

Culture of Abuse

Domestic violence has come to a head with the Ray Rice scandal. But in reality, it affects every community. Even our own.

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The footage from the security camera was grainy and soundless. Day after day, night after night, it sat perched in a corner of the Revel Casino elevator in Atlantic City, New Jersey, capturing the daily monotony of the patrons' lives. The video captured the morning of Feb. 15, however, was far from routine.

The identity of former Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice and his then-fiancé, Janay Palmer, were difficult to make out in the dim orange hued lighting of the elevator. Yet there was no mistaking the punch Rice threw that knocked her unconscious. That same video later features Rice dragging Palmer's limp body out of the elevator.

Had this been any ordinary case, charges would have been filed and the video released to the public. In Rice's case however, the incident slipped quickly under the radar.

Seven months later, on Sept. 8, the news broke out. Word of the massive scandal spread, and public outrage ensued. The task of doling out the punishment fell to National Football League commissioner Roger Goodell. Rice's actions, which would normally constitute 3 to 5 years in prison, were merely penalized with a two-game suspension by Goodell.

Suddenly, similar cases were brought to light one after the other. First it was Adrian Peterson of the Minnesota Vikings, then Greg Hardy of the Carolina Panthers and Jonathan Dwyer of the Arizona Cardinals; the list goes on. Spurred by the public's growing outrage, the Baltimore Ravens terminated Rice's contract.

The truth is that incidents like these are nothing new. They can happen anywhere, to anyone, and can go almost unnoticed.

Sometimes it takes a media scandal for people to finally open their eyes to what goes on right in front of them. Whether it's the 2009 case of pop stars Chris Brown and Rihanna, or the 2014 case of Rice, celebrities inundate the news. But there are people who endure the pain and suffering caused by domestic violence everyday.

Nationally, about 84 percent of victims are psychologically abused by their partners. Half are physically abused and one third are sexually coerced, according to the National Domestic Violence Hotline operator Bree, who is legally unable to give her last name.

"Most abuse starts emotionally, psychologically and/or verbally and then builds from there," Bree said. "Physical abuse can start with an argument but then it will escalate. It may take days. It may take months. But it always starts off with an argument."

A local high school student, Kesha Wright*, started dating a boy in 8th grade. He was one year older than her. Everything was fine until he cheated, but she took him back anyway. She thought she loved him. He always made it seem like it was her fault. She would get mad at him but he would say "Oh I'm just kidding." But it wasn't funny after the first time, Wright said.

"In the summer we got into a fight because he hooked up with another girl, [and] he hit me in my face," Wright said. "He and his friends thought it was funny. I was more scared than anything else."

Trust your instincts the first time you feel there's no respect, according to Monica Phinney, an educator in Safehome shelter's education and prevention departments. Don't decide where boundaries are and then keep moving the bar and accepting more and more things. It's difficult to continue to stay

strong and the bar will eventually break, Phinney said.

This tragedy affects everyone. One in four women and one in seven men older than 18 have been victims of severe physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime. However, men don't call into domestic violence hotlines as much because there's nowhere to put them. Most shelters are only built to take in women and children, and may have only one space for a male with children, according to Bree.

"We tell them to keep calling, to keep trying. It's like a Russian Roulette type thing. You have got to keep trying. Keep calling. Maintain your sense of hope," Bree said.

Domestic violence is the secret darkness that lurks everywhere. Even in the safest communities, no one knows everything that goes on behind closed doors. Luckily, there are methods of escape for those who refuse to continue to live in fear. Rose Brooks, a comprehensive domestic violence agency in Kansas City, offers shelter and provides services to over 15,000 women and children every year, according to Susan Millar, Chief Executive Officer of Rose Brooks.

"At Rose Brooks shelter, 50-60 percent of shelter residents at any given time are children," Dr. Kimberly Randall, Co-Director of Research, Division of Emergency and Urgent Care at Children's Mercy Hospitals, said.

