

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Casey Wright and preventing domestic abuse



PHOTO: MARLEN SHEPHERD

Casey Wright was an equestrian and a dancer. She grew up in Eugene, graduated Sheldon High School and worked downtown at the Pita Pit for several years before taking a job at a Springfield metal fabrication plant to support her goals of riding, training and showing the horses she loved.

Early on the morning of Nov. 2, Wright's ex-boyfriend, Robert Cromwell, confessed to beating 26-year-old Wright to death with an aluminum baseball bat as she lay sleeping in the house they once shared.

Domestic violence, or more specifically, intimate partner violence, can happen to anyone, according to Peggy Whalen, executive director of Womenspace. She says that society tries to make it seem like domestic violence happens to "those people," but it touches everyone. The mission of Womenspace is to prevent domestic violence in intimate partner relationships in Lane County and to support survivors.

As news of Wright's murder spread through the community, friends and strangers began to raise money to help care for Casey's horse and to donate to Womenspace, which has been hit with budget cuts in the past several years. The GoFundMe account raised more than \$14,000 in the two months after Wright was killed. But also in those months before 2013 ended, two more women, Jacqueline Marroquin and Tammy Borda, were allegedly murdered in Lane County by their partners.

According to her mother, Sydney Brooks, Wright's flaw was "thinking she could handle it/him." Brooks says that when Wright came home with her on Oct. 18, and she saw the holes in a wall of the house the couple had shared, "it sunk in for me, that the situation was far worse than any of us even imagined." But after Wright left Cromwell and moved out, her family and friends thought she was safe. Brooks doesn't know why her daughter went back to the house that November night.

According to the police report, Wright fell asleep at the house, and as she slept, Cromwell read her phone messages, decided she was seeing other men and hit her four times in the head with a baseball bat, killing her. He then made what the Springfield police referred to as a "superficial" and "feeble" attempt at suicide and called a family member to take him to the hospital where he confessed to the murder. He has since pleaded not guilty. If he is convicted, Cromwell faces a maximum sentence of life in prison, with parole after 25 years.

Whalen says many people don't know that it's when a person is leaving or has left a violent intimate partner relationship that she is in most danger. The violence is about power and control. "That's when you [the abuser] lose control in the relationship," Whalen says, "when someone is leaving."

Brooks says, "Listen to those who have been through abuse," and she advises, "Don't think you are alone, have to act alone or that you can handle it. These people kill."

According to Womenspace, each year domestic violence in intimate partner relationships results in approximately 1,200 deaths and two million injuries among women in the U.S., and up to 50 percent of all homeless women and children in this country are fleeing intimate partner violence.

"It doesn't just touch the couple," Whalen says. "This has an impact on the community."

Whalen says people can help someone who they think might be in a violent, controlling relationship. If a friend's partner is texting her all the time and being very jealous, it is a big warning sign. But you don't say, "Your boyfriend is a jealous jerk," because, she says, "We need to remember they care about this person no matter what we think." Instead you open it up and try not to be judgmental. Whalen suggests saying: "Wow, that has to be hard," or "He's texted you 10 times since you've been sitting here, are you OK?" and focusing on the behavior, not the person.

Most survivors will minimize the severity of the abuse, Whalen says. People aren't comfortable talking about it. A person isn't going to list all the bad things her partner did to her because she doesn't want her friends to think badly of him and then think badly of her as well.

That's why Whalen says it can help for someone in an abusive relationship to call an agency like Womenspace — where people don't know you, have experience and won't make you feel judged. And, Whalen says, the crisis lines aren't just for those in a violent or jealous relationship; they are also for those who need advice on how to help a friend who they think might be abused.

If you observe domestic violence, "Pull her aside, say, 'You don't deserve that,'" Whalen advises. "Let them know you are there for them."

She adds that many people will leave and go back, leave and go back, because the person promises he will change and because we want to believe our partners. Further exacerbating the problem, sometimes survivors will push their friends away because every time they hang out with their friends, there is an incident with the jealous partner afterward and it seems easier to just not go out. This leads to women becoming isolated.

"Stick by and let them know they are not alone, and everyone deserves a healthy relationship with love and respect," Whalen says. Even if she's pushing you away, don't give up — check in with her on Facebook, via email, just let her know you are still there.

She points out that, especially to young women, the fact someone wants to spend every minute of every day with her can seem really awesome. But what at first seems like a fairy tale is really something dangerous. "We kind of train girls from the time when we are very young to like the bad boy," she says. "If a boy treats a little girl badly on the playground we sometimes say, 'Oh, darling, it's because he likes you.' By doing that, we are telling girls that the boys that treat them badly are the ones that like them."

To help Wright's friends and family feel empowered, RMA Martial Arts and Fitness of Eugene and Wright's friend Leslie Probst Peterson will be putting on a free self-defense workshop for Wright's friends and family on Jan. 11. Peterson says the workshop is reality-based/Israeli-based self defense, which she says is quick to learn and helps people "feel totally self-reliant." For more information go to rightmentalattitude.com and to donate to the GoFundMe account to benefit the care of Wright's horse and Womenspace go to gofundme.com/casey-wright. ■



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