

Abuse of women large problem in North Leeds
Once it starts, it always happens again

By Francie Healy
The Mirror

ELGIN – They sit, quietly chatting about some of the most horrifying moments in women’s lives. The terror, they say, is not somewhere else but here in North Leeds, and it happens every day.



Spousal assault is everywhere. Women in North Leeds, like women everywhere in Canada, have to deal with abuse on verbal, emotional and physical levels.

Mirror photo by Francie Healy

on life with the gusto of a prize fighter. She seems tough and soft at the same time, and throws herself into her work with admirable energy.

Melinda’s days can be frustrating. She can sense abuse before it explodes, before it causes physical injury. But she can only educate and stand by and hope clients will feel supported enough to make the right moves.

All these women say spousal abuse is a large problem in North Leeds, just as it is everywhere in Canada. But they also say it’s a particular challenge in dealing with the issue in small communities because of isolation, lack of transportation, child care, and population.

Gananoque OPP Const. Maureen Maveety is a small woman with bright and observant eyes. She leans back on a couch at the Family Focus office in Elgin and tells how it feels to see beaten women, in homes, on streets, in bars, cars, stores. Maureen is cop and mother and woman, and she knows the problem better than most.

It’s a matter of safety not to describe Brockville Interval House counsellor LeighAnn. She doesn’t want her picture taken. She knows about the men who will go after her or the women she accompanies to coffee shops to talk about their problems.

This is not dramatics. This is common, everyday stuff in this area, and LeighAnn talks about it in a gentle and matter-of-fact voice.

Melinda Held-Myers of Family Focus is a feisty and witty woman who takes

“And there’s this feeling,” says LeighAnn, “if a woman calls police or goes to a lawyer it might be someone she knows, or worse, someone her husband goes hunting with.”

Maureen agrees. It happens. Abusers can be anyone’s friends.

“But police put personal relationships aside,” she says. “They don’t have friendships with abusers, no matter what.”

Her eyes narrow a little and you know she means business. “It’s our mandate to protect. Police take abuse seriously and have for a long time.”

She tells about the women who heave a sigh of relief when they realize they are no longer responsible for pressing charges against abusive husbands and boyfriends. Police arrest abusers, and their victims can do nothing about it.

Not like the old days, Maureen says. Not the way it was when there were no shelters like Interval House, and no legislation to bring an abuser to justice.

It was too easy, she says, for a remorseful husband to do the flowers-and-candy routine and guilt his beaten wife into silence.

Even before shelters, she says, police would take a victim to a friend’s or a motel paid for by service clubs. But they had to say it was her responsibility to press charges.

In most cases, she didn’t. Shamed, worn down, and most of all afraid, a woman usually had no choice but to hope it wouldn’t happen again.

But once abuse occurs, it is always repeated, LeighAnn adds. It never stops.

“You don’t get hurt on your first date,” Melinda says. “You get conditioned.”

Believing it will be otherwise is the key reason women return again and again to abusive situations.

“When you’re hurt,” Maureen explains, “the best repair is often remorse. You go back looking for that and eventually you get slammed again.” And then she adds: “The very first time it’s really bad. From then on it’s strictly downhill, because it always happens again.”

It’s a hard thing for a woman to accept, and many refuse. Time and time again they assume they did something wrong: If only I kept the house cleaner. If only I didn’t complain. If only I listened more. If only I looked better.

Martha, not her real name, is a woman in her early 30s, living next door to her husband’s parents on a North Leeds farm. Her husband, Bob, is an upstanding member of the community. His well-respected family goes back generations.

Once when Martha and Bob were dating, they had a little spat. Bob slammed his fist on the dining room table at his parents' house and sent teacups crashing to the floor. When Martha refused to pick up the shattered pieces, Bob grabbed her upper arm and told her it was her fault and she should clean up the mess.

Martha picked the slivers of china out of the carpet and apologized to everyone. Later in the evening, Bob let her out of the car a block away from her place and sped away so fast the dust flew.

The next morning Bob was at her door with flowers and a tiny gold bracelet. They kissed and made up, and the wedding plans went on as promised. But soon after they were married, Bob grew ugly and coarse, intimidated Martha's friends so they wouldn't come to the house any more, sold Martha's car, and started checking to see who she had called.

Privately, he told her she was stupid, overweight, useless and a terrible housekeeper. Publicly, he humiliated her by scoffing at everything she had to say.

When the children were born, Bob took Martha's credit cards away, gave her a meagre allowance accountable to him, and created arguments with her family. Before long no one wanted to visit or phone, but Bob systematically accused Martha of affections for other men. He reminded her his family was just a stone's throw away and "knew" all Martha's activities.

Bob was often displeased. He didn't like the way she was raising the kids. His supper wasn't ready in time. Her hair was a mess. She couldn't be trusted to do simple household math. She used too much hot water. She talked too much. She talked too little. She had no brains, she didn't understand him, she whined, she asked for too much.

He started pounding his fist again: this time through walls, on furniture, and once, in Martha's face. When Martha wept, he told her she was a pathetic baby.

Martha tried harder. She went nowhere, spoke to no one, desperately tried to raise the children properly, keep the house clean, the dinner hot and the laundry caught up. Bob went out into the community every day, and people patted him on the back and told him he was a fine fellow.

Over time, Martha became increasingly afraid to go out. She knew anything she would say or do would be wrong, and even grocery shopping became an embarrassing ordeal. She had no skills, no confidence, no freedom, no friends, and no resources.

Some people, like Martha, go through life without physical injury. Some find their husband's power and control escalates to violence. Most believe it will get better some day despite bruises, broken homes and destroyed egos. Many refuse to recognize that the fairy tale, the one they wished for with all their hearts in their teens, is nothing more than a shattered dream.

Some accept the reality of their lives when the children are hurt, or when the children witness beatings. But even when they do, there is no alternative: no job opportunities, no money, no child care, no transportation, no friends.

Interval House helps in crisis, when police are at the door to arrest the husband and bring mother and children to safety. Family Focus helps when a woman finally finds her way to one of the many services offered: a play group, perhaps. A woman's admission of her life may come out haltingly, in conversation.

"It often takes that last straw," Melinda says. "Often she will return to her husband, especially when he is sweet and apologizes and promises better times ahead. But each time abuse happens, something registers. Eventually she will take steps to change her life."

Women are not the only ones who suffer abuse, Maureen says. She and other OPP officers see a growing number of men beaten by their wives, and although male abusers far outnumber females, Maureen goes so far as to say women hurting men may be a trend.

"I think it's a matter of time," she says. "we have to start talking about all abusive relationships."

This kind of thinking makes LeighAnn uneasy.

"We have to remember men still have the options to leave," she says. "And when women abuse they are often lashing out after a series of 30 or 40 or 50 assaults." Men also report abuse, she says, as a backlash: If you're going to call the police on me, I'll show you how it feels.

"But," says Maureen, "abuse is not exclusively a male domain. Police see it going in another direction, although the statistics are nowhere the same. The balance of power still favours men, but the balance is changing."

What do you do if you know someone in an abusive relationship? You look for the signs, the women say. The obvious ones are black eyes and bruises.

But the other, more silent ones, are intimidation through looks, actions, gestures, loud voices, and destruction of property; through forced or coerced servitude and isolation, withdrawal from friends and family, put-downs, the withholding of money; through woman-as-sex-object mentality, guilt-mongering, threats.

As a friend or family member you can help by simply being there.

"Stick by her," LeighAnn says. "Don't remove yourself, even when you think she's not helping herself. Be there for her whether she's ready to leave or not."

And if you're in trouble? Talk. Reach out. Don't try to handle it alone.