Shelter helps women get their lives back

By Hon Walker
Emerald Associate Editor

Before Sally Fleming met "Bob," she had control over her life, she said.

She was enrolled at Lane Community College, she lived in an apartment with her 3-year-old son Gregory, and she had a part-time job that helped support herself and her son.

Now, two years, a $5,000 debt and one abusive relationship later, she is trying to regain the control that she said has been taken from her.

Fleming, 24, is a resident of the transition house operated by Womenspace. The house opened last year, and after a renovation project is completed by April, the house will contain five apartments and a community support center.

The house is a place where women and children fleeing domestic violence can stay between the time they leave the Womenspace shelter and the time they find a more permanent residence.

Right now Fleming and Gregory live in the transition house with another mother and son.

The women sometimes spend time together talking about men who have been "jerks," Fleming said. "Not all men — our men."

In the single-bedroom apartment cluttered from Gregory's fifth birthday celebration the day before, Fleming recounted her experience as she smoked cigarettes and occasionally glanced at the television set.

Fleming lived with a man who she said damaged her financially and physically, and he later abused her son as well.

"I moved in with him because I thought he was 'the one,'" she said. "But," she soon found out, "he wasn't."

The couple fought frequently, Fleming said, but in her view the friction was not unusual.

"I just thought, 'well, we fight a lot.' At that point, I didn't see it as abuse," she said. After two months, though, she and Bob were evicted, and Fleming went with her son to the Opportunity Shelter in the fall of 1988.

Photo by Mark Ylen

Womenspace assistant director Abbie Smith helps battered women and their children put their lives back together by providing services through the Womenspace shelter and transition house.

Last spring, she reconciled with Bob and moved to Junction City with him, she said. However, "it got real violent real fast," she said.

When she realized she was being abused, she said she contacted the Womenspace shelter, where she and her son stayed for two weeks.

However, as soon as she left the shelter, she again returned to Bob.

"I got scared and didn't know what to do. I needed a place and was having trouble finding one, and I wasn't ready to give up, yet," she said.

The threat of violence kept her on edge and caused her financial difficulties, she said. Bob used intimidation to force her into assuming economic responsibilities beyond her means, she said.

"I had to write checks and pay for stuff because I was afraid I would get beat up or my son would get beat up," she said.

It wasn't long before the threatened violence became reality, and she decided to leave Bob for good once the abuse was directed toward her son.

"You can put up with a lot more self-pain than you can seeing your kid get hurt," she said. "When the violence started on my son, I couldn't handle it any more."

> ***'You can put up with a lot more self-pain than you can seeing your kid get hurt.'***
>
> **— Sally Fleming**

Fleming said she feels fortunate to have escaped a violent cycle that can be difficult to recognize.

"I realized what was happening, and I got out of it," she said. "I learned my lesson young."

After leaving Bob for the last time, she returned to Womenspace. Then, three weeks later, she moved into the transition house, where she and Gregory have been ever since.

The search for affordable housing in a tight market has been frustrating, especially with a damaged credit rating, Fleming said.

Her welfare is barely enough to pay her rent and expenses, and she looks forward to continuing her education and eventually becoming self-supportive, she said.

Fleming said living in the transition house has improved her outlook for the future — she may be moving out this weekend — as well as her relationship with her son.

While living with Bob, she said, she had felt pressured to discipline her son, or else Bob would. However, with a one-on-one relationship with Gregory, she has been able to deal

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