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NORTHWEST news

SAFE AND SOUND

Organization advocates for prevention of domestic violence in the sexual minorities community by Jack Turteltaub

A woman comes to a shelter bruised and frightened, but her story is a little different. Another woman—who lives with her—has been beating her for the past couple of years, and things are getting worse.

A female-to-male transsexual calls shelter resources seeking relief from her partner, a man who is sexually and financially abusing her and practically running her life—into the ground. But her experience leads to raised eyebrows and blank stares.

Trying to understand these different manifestations of an otherwise all-too-familiar scenario of domestic violence is the international nonprofit Stop Abuse for Everyone. The small but growing Tualatin-based group tries to educate underserved communities about domestic violence.

The story of SAFE begins with Jade Rubick during a brief marriage in the '90s while he was a graduate student. A heterosexual man, he didn't recognize domestic violence as his wife physically dominated and assaulted him.

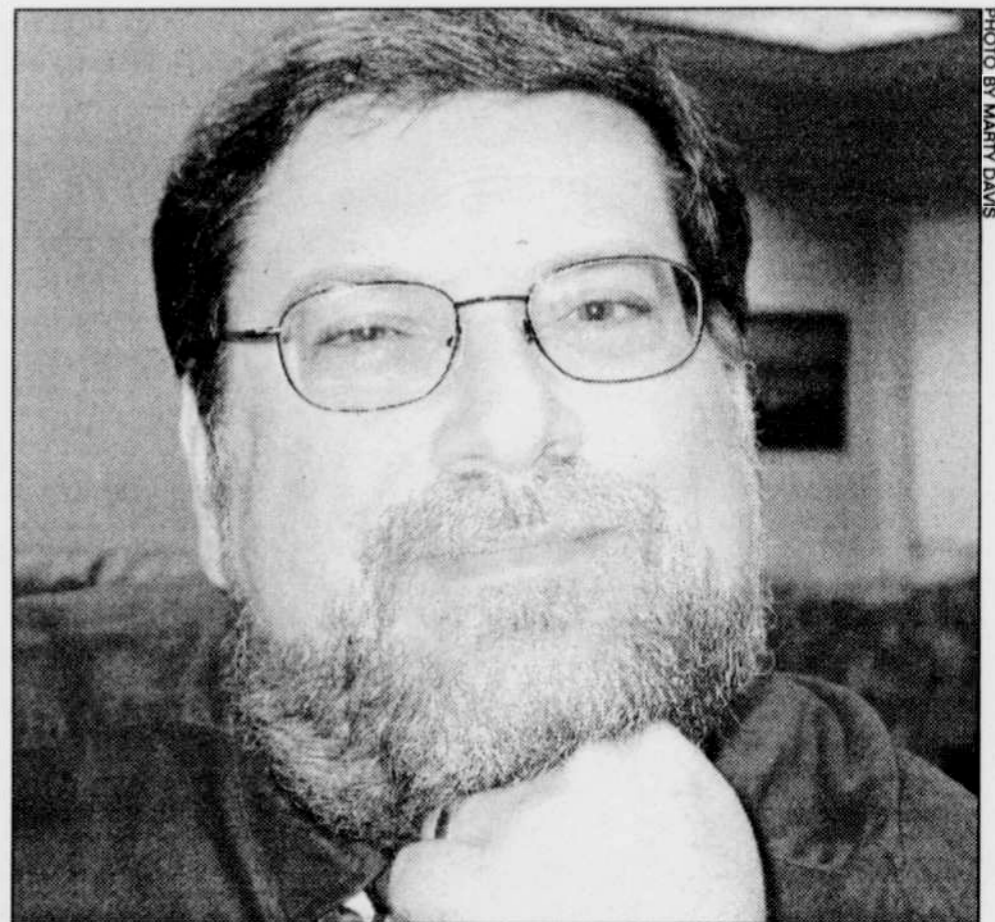
"She controlled everything I did, and there was a cycle of violence," Rubick says. "She would explode, then become nice. I felt scared all the time."

Rubick says he felt ashamed of himself and tried to hide what was happening from others. Then a close friend—his boss, a gay man—saw the bruises and figured out what was going on. He was "very supportive of me and encouraged me to get out of the relationship."

Rubick's experience became the impetus for a Web page he started in order to understand what he mistakenly thought—at the time—was a unique experience: being a male victim of domestic violence. At the time, only women and children were recognized as the primary victims of marital and relationship physical violence.

SAFE's mission has not been without criticism and even controversy in the domestic violence community, even though it is a relatively modest organization. A quarter-century ago the problem of marital and relationship violence in modern society was not well recognized, but today there are treatment programs and shelters for battered women and children and legal sanctions and diversion programs for perpetrators throughout the United States, Canada and parts of Asia and Europe.

During the past 20 years, clinicians developed treatment programs that were geared toward protecting women from male aggressors and that emphasized anger management, with legal consequences for the use of power



Ira Streitfeld serves on the board of Stop Abuse for Everyone, a Tualatin-based group that educates underserved communities about domestic violence

and control tactics. While recognizing that women were not always victims, the dominant paradigm had two categories: straight female victims and straight male abusers.

However, more and more studies are challenging this monolithic approach. Some suggest the frequency of female-against-male violence in heterosexual relationships is comparable (if less lethal) to the frequency of male-against-female violence.

Other research has found rates of female aggression in lesbian relationships and male-on-male violence in gay dyads equal to rates in heterosexual unions. Some studies suggest there are even higher rates of violence in relationships where at least one partner is trans. Same-sex domestic violence by its nature challenges a purely gender-based analysis of abuse.

Board member Ira Streitfeld, a gay man with a business background, including work in public relations, is trying to get out the message about SAFE. He likes to emphasize that it is a "human rights" organization.

"We are not about men or women," Streitfeld says. "In the beginning some refused to believe men could be victims and believed men could only be perpetrators" of domestic violence.

While there is more recognition nowadays of their complexity and differences, domestic violence victims who are not heterosexual women have faced more limitations and barriers to treatment. Only a handful of shelters in the United States even will take male victims of domestic violence—gay or straight.

Rubick recalls calling such a shelter in Eugene when he was trying to get out of his relationship. The hot line operator was sympathetic, compassionate, wanting to help but truly puzzled. There was no psychosocial framework for viewing men as victims.

The reality is, board member Phil Cook notes, that a disproportionate amount of resources go to heterosexual women and that other groups can get shortchanged. He says

PHOTO BY MARY DAVIS