

The gravity of abuse

The first in a series examining the complex personal toll of domestic abuse

BY ROSETTE ROYALE
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Anywhere. He could be anywhere. Around the corner of the apartment building where they live. Across the street at the construction site where he works. At the nearby bar where he sometimes goes for a beer. She looks around, nervous. What if he sees her? But she can't wait. Not anymore. She tightens her grip on the baby stroller and heads off into the night.

She has a plan: make it three blocks, to the shelter for women and children. Borrow someone's cell phone, call 911. She tried to dial the number back at the apartment, but he yanked the phone out of her hands and broke it to pieces.

She zooms the stroller down the sidewalk of South Othello Street, heading west toward Martin Luther King Jr. Way South, a busy intersection in a diverse, yet gentrifying, south Seattle neighborhood. On her right, an abandoned lot and taco truck, on her left, an unfinished luxury apartment complex. By this time of evening, heading on midnight, hardly a car drives by. The light rail station sits empty. She's all alone.

Except for her son. Their son. Tomorrow he'll turn seven months old. About 90 minutes ago, shortly after the yelling and screaming drew her neighbors into the hallway, the child cried while she splashed water on her face in the bathroom of Apartment 21. Now he sits in his stroller, bundled up in a blue, fuzzy snowsuit.

In a rush, she forgot to grab her own coat. Not that she minds. She barely feels the chilly spring air rushing over the red mark on her throat.

But she can feel her right cheek throb. In the bathroom mirror, she saw the knot, the swelling,

Rosette Royale is the assistant editor of Real Change News, Street Roots' sister paper in Seattle, Wash. "Gravity of Abuse" grew out of a three-month 2010 Seattle University fellowship to study family homelessness in Washington state. The fellowship was funded by the Gates Foundation. All quotes, thoughts and feelings of individuals stem from interviews, personal correspondence, police reports and court documents. Research for the series lasted 22 months.

the purplish-maroon hematoma that formed under her eye. But it's weird. Because when he hit her, she couldn't really feel it. It was like she lost consciousness ... Did she? Did she black out?

Outside, she hustles the stroller down the sidewalk. Streetlights cast an orange halogen glow, throw shadows that pile up under bushes, shadows large enough to hide a grown man. If only she knew where he went when he left the apartment.

Nearly 16 months ago when she met him back in Idaho, she had wanted to change her life. He'd told her the same. They would do it, together. But things got in the way. The poverty, the drug use, the drinking, the yelling, the fighting, the fists, the fear — all of it clouded their vision. All of it weighed on their lives.

And other lives as well. The best friend. The neighbor. The roommate. At some point, each witnessed parts of their turbulent relationship. People in close contact will feel transformed by the experience of violence.

But none more so than the woman who flees the relationship's fury: Brandy Sweeney, 28, racing a stroller down a sidewalk on April 29, 2010.

It's taken her some time, since each abusive relationship exerts a unique gravitational pull. Not

only does it draw in the abused and the abuser, it also attracts the attention of those closest to the couple.

Due to underreporting, the true number of people caught in abusive relationships is unknown. The Centers for Disease Control estimates 1.3 million women a year in the U.S. experience some type of physical assault by a partner. Not every woman survives.

But for the woman who pulls free, aided by those around her and her own ingenuity, she may find, waiting on the other side, a peace that seemed impossible when the relationship pressed down upon her. That's what Brandy seeks now — to end the gravity of abuse.

So she rushes to the shelter. She can see the building up ahead, illuminated, a beacon several hundred yards away. A light in a city where she hopes to find a better, peaceful life.

She can feel her right cheek throb. In the bathroom mirror, she saw the knot, the swelling, the purplish-maroon hematoma that formed under her eye. But it's weird. Because when he hit her, she couldn't really feel it. It was like she lost consciousness ... Did she? Did she black out?

Treasure Valley

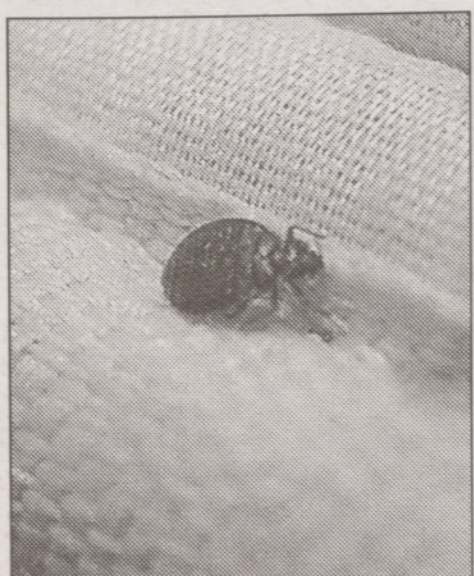
On a brisk, winter morning in mid-December 2008, Brandy Sweeney, then 26, stepped off a Greyhound in downtown Boise, Idaho, looking for an emergency shelter for women and

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Resources for victims of domestic violence

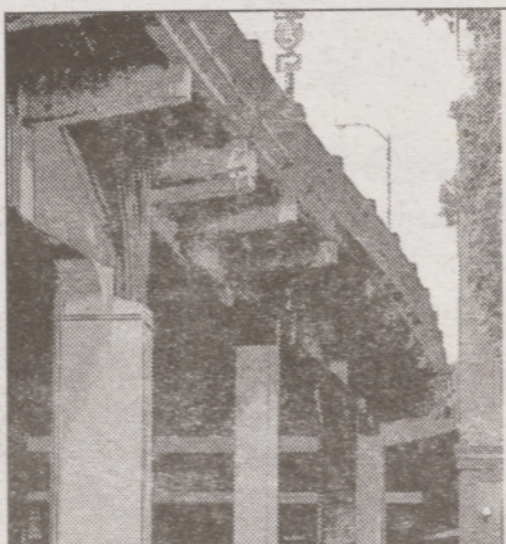
211info: Dial 2-1-1.
Portland Womens' Crisis Line: 503-235-5333
National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

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