

**SERIES**

## Everyone's Battle: Stopping the cycle of harm



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AUBURN | The first time Elaine's ex-husband broke her jaw, he didn't use his fists. He used a broom.

Peter wielded the wooden tool like a bat, repeatedly walloping Elaine's knees and chest. Then he hit her face, and the world went black.

When Elaine regained consciousness 45 minutes later, she opened the eye that was swollen shut to see Peter staring at her with tears staining his cheeks.

"He was just sitting there crying," she said.

Dazed, Elaine — who asked that her name and her abuser's name not be used to protect her children — said she scanned her body, assessing the damage. Her knee caps were knocked out of place. Red welts colored her chest and face. And it was extremely difficult for her to breathe.

As Elaine recalled the incident decades in the past, she traced a line with her finger from the crown of her skull down her left cheek, remembering where Peter fractured her face.

"I thought, 'What am I going to do?'" Elaine remembered.

And everyday, countless women and men across Cayuga County are asking themselves the same question.

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Domestic violence is an ugly, ancient monster.

For as long as couples have cohabited, there have been individuals who have choked, hit, kicked, intimidated, cursed out and killed the person they claimed to love.

Cayuga County is no different. But a series of recent, brutal murders reminded the community what can happen with the often-silenced form of violence is ignored.

In the past two years, each of the county's four homicides have been domestic-violence related.

Patty Weaver, a supervisor at the Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency, said that makes for a high domestic-violence-related homicide rate.

Homicide, however, isn't the only brand of domestic violence that runs high in Cayuga County. According to Cayuga and Seneca Counties Community Profile's most recent data, the county's domestic violence rate is 85 cases per 1,000 people, compared to the state's rate — excluding New York City — of 48 cases per 1,000 people.

And according to C/SCAA, Auburn's rate of domestic violence cases is double the county's rate and four times the state average.

Weaver said she doesn't have a concrete answer for why domestic violence rates are higher in Cayuga County than the average upstate New York county. She speculated briefly, hoping that increased awareness among the community may account for some of the higher reported rates.

Either way, the community isn't willing to take chances.

Sarah Barnard, C/SCAA's domestic violence services director, said her agency — in partnership with local law enforcement — uses a powerful tool to combat domestic violence: education.

"The problem with domestic violence has always been there, but now it's more talked about," she said. "It's more open."

Productively talking about domestic violence entails offering a definition of exactly what domestic violence is: abusive behavior used by one person to control their partner. The abuse manifests in a grimly diverse list of forms that range from verbal to physical violence.

To exert control over their partner, Weaver said abusers often isolate victims from their families, friends and anyone would advise the victim from staying in an unhealthy relationship. She said domestic violence situations often escalate into physical abuse — something she said C/SCAA is dealing with more and more.

Over the last 10 years, Weaver said she has seen the level of violence in Cayuga County "escalate tremendously."

"It was rare that we would have a victims come in with physical injuries," she said. "Now it's almost rare to see a victim come in without the physical injuries, or talk to us over the phone and not disclose some kind of physical abuse."

District Attorney Jon Budelmann said domestic violence entails a series of actions abusers take to exert power and control over their victims. He said this intimate-partner system of abuse is cyclical, and often referred to as a wheel.

He said the cycle starts off with a "Honeymoon Phase," where abusers treat their victims with kindness and romantic gestures.

"If the guy came up and was a jerk, popped somebody in the face right off the bat, there's no relationship. There's no connection. There's no power," Budelmann explained. "So

generally it starts with what's called a honeymoon, or a period where they're getting along."

Once the victim is enamored and attached to the batterer, he said the honeymoon fades and is slowly replaced by a tension-building phase. During this period, abusers implement verbal attacks, where they curse at and demean their partner.

Weaver said batterers use an abusive method for as long as it guarantees them control.

"When a situation becomes physical, it's because whatever tactic took place before the physical began didn't work," she said.

Barnard agreed, adding that once an abuser beats their victims, they don't stop.

"Once it gets to the point of physical violence, it doesn't go back," she said. "It usually just escalates."

Budelmann said each violent explosion — whether it includes sharp expletives or a blow to the face — is followed by a short honeymoon period, where a batterer works to atone for their outburst. He said abusers often take their victims out to dinner, buy presents and swear to get treatment.

"Rather than lose her or lose the control, he's nice to her again," Budelmann said.

But the honeymoon inevitably ends. The cycle of abuse starts its next revolution, becoming more and more violent with each turn.

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When Elaine met Peter in 1992, she felt nothing but hope.

She had escaped two abusive relationships previously, and was convinced that he would treat her and her young daughter with nothing but kindness.

"Just fun. A whole lot of fun," Elaine said of Peter. "We laughed all the time."

So the first time he beat her, she didn't foresee the attack. One minute, they were joking. The next, she was splayed out on the floor with a broken jaw.

"I never, ever would've thought it would happen," she said.

When Elaine returned from a trip to the hospital, Peter seemed to revert to his kind self. He repented, and — through denying the incident — acted as if nothing happened.

Elaine said Peter didn't attack her again for a few years. Although he occasionally accompanied a threat with a quick punch, Elaine said he always backed off quickly.

"There were little, small things, but he'd say he was joking," she recalled.

Peter's relative calm did not last long.

One night, Elaine said he returned to their apartment with his brother after attending a football game. After catching sight of a bruise on Elaine's leg, the man confronted Peter, accusing his brother of once again beating his significant other.

Peter didn't handle the confrontation well. Elaine said he started to drink again, and act belligerently.

Eventually, he punctuated his cruel speeches with his fists.

"I don't know why he always went for the left side of my face," Elaine said, closing her eyes. "He always had to punch."