Another local shelter, Safehome, provides similar services for victims of domestic violence. Safehome has 45 beds and houses an average of 50 people a night. But after the Ray Rice incident, hotline calls increased 35 percent nationwide, according to Monica Phinney, an educator in the shelter's education and prevention departments.

"People probably realized they didn't want to be like Janay [Palmer]," Phinney said. "They were judging her for not leaving him, but they looked back and realized they would soon be her."

Safehome works closely with the local police departments to develop protocol for a Lethality Assessment, a tool that helps police assess the likelihood of a victim being killed. If the victim screens high lethality, the shelter takes them in immediately. Often times, this means many will go without a bed.

The situation gets worse and worse, officer Derek Akers of the Kansas City Police Department said. The same addresses pop up all of the time.

"If you grow up in an abusive family, there's an 80 percent chance you'll grow up to do the same or become a victim yourself," Akers said.

On average, people stay in Safehome for three months. Afterwards, many women move to a transitional living program that allows them to be more independent and offers less expensive housing.

There isn't a strong difference between adult and teenage relationships. Abusive behaviors first take shape around the 16 year mark. Teenagers are more gender neutral, one out of every three boys and girls will be in an abusive relationship as a teen. Kids who bully others at age 12 are seven times more likely to be the abuser in their relationship at 18 or 19 years old, Phinney said.

"Physical and emotional violence are affecting boys and girls at the same rate, but the physical violence that comes from a male perpetrator has a higher impact," Phinney said. "The injuries sustained by females are more likely to interrupt her life whether it be abstaining from school, or seeking treatment. It's also much, much more common for sexual abuse to come from males."

A lot of teenagers don't recognize their relationships are abusive because they see so much unhealthy behavior in the media, said Phinney.

A support system is needed. The abusers know that if isolation begins early on, they will become the only person the victim can turn to. That support system is vital for survival.

"It's so so common for people to get into dangerous situations because

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STUDENT SURVEY: (358 students)

Are you a victim of domestic violence?

3.3% **yes**
96.6% **no**

Do you know someone that is a victim?

24.3% **yes**
75.7% **no**

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they think if they are breaking up with someone, it needs to be a private, one-on-one thing,” Phinney said. “You need to have other people around you.”

Whether the abuse is mental, physical, or both, it always has lasting effects on those who are targeted. Children exposed to domestic violence are more likely to have behavioral problems, developmental delays, mental illness, physical illness, learning trouble and experience dating violence, according to Randall.

Another local high school student, Lila Woods* said her father had a bad temper and she never knew what would set him off.

“I don’t remember most of my childhood. I’ve blocked it out. My dad was strict, but he could be nice too,” local high school student Lila Woods* said. “He would easily blow up over the smallest things. He liked alcohol. A lot.”

Woods had a bag packed with a couple changes of clothes and a stuffed animal. She housed it under the bed just to get away. She was six when she first packed it. Woods kept it for years. She held some resentment for her mom for not doing more. But according to Phinney, her abstaining from leaving may have been a good thing.

“The biggest misconception that people have is that leaving is always the best option. Most domestic violence related homicides happen after the person has left,” Phinney said. “So it can be an extremely dangerous situation for them to stay. There needs to be extensive planning in place. So don’t pressure people if they aren’t ready to leave because they probably know it’s not safe for them.”

Woods was playing in the basement one day with two friends when she became cognizant of noises upstairs. Her mom called Woods cellphone and demanded that she and her friends go outside and avoid the the upper levels of the home. That was also the last time she spoke to her dad.

She has refrained from contact with her father for four years. Now as her childhood has come bubbling back up to the surface, she has advice for all victims of domestic violence. It is never okay to be abused, and everyone should stop it as soon as it starts, Woods said.

The leading causes of poor health in adults, both mental and physical, can be a direct result of exposure to domestic violence as a child., according to Randall. However, the negative effects of domestic violence are everlasting and have greater effects on adults who experience it, because children are so resilient.

