the warning signs of abuse and resources that will enable them to keep themselves safe if they are experiencing violence in the home. She declares that, “Our hope is that the seeds we plant for these children today will carry on into their relationships when they become adults, both preventing abuse in their relationships and breaking the cycle of abuse for the next generation.”

To learn more about The Shelter for Abused Women & Children, visit www.naplesshelter.org/front/. And if you need help, or know someone who does, call the confidential 24-hour crisis line at 239-775-1101. ■

— Joe Landon is a communications consultant who retired as executive director of communications for Collier County Public Schools in 2014. Contact him at joelandon@outlook.com.



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