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LOCAL news

SHATTERING STEREOTYPES AND ISOLATION

New group is forming for gay men in domestic violence situations

by Grace Pastine

The last six-hour shift Tess Wiseheart spent on the crisis line was harrowing. More than 12 women called seeking refuge, yet all the shelters were already full for the night.

"Some days there's nothing you can offer them," she says wearily.

Wiseheart is the executive director of the Portland Women's Crisis Line, one of the five oldest domestic and sexual violence service providers in the country, and the largest provider in Oregon.

According to Wiseheart, PWCL was initially founded to stop rape against women, but like many feminist anti-violence projects of the early 1970s, it quickly expanded its services. The agency now offers services for the survivors of domestic violence, childhood sexual molestation, and sexual harassment.

In recent years, PWCL has begun to address violence within the lesbian and bisexual women's community. And starting in August, the agency will again stretch its already tight budget to reach another underserved community: battered gay and bisexual men.

Craig Smith is the organizer and co-facilitator of the upcoming 12-week support group for battered gay and bisexual men that will be offered through PWCL. Phoenix Rising Foundation will provide the additional co-facilitator.

It will be Smith's first experience as a support group facilitator. Currently, the bulk of his time at PWCL is spent conducting community outreach. He often visits schools in order to educate children and young adults about domestic and sexual violence.

Smith and Joyce Baxter, PWCL's support group coordinator, believe it will be the only, and quite possibly the first, support group in Portland for gay male survivors.

The group will meet once a week for an hour and a half to discuss the participants' social and legal options, develop safety plans—for instance, the quickest way to escape the house in a desperate situation—and to talk more generally about the definition and causes of violence.

Participants, some of whom may still be in abusive relationships, and others who may have left years ago, will also share their personal experiences, a move that Smith states is crucial.

"Breaking the pattern of isolation is an incredible step," he says.

For the founders of the anti-violence movement, gay domestic violence is perhaps one of the most troubling incarnations of interpersonal violence to date.

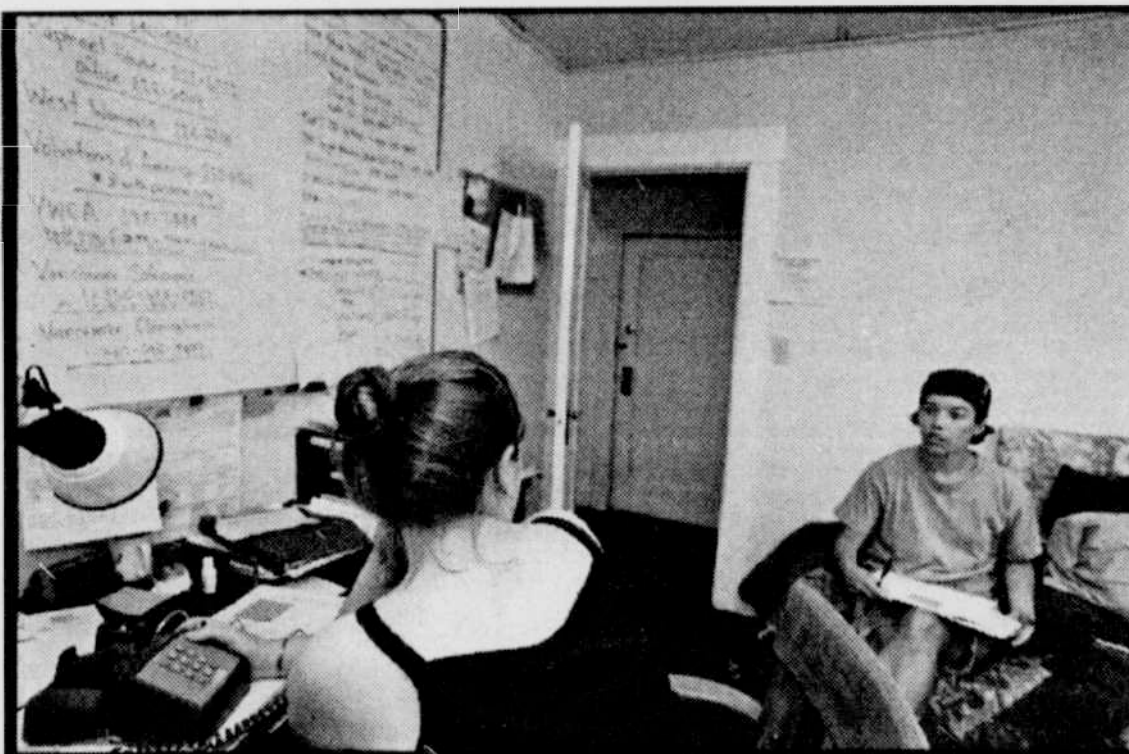
Due largely to the work of feminists of the early 1970s, domestic and sexual violence has been a topic of national discussion for the past

20 years. Yet domestic violence involving lesbians and gay men has shattered organizers' notions that women are never the perpetrators of violence and that men are rarely the victims.

