

Carroll County Times

[Print Page](#)

Domestic violence: "At that point, I said I was done with him. And then, three days later, he called."

By Ryan Marshall, Times Staff Writer

Heather remembers the first time her boyfriend hit her.

It was six months into their relationship. They'd been at a party, and he was doing shots of liquor.

He got into an argument with several of her friends, then went after Heather, calling her a whore and accusing her of sleeping with several of her male friends.

Heather, who was three months pregnant, remembered hoping on the way home that he'd just pass out when they got there. Instead, the argument flared anew at their house in Westminster. He again accused Heather of sleeping around, then punched her in the head and slapped her in the face several times.



KYLE NOSAL/STAFF ILLUSTRATION

Heather, a domestic abuse victim, said one reason she stayed in the relationship was so her son could know her father.

- After the first incident, Heather went to stay with her mother.

"At that point, I said I was done with him," she said. "And then, three days later, he called."

Her boyfriend explained some of the emotional issues he was dealing with, she said. He told her that he loved her, that she was the best thing that ever happened to him.

They moved back in together. She wanted her son to know his father, she said.

Abusers can make promise after promise that it will get better, that it will never happen again, she said. But it almost always gets worse.

"They can be Prince Charming," she said. "But they can turn on you in a second."

- Things went smoothly for about a year. Then the family moved into a smaller apartment. Their son was about 7 months old. The stress of living in close quarters with an infant caused friction.

One night, he pushed her down a flight of stairs while she was holding the baby, sending both her and their son to the hospital. She said all she could think about while falling down the stairs was protecting her son.

He eventually needed eye surgery to correct an injury from the fall.

The police came and filed an incident report, but her boyfriend wasn't arrested. She went to court the next day and got a protective order for her and her son.

- This time they were apart for several months. Eventually, they ran into each other in public. She wanted to take things

slow, but they got an apartment together. She had the protective order modified to allow no adverse contact and told him the relationship was over if the abuse happened again.

Two weeks later, returning from a night out — he drank, she drove — they got into an argument in the driveway. Walking up to the porch, he grabbed her by the hair and shoved her several times against one of the porch posts.

He stabbed her once in the upper thigh before a neighbor called the police. She went to the hospital and got stitches.

Her boyfriend was arrested for violating the protective order.

- Heather had been involved with Family and Children Services in Carroll County for several years. She began working with crisis worker Jennifer Danko and other staff there after the second incident of abuse.

She viewed Heather's decision to go back as part of the cycle of domestic violence, Danko said. It often takes victims several attempts to make a clean break with their abuser, she said. Part of dealing with victims is supporting them and doing whatever you can to keep them safe whatever decisions they make.

After the stabbing, Heather moved to a safe house run by the organization. The location of the house and the identity of its tenants are kept confidential.

Residents have daily meetings with a counselor in which they can talk about anything they want. They are given chores to do each day to keep them busy, she said.

Heather admitted to chafing at some of the rules early on, but said the support and strength the staff gives victims eventually won her over.

"You feel safe. They help you get back on your feet," she said.

- Helping victims in the period immediately after they leave an abusive relationship is a vital role for counselors and domestic violence coordinators.

The most dangerous time in a violent relationship is when somebody leaves, said Michael Cohen, executive director of the Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence. Domestic violence is all about power and control, she said. When one side of a relationship threatens to leave, it can dangerously shift the dynamics of the relationship.

"Leaving is not only difficult, it's dangerous," she said.

Fear and family and economic concerns often stop victims from leaving, Cohen said, and the victim often still loves the abuser and wants to believe any promises made and excuses given.

Even abusive relationships have some good sides to them or else people wouldn't stay in them, said Connie Sgarlata, the director of Family and Children's Services for Carroll County.

Part of the seriousness of domestic violence is the fact that it spans all social and economic classes, Sgarlata said. She said the stereotype is that victims always have low self-esteem, but she's seen many assertive, confident women get into abusive relationships.

Just as types of victims can vary, so can forms of abuse.

"Most people believe domestic violence is hitting," Sgarlata said. But domestic violence can cover the spectrum of physical, emotional or sexual abuse.

The emotional abuse is often harder to deal with than the physical because it hurts more internally, and damage to someone's emotional well-being can last longer than scrapes and bruises, she said.

Finding reliable statistics on domestic violence is difficult because so many cases go unreported, Cohen said. Victims may go to other sources such as doctors or clergy for help instead of reporting incidents to law enforcement, she said.

Historically, even fewer cases were reported, making it even more difficult to quantify the problem.

"There's no baseline, so we don't know," Cohen said.

Nearly 10 percent of the 4,165 court cases that originated in district court — the majority of cases — in Carroll County in 2007 were domestic violence crimes, said Maria Oesterreicher, a domestic violence prosecutor for the county's state's attorney's office.

Since 2003, just less than 10 percent of cases from district court in the county have been domestic violence cases.

The domestic violence cases involve intimate partner violence between people who are married, dating or have children in common, Oesterreicher said. The classification doesn't include sexual assaults or crimes against children such as child abuse or child sexual abuse.

- Having a unit specifically devoted to domestic violence is important because those cases can't be prosecuted like most others, Oesterreicher said. Victims in most cases want the defendants held accountable, she said, but the complicated relationships in domestic violence cases make things harder for the prosecution team as well.

Dealing with reluctant victims means Oesterreicher sometimes has to push on with a case despite her main witness being hesitant or unwilling to testify in court.

She and the other members of the unit — an investigator, Gary Cofflin, and a victim witness assistance coordinator, Sarah Rickter — often have to play the hand they're dealt in a case, Oesterreicher said.

Sometimes all the victim wants to know is that the abuser isn't going to go to jail. If Oesterreicher offers to try for alternatives like probation or counseling, the victim may be more cooperative.

Cofflin, a former state trooper, checks the file to make sure the police have included the necessary information in the report and follows up with the victim, if necessary.

He reviews any violations of protective orders and collects evidence of violations, such as getting tapes of 911 calls the victim may have made.

During the investigation and through the court proceedings, Rickter helps guide the victims through the process. She sends all domestic violence victims an initial letter with her contact information and lists of resources, and she invites them to come in and meet her. She also collects demographic information such as a victim's sex, age, the nature of the relationship and whether there have been any prior acts.

Despite the reluctance from many witnesses, the unit occasionally gets a note or letter from victims after the case is over, thanking them for their help in a difficult time. While the thank-yous don't come that often, they serve as validation and a chance to recharge their batteries, Rickter said.

The chance to know you've left a long-term, positive impact on domestic violence victims makes the struggles of the job worth it, Oesterreicher said.

"I think the rewards greatly outweigh the frustrations," she said.

Heather said she agreed to talk because she wants women in abusive relationships to know that there are options available to help them. Her full name hasn't been used because the Carroll County Times doesn't identify victims of abuse.

Reach staff writer Ryan Marshall at **410-857-7865** or ryan.marshall@carrollcountytimes.com.

Possible warning signs of domestic violence

Does your partner:

- Call you names or put you down?

- Control whom you talk to or see?
- Blame you for his or her behavior?
- Keep you from having a job?
- Control how money is spent?
- Throw things or destroy property?
- Force you to have sex?
- Threaten to hurt you, your children or pets?
- Threaten suicide if you leave?

Source: Family and Children's Services of Central Maryland