

Breaking the Cycle

Contributed by Annette Owens-Johnson, MSW, LSW

I believe I now know what it means to have your life come full circle. Ten years ago, I never would have imagined that my life would be what it is today. I guess you could say that the "me" back then was the polar opposite of the "me" today. I now work for Women Against Abuse, Inc. (WAA) as the director of the transitional housing program. Anyone who really knows me knows that domestic violence and affordable housing have always been close to my heart. I am now doing meaningful work that bridges the gap between the two.{mosgoogle}

WAA is one of the largest domestic violence programs in Pennsylvania. In 2006, WAA served 11,409 individuals through emergency housing, legal services, hotline counseling, and education and advocacy. WAA operates the only shelter in Philadelphia that specifically serves victims of domestic violence. In addition, legal services are provided through the Legal Center, which is the first legal program in the nation solely dedicated to addressing issues of domestic violence within the justice system. Beyond a doubt, there is a staggering need for these services.

In 2006, 13,093 Protection from Abuse orders (PFAs) were filed in the city of Philadelphia. In 2003, 115,000 calls were made to 911 seeking an emergency response for a domestic violence incident, with the police returning to the same household multiple times in over 47,000 of said incidents. In 2006, the Philadelphia Police Department responded to 71,350 domestic abuse incidents. And for the 2007 fiscal year, 8,011 hotline calls were answered by the Philadelphia Domestic Violence Hotline. Hence, you can see the importance of this vital work.

At face value, many would believe that this journey for me began when my professional career launched, right out of college, when I landed my first "real" job as the housing counselor for WAA. Actually, this is when the need to bridge the gap between domestic violence and the lack of affordable housing became crystal clear to me. As the housing counselor, I had the role and responsibility to link survivors of domestic violence, who were primarily single women with children, with housing for their families that they could actually afford.

This was no easy task. Every day, I encountered women who had a multitude of barriers, on top of trying to get past the trauma of the domestic violence that they and their families had endured. The barriers included poor credit, poor finances, and honestly, a poor education of the social service system that they were being thrust into.

Nevertheless, the stark reality is that many survivors of domestic violence are in desperate need of these social services, be it from the trauma of domestic violence itself, or in addition to this trauma. For example, more than half--close to 60%--of women on public assistance have a history of domestic abuse. In addition, a connection has been made between experiencing abuse and the development and exacerbation of mental disorders, as well as substance abuse. And the link between domestic violence and homelessness is clear--domestic violence is one of the leading causes of homelessness for women.

My cultivation into this journey of linking survivors of domestic violence with concrete services such as housing began early in life for me, when I was just a pretty, dark-skinned little girl with an Afro bigger than me. It was a stark irony for me to learn years later that a domestic violence shelter was housed in the building that I rode past every day on my way to school. Each day, I wondered what the building was, when at the very time, my family was in desperate need of the services housed there. This was another chapter of my life.

And there are stages, or cycles, throughout life--to be born and to die, to have joy and to have sorrow, to have faith and to despair. But the beauty with each of these dichotomies is that there is always hope that through hard work and purpose, and even through trials and tribulations, it is possible for one to move from one stage of life to another, and to break the cycle.

It takes work, though--a lot of work. And an incredible support system. Not any old system will do. I was blessed to have both. Through counseling (yes, work), and this support system, which includes my Rock--my incredible husband--who has stood with me throughout this journey, I was able to come out on the other side. So I can at least somewhat relate when I tell people, namely my clients, that they can come out on the other side and prevail, as well.

And they do. I have been privileged to witness this on many occasions--when as a housing counselor, I handed a mother with three children the first set of her own keys to their new home. Or when the single mother of six, who left with her children with nothing but the clothes on their backs, rose up to obtain her own income, employment, and even permanent housing, all within a span of six months. And when I see the mother of two from Africa, who is a registered nurse in her country, go through the blood, sweat, and tears of the tedious immigration process, gaining a scholarship in the process, so she can work at all in this country, and start a new life for her and her children, free from abuse.

I have been privileged and blessed, indeed, to be a vessel of service in which I have witnessed the innate power of people to empower themselves, to end one stage and start another, to change the story, and to break the cycle.

As a current client who is being assisted by the various services at WAA says: "It means something that when I'm happy, you're happy. And when I cry, you cry, as when I hurt, you hurt." And to this, I add: "When I break the cycle, when we break the cycle, you break the cycle."

For more information on how you can help to break the cycle of domestic violence, visit:
<http://www.womenagainstabuse.org>.

Annette Owens-Johnson, MSW, LSW, received her B.A. in criminal justice and her MSW from Temple University. Annette's career has focused on the human services field, including experience in both criminal justice and mental health. Annette also has extensive experience with nonprofit social service agencies in the areas of domestic

violence, homeless populations, and residential settings. Currently, she is employed with Women Against Abuse, Inc., as the director of the transitional housing facility, Sojourner House. Annette's long-term career goal is to open a holistic health care clinic for underprivileged and underserved populations.