

Nyack News & Views

Nyack Sketch Log: Center for Safety & Change

By: Bill Batson | July 30, 2019

Do you know the origin of the phrase “rule of thumb?” It was the maximum thickness of an object that a man in 18th century England could use to legally assault his wife. Yes. That is how pervasive violence against women is on our planet. It is a part of our language.

In 1979, a group of volunteers launched the Rockland Family Shelter, now known as Center for Safety & Change, to protect women and children from the devastation of domestic violence.

I was honored to meet an incredible group of advocates, tour their facilities and interview their Chief Executive Officer, Elizabeth Santiago on the occasion of their 40th anniversary.

What was it like before 1979 for victims of domestic violence?

Victims of domestic violence before 1979 did not have anywhere to go. Police would be called to homes by neighbors to intervene in a domestic violence occurrence. It was routine for police to tell the abuser to take a cold shower or take a walk around the block to calm down.

Today, Center for Safety & Change trains many businesses, non-profits, schools, including Police Academies, on how to recognize domestic violence and on to manage this safely for all parties involved.

How much demand was there for your services when you started?

We started out with a 15 bed house, 24-hour rotary and a few concerned citizens ready to answer the phone. They brought board games to pass the time because they truly didn't believe the demand was that great. On October 5, 1979, we officially opened the doors to our shelter and filled 11 out of the 15 beds. The second day the remaining beds were filled. And the phones have not stopped ringing since then.

What services do you currently provide to the victims of domestic violence and their families?

We have an emergency residential shelter that



Special Guest Sketch Log Artist Juliet Craig

Juliet Craig, a student at Tappan Zee High School, was the 2014 winner of Center for Safety & Change's Student Art Competition. I saw her drawing displayed, along with other winners, in a hallway at the Center's office. Juliet perfectly captured the despondency one would imagine a victim of domestic violence must feel. If my column about the Center was to have an illustration, this was it.

has 15 beds. On average, this shelter provides safe nights to about 100 victims of domestic violence on a yearly basis. In addition, we had to turn away close to 400 victims because there was no vacancy. When this happens, we work with other sister agencies in other areas to provide housing options, as well as safety planning tactics to keep families safe. We help them think of options on



Thank you to Elaine Apfelbaum and everyone who participated in the 2019 Apple Poker Run in New City. Elaine has organized this event since 1985, raising thousands for local charities. Center for Safety & Change was truly grateful to be the beneficiary of this third-party fundraising event, raising \$16,000 for our vital programs and services. Pictured from left to right: Leslie Rodriguez, Bilingual Special Victims Therapist, Tracie McLee, Center's Chief Development Officer, Elaine Apfelbaum, Founder of Apple Poker Run, Elizabeth Santiago, Center's Chief Executive Officer and Michele Koblick, Center's Finance Associate.



Playroom inside Center for Safety & Change's Emergency Shelter

children and youth department has literally more than tripled in size starting out with a Director, Jean Roemer, who implemented Creative Arts Therapy. Before the program, we were seeing at maximum 100 children and youth on an annual basis. We see close to 500 children and youth, with a staff of 6 employees – and there is a current waitlist of about 40 children.

We added our Sexual Assault Forensic Examiner Program in 1984, but added on our partnerships with Nyack Hospital (Montefiore Nyack) in 2003 and Good Samaritan Hospital in 2005. We have specific rooms in each Emergency Department dedicated in supporting victims of rape and sexual assault by our specially trained medical examiners.

Our legal department consisted of two lawyers about three years ago and has literally quadrupled in size since 2016. The legal department has six attorneys including matrimonial, family, immigration and anti-human trafficking lawyers, as well as four legal advocates and two paralegals. The legal department provides legal advice, assistance and court accompaniment for victims of violence and abuse. They help them fill out orders of protection, explain what their rights are and provide them with options.

What are some of the ways that women and children find out about your services?

We host trainings to youth in all of the nearby high schools including all private schools. We host trainings to corporations and local businesses on a variety of issues such as sexual harassment and domestic violence in the workplace. We host many outreach events and attend many events in the community. In addition, we have 11

staying with a family member, or friend, etc. Although the shelter is the heart of our agency, it only accounts for about 20% of the work that we do.

The bulk of the work is through our non-residential services. Center for Safety & Change's Domestic Violence Non-Residential Services were developed and implemented specifically for domestic violence victims who do not require or desire residential placement.

Non-Residential services include, but are not limited to a 24/7 crisis hotline, individual and group counseling, support and empowerment groups, advocacy and accompaniment, safety planning, legal services and court assistance, information and referral services, community outreach and education, children's services and school advocacy, education programs for professionals, for teens, and for others, transportation and translation services, as needed, and comprehensive crime victim services including assisting with applications to the New York State Office of Victim Services.

How has your organization grown over the years?

The Center has grown in so many ways. Our

locations in the County. We recognize that there is a stigma that comes along with our home office at 9 Johnsons Lane in New City. A victim may feel intimidated or may not want someone to see them in that area. We strategically placed satellite offices throughout the County including Haverstraw, Nyack and Spring Valley to help preserve anonymity, confidentially and geographically availability.

