

Activism Overcomes Ignorance & Isolation

SUZANNE

Nestled in the Black Hills of South Dakota is the town of Custer, population 2,000. During the summer, Custer bustles, swollen with tourists passing through on their way to nearby Mt. Rushmore.

During the long winter months, the surrounding snow-streaked, granite mountains and lush forest make for breathtaking scenery but the inclement weather brings instant isolation.

One is struck by the number of remote houses and cabins tucked into gulches or hidden by hilly forest. Most Custer County residents live in these ripples of topography.

Wages are low and educational opportunities limited. Couples marry young and women start families early; conservative gender-role attitudes prevail. Custer County is much like any other rural, hill community in the United States.

It is here that a group called WEAVE, Women Escaping A Violent Environment, was born. Its purpose was to serve as support for women in Custer County experiencing domestic violence. In WEAVE's early days, "escaping" women were taken into private homes.

When the South Dakota state legislature passed a law requiring a percentage of the marriage license fee to go toward education about domestic violence, WEAVE was interested. In order to qualify for funds, it needed a more formal structure. WEAVE was taken over and directed by a parent group called Business and Professional Women (BPW), as an extension of BPW's social obligations.

WEAVE has existed in its present incarnation for only four years. As such, it is still new and growing. I spoke with some people who work with WEAVE to get a feel for how it continues to function despite the underlying discomfort the subject of battered women causes this small community.

Donna Talley is the current Executive Director. She has patient blue eyes and her voice softens when she says, "My mother was a victim of domestic violence. Her death was attributable to violence. No one deserves to be battered."

I ask her to describe her community, and phrases like "attitude of denial" and "rural poor" filter through. She feels that some abusers may believe they can get away with more here because homes are so isolated.

"It bothers the abusive people that we have this service," she says, defiantly.

No longer simply a support group, WEAVE is now an educational taskforce offering workshops, a newsletter, a 24-hour number, temporary shelter, and two professional counselors.

I asked how WEAVE can possibly provide these services, with no office and fewer than ten volunteers in a given month. Apparently, while there is funding to be applied for, grassroots support is the key to its operation.

Talley strongly recommends that struggling groups try to strike deals with local radio stations for publicity. Given a break

in cost, commercial spots for WEAVE air on the Custer station, KFRC, several times a day.

For its two-year-old newsletter, WEAVE receives a grant from the South Dakota Domestic Abuse and Sexual Assault collective. The printer gives WEAVE a special price because he supports the cause.

WEAVE is not afraid to ask for input from the community. Churches give to the group's food pantry that serves sheltered women and children, and fundraisers are mostly cookie and craft sales.

"Our county commissioners," Talley adds, "match our state and federal grants. We have a Victim of Crime Assistance grant in this state, too."

To maintain rapport and build community awareness, plaques are awarded to supporters at publicized ceremonies. Also, workshops on subjects such as "Children of Battered Women" and "Rape" give curious members of the public a chance to learn more about the WEAVE taskforce.

Probably WEAVE's greatest function is the 24-hour support service provided in conjunction with the police. Although women can call the 800 number directly, typically, it is the police responding to the assault who beep that week's on-call volunteer.

WEAVE then provides immediate moral support to the victim, informing her of group therapy meetings, and offering temporary shelter at an area motel.

"If we can find help for the victim, it makes our job easier. We don't have to keep going back to that house," asserts Chief Deputy Glenn Talley, Donna Talley's husband. "I've been doing this for twenty years. I believe evidence supports the battered woman syndrome but there's a lot that goes unreported because of the mandatory arrest law. If we go out to the house, she knows the man is going to be arrested."

He cited that on average, a woman makes seven attempts to leave her situation before she finally does, and that he believes more women do not call police in this community because of the stigma of being identified.

For the last two years, officers have voluntarily attended the same training sessions as WEAVE volunteers, giving them a wider perspective.

Donna Talley confirms that while many officers have trained for domestic violence and sexual assault calls, "There are some who've refused to go. Some deputies side with the men—the man is always right."

WEAVE volunteers do not encourage a woman to leave home unless she is in immediate danger, but if a woman opts for temporary shelter, WEAVE pays for her two-to-seven-day motel stay. For the women's safety, a different motel is used in each case. In 1991, almost 30 women and children were sheltered this way.

The taskforce is looking for a permanent shelter but cannot use state or federal funds to purchase a structure. One of WEAVE's goals is to secure more transitional housing.

Tina, 25, a worker at a host motel, said, "Everything happens everywhere—small town or city. I don't think women should

feel ashamed. I've always wondered what I would do."

Unfortunately, not all motel owners are sympathetic to the cause. One said, "Why do you waste your time and money on these broads. Most of them deserve to have their asses kicked."