“Part of our job as pediatric health care providers is to help build that resilience in kids and to help enable parents who’ve experienced DV to get the resources they need to provide safety and nurturing for their kids,” Randall said.

One adult affected by domestic violence did not have any resources at hand when she was a child. Local high school teacher Edith Baxter* remembers back to the summer before her junior year of high school. Back to the time when she met the good looking, all-state football athlete.

The abuse started off as jealously but eventually turned into verbal and physical abuse.

“I thought that since I grew up with chaos and abuse with an alcoholic mother, I just thought it was normal,” Baxter said.

Baxter knew she had to escape the relationship. She didn’t want to end up at the same college as him. Because he was an all-state athlete, he had many offers thrown his way to play college football, but he wasn’t going to make any

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***Edith Baxter**

final decision until he knew where Baxter would be attending.

“I knew I was going to Warrensburg, but I lied and told him that I was going to UMKC. I was desperate. I knew that I couldn’t go to college with him. He was already physically abusive and so verbally abusive. He told me that I was so ugly and that no one wanted me and that kind of stuff. I shouldn’t have listened to all of it,” she said.

In the end, he found out she was attending Warrensburg and enrolled so they could be together. Baxter described her first semester of college as terrible.

“I couldn’t hold my head up if I crossed the campus because he would ask, ‘what are you looking at?’” she said.

The boyfriend began drinking excessively which made things worse.

One night when Baxter and him were sitting in front of the football players dorm in Baxter’s convertible, he became upset about something and starting beating her head against the dashboard until blood was streaming out of her ear. Bystanders who walked past them never stopped to help or say anything because they were terrified to interfere with the all-star boyfriend.

He took her to the emergency room and told the nurses and her grandparents a lie about how

she hurt herself.

“The thing with abusive people is after its over, they are so sorry and say they love you so much. That’s the trap. They can’t live without you. It makes you feel like they do care about you,” Baxter said.

Baxter felt helpless. She lied to him about not being able to finish college and said she needed to go home for winter semester. After he broke in and entered her house, Baxter ended things with him.

Baxter was eventually convinced to re-enter the relationship. Though he promised he would never hit her again, she still fell into depression. While he did keep that promise, he was still verbally abusive. The relationship turned into marriage four years later.

“[I married him] Because my mother kept progressively getting worse and he and his family was all I had. I didn’t want to marry him,” Baxter said. “In fact I knew it was bad. My bridesmaids had to push me up the steps. There isn’t one wedding photo where I was smiling.”

In the end, the marriage didn’t last because she met someone who made her finally feel worth something. She was 28 years old.

Years later, Baxter found that the reason he acted the way he did was because he loved her so much and was afraid of losing her.

“It was combination of alcoholism and low self esteem, and I think that is 99 percent why guys or girls do this because they hate themselves and they want to make you feel that horrible,” she said.

Baxter wishes she had available to her the level of education there is today about domestic violence and the availability of counselors with whom to speak.

In some ways, the effects of the Ray Rice incident can be considered beneficial. The national attention it gained has helped bring the issue of domestic violence back to the forefront of peoples’ minds.

Not only was the nation alerted to the presence of domestic violence, but it also opened peoples’ eyes to the fact that it occurs more often in our own hometown than it does in the media.

More importantly, the Rice scandal opened the eyes of many women everywhere to see the truth about their own situations, and realize that they needed to change or escape.

It has let women and men around the country know that it is never okay for someone to put their hands on you. Stop the cycle of violence. Tell someone.

**Kesha Wright, Lila Woods and Edith Baxter are pseudonyms of local high school students and a teacher to protect their anonymity.*



ABUSE HOTLINES

National Domestic Violence Hotline
1-800-799-7233

Rose Brooks
816-861-6100

Safehome
913-262-2868

MOCSA
1-800-392-3738