



Bryce Dole/Hermiston Herald

Domestic Violence Services held its seventh annual "In Her Shoes" experiential walk to raise awareness of domestic violence in Hermiston on Saturday, April 24, 2021.

Domestic Violence Services holds 'In Her Shoes' walk to raise awareness

By **BRYCE DOLE**
STAFF WRITER

She was a 32-year-old accountant with a daughter. She was married, though he was not the father of her child. Slowly over time, their relationship soured.

It began with emotional abuse and escalated to physical abuse. Friends and family encouraged her to give him another chance. They said he was sorry. The decision loomed — stay or leave. She chose the latter.

She reported the abuse to the police. In court, she lost custody of her daughter because she worked full time. Then, she went to Child Protective Services. They didn't find credible danger to the child and declined to help. She just wanted to be with her daughter. So, she took him back.

This was one of many scenarios that participants engaged with at the seventh annual "In Her Shoes" experiential walk outside of Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston on a blustery Saturday, April 24.

The event, organized by Domestic Violence Services, a nonprofit that has served Umatilla and Morrow counties for more than 40 years, was intended to raise awareness about domestic violence and sexual abuse by having participants walk step-by-step through the obstacles victims commonly face when they seek help.

"It's discouraging knowing that's what people have to go through," said Jessica Reker, the director of community health and outreach at the hospital, who engaged with the accountant's story. "That someone might not believe them or that someone might say, 'Oh, but you know, he supports you.' It's just sad that they have to weigh the positives and negatives. That should be something that's not OK."

The accountant's story is not unlike the many stories she hears through her job at the hospital, Reker said.

"These are choices faced by real people in really horrible situations," said Kathryn Chaney, the executive director of Domestic Violence Services. "The outcome isn't always great. That's why programs like ours exist — to help people from those circumstances."

For both participants and event organizers, one word became central to each conversation — empathy.

"So often when you have a good friend or family member that keeps going back to an abusive relationship, you get frustrated or angry or you just don't get it," said Chaney, who has worked in services regarding domestic violence and sexual assault for nearly 30 years in multiple states. "That's natural. But we developed this program to help people understand what these kind of circumstances are and what the choices are. This kind of activity gives people insight to those difficult choices."

Jeanne Bedolla, a project coordinator with Domestic Violence Services, said the event shows the vulnerable situations victims experience after suffering from abuse. She said she saw this

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Proceeds from the seventh annual "In Her Shoes" experiential walk outside of Good Shepherd Medical Center went to Domestic Violence Services' shelters in Pendleton and Hermiston, as well as its advocacy centers in Boardman, Heppner and Milton-Freewater. The nonprofit organization also offers safety planning, peer groups, parenting classes and other support services and operates a 24-hour crisis line (800-833-1161). For more information, call 541-276-3322, 541-567-0424 or visit www.domesticviolenceservices-or.org.

first-hand when she helped her sister move back home to Oregon from Denver, Colorado, when her marriage turned abusive.

"They're basically groomed at that point to think they're not worthy or that they can't do better," she said. "This (event) kind of shows people what limited resources people have. You can say, 'Just go here or go here.' But those people either don't know about it, or they don't have the family or friends for support depending on what their situation is. Sometimes it gets them into the world of drugs, and that's a whole other story. It's just a vicious cycle, unfortunately."

Bedolla said the nonprofit is now looking to set up programs in middle and high schools to raise awareness about the various forms of abuse, including dating and cyber abuse.

Reker said events like "In Her Shoes" are important ways to show the barriers victims face to get help.

"There's just not awareness of what sorts of services are available, what people have to go through to be able to get help, all the barriers there are — police, court, Child Protective Services," she said. "If you don't have an advocate in that process, it's almost impossible. So these are just really important awareness events."

Caitlin Cozad, the marketing and communications director at the hospital who attended the event, agreed with Reker, adding the event illustrates how common various forms of abuse are.

"A lot of times, people see physical abuse because they can actually see it," she said. "But there's emotional abuse, there's verbal abuse, which are intangible. And there needs to be more resources out there for families who are victims of domestic violence — physical, verbal, emotional."

Reker said she believes that engaging with the scenarios in the event can decrease stigmas surrounding victims.

"It's not as black and white as, 'This person's beating you, so leave the relationship,'" she said. "There's so many factors. It's not that simple. And unfortunately, in our area, there's not that many places that people can go."



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