"For a long time we thought we knew who the enemy was," says Wiseheart, who recounts pulling down informational fliers on lesbian battering from the festival grounds of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in the early 1980s.

Wiseheart, who was on the staff, was one of the people instructed by festival organizers to remove the postings.

"They told us to take them down," she recounts. "They said, 'This isn't happening in the gay community.'... We just didn't get it."



In the anti-violence field, identities and locations are often kept under wraps; above, two volunteers are staffing the hot line

Wiseheart says service providers are learning something new each day about domestic violence in the sexual minorities community.

"I don't think we are anywhere near knowing how widespread this is," she says.

Wiseheart estimates the crisis line receives about 10 to 15 calls per month from people seeking help stemming from gay male domestic violence situations, but she does not have official figures.

Last year, staff and volunteers answered a total of 20,418 calls, but PWCL has not begun tracking the number of calls related to gay male violence.

Wiseheart believes that as word gets out about gay male battering, more calls will start coming in.

Based on the informal accounts she has heard from health care professionals, crisis line staff members and battered gay men themselves, the violence follows familiar patterns. The batterer seeks to intimidate and control his partners through physical attacks, sexual assault and verbal threats. Most professionals agree there is usually an increase in the frequency and severity of the violence. The victim of the assault commonly believes he provoked the violence and feels isolated and full of self-loathing.

Yet for the victim of domestic violence, many of the common hurdles in escaping the violence are compounded when the assailant is of the same sex.

"One of the things which is so intense about domestic violence for gay and bi men, and also

[trans people], is that you also have to come out in order to access services," says Smith.

In some cases, that coming out may make the victim susceptible to more physical or emotional violence at the hands of the police and the court system.

Smith applauds the headway the Portland Police Bureau has made in investigating domestic violence reports and dealing sensitively with same-sex battery.

"But you never know who is going to show up at your door," Smith adds.

In *Men Who Beat the Men Who Love Them*, one off the few books available on the topic of gay male domestic violence, co-authors David Island and Patrick Lettelier write about the double bind many gay men and lesbians face: "Many gay men and lesbians are cut off from the usual support systems in our society: their families, who cannot or do not want to accept homosexuality; the church, which almost universally condemns homosexuality; and in many cases, the medical and mental health professions, which have a history of labeling lesbians and gays as sick or mentally ill."

Furthermore, since gay male domestic violence has generally received less attention than heterosexual or lesbian battering, fewer gay men are likely to self-identify themselves in order to seek help.

They may believe that men can't be battered. Or, just as many women 25 years ago would have been loathe to describe the sexual violence inflicted on them by their husbands as rape, some gay men may not be able to recognize that the violence they experience at the hands of a lover falls within the understood pattern of domestic violence.

"There isn't a model available for gay men yet," says Wiseheart.

While the topic of gay male battering is not new, services for gay men are very limited. In 1986, the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project began providing services to lesbian and gay victims and batterers. That same year in San Francisco, the Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project began providing services for battered gay men.

Yet, according to Island and Lettelier, only a handful of new projects have been started around the country since then. There are undoubtedly multiple reasons for this, which range from a difficulty in securing federal funds for gay and lesbian projects generally to a societal unwillingness to view men as potential victims of physical and emotional abuse.

Wiseheart adds that anti-violence programs are already severely underfunded even before addressing the pressing needs of underserved communities such as the hearing impaired, the elderly and the sexual minorities community.

While PWCL will continue to focus primarily on serving women, it is Wiseheart's hope that other organizations in the gay and lesbian community will begin offering more services in order to help both gay male batterers and survivors.

■ Men interested in participating in the 12-WEEK SUPPORT GROUP beginning in late August for battered gay and bisexual men should contact Craig Smith at 232-5103.

Staff and volunteers at the PORTLAND WOMEN'S CRISIS LINE are trained to respond to same-sex violence. For assistance, call 235-5333 or toll free 1-888-235-5333.