

I ghost wrote the following piece for the executive director of the Cape Cod Center for Women in commemoration of Domestic Violence Awareness Month. It ran in the Cape Cod Times and the Falmouth Enterprise in October 2008. Within a day of publication, readers called the shelter offering money totaling \$1,000 and other help.

By Mary Starr

October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month, a commemoration first started in 1987, the same year that April, who recently sought help at our shelter, was born to a drug-addicted mother.

April's mother married a man who didn't want April around. He frequently beat her, and when April turned 12 she became involved with a 17-year-old who would treat her the same way.

At first, he showered her with attention, which no one else in her short life had paid her. But soon he became possessive, controlling and physically abusive--a typical pattern of behavior for many batterers. He took her car keys so she couldn't drive anywhere. His friends called her "Dee's girl" instead of by her name. And when he beat her in front of them for accidentally bumping into him after an argument, they laughed.

"The more they laughed, the harder he hit," she remembers. "And the more I cried, the harder they laughed. So from that day on I stopped crying."

Fully believing that Dee would eventually beat her to death, April made her escape with the help of local police. After staying in a couple of off-Cape shelters, April made her way to the Cape Cod Center for Women, where she found peace to heal and become whole. She received counseling, talked with the other residents, wrote in her journal, and just breathed in the sweet air in our quiet back yard.

After nine months in our shelter, April got her own apartment and now works as an advocate for the new residents coming in to the Cape Cod Center for Women.

"It was a horrible situation I was in," she says, "but coming here and having to deal with it completely changed my life around."

Our homey shelter on the Upper Cape is a unique one. It may not serve large numbers of women each year, since it has room for only nine people at a time, but those it does serve receive the support and attention they need to make substantial changes in their lives. Most women stay with us for about six months, then go on to a transitional housing program or find permanent housing.

But getting to that point is a long journey. The women arriving at our door have been beaten countless times and raped; they've been convinced they are worthless. Many are suffering from depression and post traumatic stress disorder, as are their children, and

they can't sleep during their first weeks with us. Most are initially unable to trust us because they're not used to even the smallest acts of kindness.

During these difficult economic times, our services become more in demand, as despondent homeowners in foreclosure and frantic jobless parents resort to violence against themselves and their loved ones. But this is also a time when we are seeing our funding—half of which comes from the state and half from fundraising and private donations—shrinking, and are expenses, particularly for food and heating fuel, growing. During the last fiscal year, nine out of 35 emergency shelters lost their state funding and were forced to close. And with more state budget cuts looming, many programs, including ours, will likely see reductions in staffing and programs.

This is not the time to cut domestic violence programs. Last year in Massachusetts, 55 domestic violence deaths were reported, the highest rate in the past 15 years. And as of September, 32 domestic violence deaths had been reported this year. Without our programs, April would likely be dead, not sharing her story with new residents of our shelter.

“They gave me my life back,” she says. “And it had been taken away a long, long time ago.”

Mary Starr is executive director of the Cape Cod Center for Women. Contact the shelter at 508-564-SAFE or go to capecodshelter.org.