



June 2015

Issue No. 96

OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

# *IN SIGHT* for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN FAMILIES OF PROFESSIONALS

*It started soon after the wedding. I told my spouse I was going for a haircut after work. He was red-faced and almost shaking with anger. I had never seen this side of him. I tried asserting myself – it's my hair and I can get it cut if I want to. He became more angry. I tried to negotiate – I would just cut a few inches; it would probably grow back quickly. In the end, I didn't get it cut. It was easier. "Maybe this was the give and take that people talked about in a marriage?" I thought to myself. After a few more incidents, I suggested marital counseling. He refused. I stayed anyway. I couldn't get a divorce after six months over a haircut argument. I must be overreacting, and what would people think?*

*His career stalled, and he became more sullen and unpredictable. He blamed his problems on work. I was sure I could help get him through this low point and things would get better. Wasn't that a wife's job after all? I planned fun activities to try to make him happy. I took on more household tasks. He said he hated shopping, so I did all the shopping. I handled the cooking and cleaning and family finances. One night I was making dinner with lima beans in it, and he became enraged because he doesn't like lima beans. I said he should eat something else. He was angry for weeks, and I was on pins and needles never knowing whether Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde would come home at night. I threw myself into my legal career. As his career was fizzling, mine was growing, and one year my income was higher, which escalated his erratic behavior.*

*Around this time, the coercive sex started. He demanded sex, accusing me of being a bad wife, calling me names, making life*

*miserable so that it was easier to sometimes give in. "Maybe I was a bad wife if I didn't provide sex?" Then he started putting his hands around my throat. Even then, I was in denial about how bad the situation was. I still thought, "maybe this is how all marriages are?" Plus, a child was on the way. After giving birth, I stayed home for a while and was vulnerable physically and financially. He took advantage. He spent our limited income freely, and his screaming rage fits were followed by puppy-dog eye apologies, followed by more anger. He agreed to counseling in one of his apologies, then told the counselor he blamed our problems on my shortcomings as a wife. Nothing was his fault, and he bore no responsibility for his actions. My confidence was so shattered I nearly thought it could be true, but a good counselor helped me see the future only held more of the past.*

*One night, his anger turned on our baby. That was it for me. Leaving was one of the hardest things I've ever done. I knew my life would be changing drastically. Family and friends only knew the carefully manicured image he created for them, and of course I hadn't told anyone what was really going on. But I left, with support from a few close family members and friends. Even years later, I'm embarrassed to talk about the situation. How could a successful female lawyer be in such a situation? If I could be in such a situation, was I really the strong woman I thought I was? Weren't "abused" women low-income and uneducated? Family and friends had a hard time believing it as well. I didn't fit their image of domestic abuse. I lost many friends. But I gained my life back day by day.*

### OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

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*My life now revolves around my child. I focus my time and attention on providing a happy, peaceful, safe environment. Having gone through what I experienced, I enjoy every minute with my child, and I especially appreciate the loving snuggle moments. There were times when fear reigned and happy moments didn't exist, so I don't take them for granted any more.*

Domestic abuse knows no income or education barriers. Men and women are abused, although statistics are difficult to obtain for abuse of men because it is reported even less often, and women are more often the victim. One in four women will experience domestic violence in their lifetime. Sexual assault or forced sex occurs in approximately 40-45% of abusive relationships. There are thousands of women lawyers in Oregon. Statistically speaking, then, hundreds of women lawyers in Oregon are currently in, or have been in, abusive or violent relationships. We rarely discuss it, but we must, because it affects all of us.

Domestic violence is the use of physical, sexual, threatening or emotional force to frighten, intimidate, and control an intimate partner. Domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behavior that occurs over time. This abuse often escalates and may become worse with time. Abusive partners use combinations of behavior to control a survivor. Even if you have never experienced physical harm by a partner, but are afraid and controlled by your partner's actions (shouting, throwing things, or threats), you are being abused. Source: [www.womenhelpingwomen.org](http://www.womenhelpingwomen.org).