Would you say that incidents of domestic violence are increasing or decreasing?

This is a tough question to answer. Although the number of victims we help annually has remained steady, the number of times we help victims achieve safety and seek services has increased. Last year alone, we helped around 2,000 victims of gender-based violence close to 30,000 times.

I understand the 71% of pets in homes where domestic violence occurs are harmed or killed by their intimate partner. What does a victim do with their pet(s) when escaping violence and abuse?

We know our pets are family. In fact, the bond is so strong that 48% of domestic violence victims delayed leaving their intimate partner out of concern for their pets' safety.



In partnership with the Hudson Valley Humane Society, Center for Safety & Change established the Paws for Safety program in 2011. This unique program temporarily places animal victims of domestic violence in a loving and confidential location while their owners make safe living arrangements to escape the abuse. Paws for Safety provides victims with the security of knowing their pets are safe and handled with care until they can be reunited. If you are in a relationship, where you and/or your pets are

being abused, harmed and/or threatened, please call the Center's 24-Hour Hotline (845) 634-3344. No one deserves to live in fear of violence, abuse and trauma.

What impact has the #metoo movement had on your work?

We believe the #metoo movement has created a safe space to allow victims to come forward and tell their story and seek services.

How does the current climate towards immigrants impact your work?

A) Immigrant survivors are afraid to report crimes and seek the protection of the courts, and are more vulnerable to domestic violence and other crimes as a result. The reason for this fear is that immigration enforcement priorities no longer exist. During the Obama administration, people with more serious criminal histories were prioritized for removal and people who were simply out of status were not. ICE presence in courthouses has increased by 1,700% and victims have been swept up in court raids.

Also, many victims want to bring their abusers to court to get an order of protection, but do not want them deported. Many are afraid for fear of impact on the father of their children. For example, one of our domestic violence clients was recently arrested at the Ramapo Justice Court and detained - ICE knew she was the victim and still arrested her.

B) Immigrant survivors are afraid to serve as witnesses for the same reasons above. We like to use voluntary witnesses in our trials and are being hampered in calling undocumented witnesses - we cannot give them the assurance we once did.

C) Immigrant survivors are more afraid to file for immigration status. Under former policies, if humanitarian applications were denied, the applicant simply reverted to being undocumented. Now, if a survivor's application gets denied, they will be put into removal proceedings. Also, scrutiny of applications has become heightened and negative discretion is exercised far more harshly. For clients with children especially, they put a lot on the line. USCIS statistics reflect significant declines in filings.

I understand that you do outreach in Middle Schools. What is your message to young people?

Our message to young people is teaching them

what healthy relationships look like and defining what consent is. It is no longer no means no, but yes means yes.

What should a person do if they know of a friend or family member who is being abused?

Call our 24-Hour Hotline at (845) 634-3344. We can answer any questions or address any concerns.

What are your goals for the organization's 41st year?

We need to change the way society normalizes victim blaming and social norms. We want to engage men on the issue because it starts with them as well. We want to reimagine Rockland and make this a safer place for women, children and men. If we can make these changes, it will be a safer place for all. Ultimately, we want to put ourselves out of business eradicating gender-based violence.

What are some of the ways that the public can help?

The public can help in many ways. First, they can sign up to volunteer. There are many jobs and tasks that need to be done. Last year, our volunteers donated close to 12,000 hours of services, a cost savings of about \$270,000. We encourage our community to start changing social norms by creating safer spaces for victims to come forward in. The Center starts by believing victims. Finally, donate. From making a one time donation to becoming a monthly donor, your donation will continue to sustain our programs and services for generations to come. We also encourage friends of our agency to attend community and fundraising events.



Center for Safety & Change is truly shaping today's youth into tomorrow's activists and change-makers. Student Activists Ending Dating Abuse (SAEDA), a youth-led education and prevention program, celebrates diversity, challenges oppressive social norms and promotes leadership while inspiring youth to ultimately end gender-based violence. Since its inception in 2004, SAEDA has trained more than 1,000 high school students across Rockland County and surrounding areas.

Center For Safety & Change: A Story in Shocking Statistics

15 bed facility opened Oct. 5, 1979 and has been filled to **capacity** since the day after opening

24 hour hotline started at same time and has run continually for **350,400** hours

1,900 calls per year

1 in 4 women report experiencing violence from a former or current intimate partner

1 in 5 women report being raped in their lifetime

1 in 71 men report being raped in their lifetime

71% of pets in these homes are harmed or killed

18% of female victims of spousal rape say their children witnessed the crime

10-14% of married women will be raped at some point during their marriages

40% of female murder victims are killed by intimate partners

72% of all murder-suicides are perpetrated by intimate partners

19.3 million women and **5.1 million** men in the United States have been stalked

66.2% of female stalking victims reported stalking by a current or former intimate partner

500%: the increased likelihood of homicide for a women if a gun is present in a home where there is domestic violence

Source: centerforsafetyandchange.org

You can also call **(845) 634-3344** to volunteer. In 2018, volunteers donated close to **12,000** hours of services, a cost savings of about **\$270,000**



24-Hour Hotline: (845) 634-3344
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