Through the small town pipeline, Talley has since learned he is an abuser.

Even if a woman chooses to stay in the home (drug or alcohol abuse may factor into this decision), volunteers stress counseling. Group therapy is held twice weekly for these women at a professional office in town. One counselor, asking that her name be withheld, talked about WEAVE clients.

"I see the effects of abuse on women and children everyday in my work. I'm amazed at how many women do come forward here. I've seen people grow personally and make positive changes in their lives. I think the WEAVE program is important, and I would like to see more services for children in the future. But it takes time to change a community's attitudes."

To help bring about this change, in October 1992, WEAVE sponsored a march down Main street in Custer. "I wanted to open eyes, to make a statement," Talley says, "I wanted people to know that violence is not okay."

Based on Take Back The Night marches, the march in Custer was the first of its kind held in western South Dakota.

Using the slogan, "Stop Pain and Violence," over 15 participants marched and chanted. Some of them were former victims. They took over Main Street from spotlight to spotlight, in tiny, rural Custer.

Only one heckler marred the parade. A man in a truck with a shotgun demanded access to a blocked saloon, intimidating the marchers until he was redirected.

JUST SO MUCH WORK

After the march, business as usual meant stress. For a fluctuating handful of two to eight volunteers, fundraising and coordinating services can seem overwhelming. In 1991, volunteers logged over 8,000 hours.

Talley admits, "If someone would take this over from me, I would step down. It's just so much work."

Unlike an urban group that enjoys rolling support from many activists, in WEAVE, a few people are responsible for many services. Personal lives become affected.

Priscilla Engen is Director-at-Large and, frankly, tired of all the public relations and fundraising that began for her three years ago. Engen insists she was never one to get "involved" until WEAVE. She has a quick smile, but thinks carefully before she speaks.

"Where I grew up, on the reservation, no one did anything about domestic violence. I joined WEAVE to help other women. Not do public relations."

Her frustration evident, she is dismayed that she has not gotten a call while on beeper duty. "I don't want women to get beat up, of course. But I give so much personal time to fundraising, I feel some disillusionment that so much time is spent on the 'cause' and not the 'work'. The publicity makes me uncomfortable and sets me apart from the people I know.

"There are people who joke about us—'Women Enjoying A Violent Environ-

ment'...they don't take it seriously. It's kinda like the reservation—complacency. Don't interfere in my life, this is it, this is the way it's always been.

"We just can't get emotionally involved. You help them and they leave, then you help them and they go back... I want to say to women I do this because I care for you, I love you, and you don't need to live that way."

Engen discovered that a close friend had been in an abusive situation and had chosen not to tell her.

"She told me, 'I thought you would turn him in to the cops because you're involved with that group'. That really hurt me."

Although Engen created the banner carried at the October march, she did not attend.

I asked some townspeople what they thought about WEAVE operations but no one talked about the service. Instead they spoke about domestic violence and their town. As if revealing a secret, they looked around guiltily, afraid others were listening.

John, 33, stammering, seemed afraid he might say something wrong. "It happens in people's homes, so you don't know the scope of how bad it is."

I asked him if the 'problem' had to be widespread and very obvious to warrant such a service. He mumbled, "I guess to help one person would be beneficial."

A girl, 17, told me, "There're a few kids in school I've heard have been beat up by boyfriends. It's definitely a concern for me and my friends."

Lori, 21, believes that, "People in small towns take things in stride and they just don't care. They're as bad as cities—actually, small towns are worse."

Her statements made me think about all the people who had spoken with me, some not wanting to give their true name, or go on record. I figured this tiny, enduring service called WEAVE must be doing something right. Shaking things up.

I empathized with Priscilla Engen for her uneasy, high-profile connection to the group, her frustration, and the painful distance she felt between herself and some friends.

I understood Donna Talley's stress. They are emotionally involved. I wanted to scream, "Funding a domestic violence taskforce with bake sales and quilt raffles—how absurd!" But in this rural context, it seems oddly appropriate. And ironic.

Curious, I went to the saloon on the WEAVE parade route.

It was a classic, redneck bar. I was not uneasy because I was there to ask questions, but because I am black.

There was a 'Welcome Hunters' sign over the door, a sawdust floor, and the mustiest smell imaginable inside. All conversation ceased upon my entry. One man agreed to speak to me.

"Look," he whispered, "This is your basic small town. 'It' happens here—probably 80 percent isn't reported—but they already have enough support through the church and social services. Groups like that. Women already have enough."

Satisfied with himself, he returned to his pool game. His friends were looking at me and laughing.

I guess it's like the counselor said. It takes a long time to change a community's attitudes.

A long, long time. ▲

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