While being a lawyer brings some advantages, like knowing the legal system, it also brings disadvantages. Advocates believe victims of domestic violence in professional and higher-income families are even less likely to report abuse. Wealthier families face great social pressure to keep abuse secret. Susan Weitzman, *Not to People Like Us: Hidden Abuse in Upscale Marriages* (2000). Wealthier women may not have been exposed to previous domestic abuse, making recognition, acknowledgement, and response more difficult. Or they may have been exposed to abuse in a family growing up, and learned that being a silent victim is required. Lawyer victims may know the attorneys and judges they would have to appear in front of and may fear career or personal damage, especially when the attorneys and judges hold the mistaken view that abuse victims

are low-income, uneducated people. Victims may be "go-getters" who see the abusive relationship as an obstacle to overcome rather than acknowledging its abusive character. Victims are embarrassed about the abuse, believing it should not happen to them or they should know better. The abusive partner may have the power and resources to punish the victim financially, socially, and otherwise. The abusive partner often has a good reputation in the community (a common control tactic) such that friends and family may not believe the abuser could do such a thing, undermining the victim's support system and making the victim herself doubt the severity of the situation. The victim may fear that divulging abuse will result in social isolation, damage to a career, or loss of financial resources, thinking that if she isn't smart enough to avoid an abusive relationship, is she smart enough to be a good lawyer?

Successful, educated women also may be prime targets for abusive partners. Control of a successful woman may be a prize for the abusive partner. "A marriage may begin peacefully, but then the abuse may slowly become more controlling and his anger more explosive. This behavior can recur in cycles, with the abuser unpredictably alternating between attentiveness and attack. Even if a pattern becomes clear and it may never, the victim often clings to a hope that things will improve." Evan Stark, *Coercive Control* (2009). Educated and wealthier women may avoid friends in order not to be questioned or tempted to divulge painful or embarrassing details. They may also avoid telling friends about the relationship problems, further isolating them from the help they need. Heidi Brown, "Domestic Abuse: What You Need To Know," *Forbes.com* (May 13, 2009).

### **Some Signs of a Dangerous Relationship (only some may be present)**

- You spend less time socializing, becoming withdrawn and isolated.
- You feel sad, depressed, anxious, unhappy, not yourself, on "pins and needles" around your partner.
- You avoid discussing home life, avoid your home life, or find excuses to stay away from home.
- You get calls multiple times per day from your partner, or your partner checks your e-mail and phone texts.

- You are not allowed to make decisions or purchases without checking with your partner.
- You must check with your partner before planning or doing anything.
- You let your partner cancel plans, especially at the last minute.
- Your partner threatens or physically hurts you, such as hitting, shoving, slapping, pulling your hair.
- Your partner becomes angry or has angry outbursts over minor things.
- Your partner minimizes your accomplishments and/or maximizes your partner's own accomplishments.
- Your partner insults you privately or publicly, calls you names, or puts you down.
- Your partner follows verbal or physical attacks with an affectionate apology.
- Your partner promises it won't happen again.
- Your partner blames the abuse on some external factor, including you, never accepting responsibility.

Oregon lawyers are suffering and need help and support to survive abuse. As you read this article, you may recognize some signs of abuse in your own relationship or in a friend's relationship. If it's your own relationship, talk to a friend or counselor or call the Oregon Attorney Assistance Program. Take action before it gets worse. If it's a friend you are thinking of, take the friend to coffee; don't let him or her be isolated. Offer to help if he or she needs it and when he or she is ready. Give your friend a copy of this article, or send it to a safe address for your friend. Hospital staff are now trained to ask if people are safe in their home environment. We shouldn't wait for a hospital visit for the question to be asked.

#### AN OREGON COLLEAGUE NOW THRIVING

- *Oregon Attorney Assistance Program*  
503-226-1057 or 800-321-OAAP
- *National Domestic Violence Hotline:*  
800-799-SAFE