After the second time he broke part of her face, Elaine got pregnant in quick succession. She said he didn't hit her when she was carrying either of their two children.

The lull in physical abuse ended after their youngest child's birth.

Peter — a "hands-on" man — threw plates against the couple's walls. When Elaine tried to sleep, he would hover over her menacingly, spitting on her and putting lit cigarettes out on her skin.

"It was bad for a really long time," Elaine said. "There were so many police reports during that time."

After the third time Peter broke his wife's face, Elaine was able to escape him for awhile. He was arrested, and Elaine filed an order of protection against him.

Peter, however, didn't heed the order.

Elaine said he broke into her Auburn home one night while she slept, hoping he would catch her with another man. Instead, he found Elaine alone, and broke her jaw for the fourth and final time.

"He woke me up with a nice punch to the face," she said, pulling aside her cheek to show where Peter knocked out a tooth.

A detective found Peter later that night, and arrested him after he admitted hurting the mother of his children. While he spent time in jail, Elaine said should took her children and jetted out of the area.

When he got out of incarceration, a sober Peter followed Elaine. He kept away from alcohol for awhile, and seemed to be contrite about the pain he inflicted on his family.

But when the couple moved back to New York, he turned back to alcohol and abuse. He stopped working and started taking pain killers, forcing Elaine to financially provide for the entire family.

Peter promised to stop drinking, but remained in a perpetually plastered state. Elaine learned that confronting him resulted in pain.

"There was no compromising," she said. "All of the sudden, the fire comes from nowhere. And so does the fist."

Mentally and physically, Elaine was trapped. She said she was stuck in a town with Peter's loved ones, in a place where no one cared about her pain.

So she stopped caring about herself.

"When you hit that next plateau," Elaine explained, "I think something inside you starts to believe you deserve to be where you are."

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Rome Canzano, a local defense attorney who formerly worked as an assistant district attorney, said one of the scariest aspects of domestic violence is how accustomed victims become to physical abuse.

"When you ... hear how casually they talk about being shoved or being struck or being beaten, it's surprising. But to them, it's not," he said. "It just becomes part of their daily routine."

Canzano said victims often make excuses for their abusers, blaming the violence on substance abuse or financial stress.

Weaver said victims often tell their C/SCAA advocates that their partners only abuse them when drunk. She said it's hard to show victims that there is never an excuse for violence, that abuse should never be condoned.

"Battering is a choice," she said. "It's not because of drugs or alcohol or a mental health issue, because there's plenty of people out there with substance abuse issues and mental health issues who aren't battering their partners."

But society often puts the blame on victims, not their batterers. And that often discourages victims from seeking help

Budelmann said what emergency responders, social service officials and the lay community need to understand is that no one wants to be abused.

"The victims are going to do what makes them the safest," he said. "So if they think staying in that relationship is going to make them safer than leaving it, they're going to stay."

He said the same reasoning lies behind a victim's decision to drop charges against his or her batterer.

Barnard and Weaver said cutting off a victim or treating them poorly because they have decided to stay with the person who is abusing them is far from helpful — especially considering that the time a victim chooses to leave their batterer is the time they are most in danger of getting murdered.

Budelmann agreed, explaining that when an abuser senses they've lost control, "all bets are off."

"Domestic violence perpetrators are at their most dangerous when they're losing control," he said. "They could move on to the next victim, or they could go and say: 'If I can't have her, nobody else can.'"

Instead of further isolating victims, both Barnard and Weaver encouraged the community to listen to victims when needed, and report suspected violence.

Barnard kept her advice simple: "Don't look away."

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It took Elaine nine years to leave her abuser.

Although she prepared for the moment for nearly one decade, Elaine said it took an unexpected source to convince her it was finally time to get free.

In the mid 2000s, Elaine said she went to her gynecologist for consultation prior to having a hysterectomy. The doctor — who worked with Auburn Community Hospital — had access to all of his patient's records.

After explaining the procedure, Elaine said her doctor looked at her and, speaking quietly, said: "I know you're a battered woman."

She was shocked by his analysis and empathy. Elaine said she had spent years dealing with police officers, doctors and social services personnel who acted either hostile or indifferent.

So, blessed by someone who actually cared, Elaine said she started to speak through her tears.

"I was exposed. I was wide open," she said. "They were tears of: 'Here I am. I'm raw.'"

After listening to her speak, Elaine said her doctor told her she was a beautiful, funny woman who deserved better than four broken jaws and a life of terror. He also told her that if her husband punched her in the stomach after her hysterectomy, she would hemorrhage and die.

The gynecologist told her he wouldn't schedule the surgery unless Elaine was ready to leave Peter. After a moment of silent thought, Elaine told her doctor to schedule the surgery.

At that moment, she went from a victim to a survivor.

Elaine isn't done battling domestic violence. Although she finally escaped 20 years of hell, Elaine said she knows there are countless men and women across Cayuga County who are still living in fear.

She advised victims not to be afraid to fall down, to not be afraid to live alone and, most of all, to know that they deserve better.

"In those moments is when you really understand how strong you are, and you can make it. You can do it," Elaine said. "I did it, and I've come so far."

## Everyone's battle

First installment in four-day multimedia series assessing the impact of domestic violence on our community and what's being done to reduce its prevalence. Head to [auburnpub.com/everyones\\_battle](http://auburnpub.com/everyones_battle) to see video interviews related to today's stories, as well as additional videos that will be posted online Monday.

## A troubling trend

### Data from the Domestic Violence Intervention Program in Cayuga County:

#### Bed nights used at emergency shelter

- 2010-2011: 784 nights
- 2011-2012: 1,535 nights

#### Number sheltered

- 2010-2011: 30 families (25 children)
- 2011-2012: 37 families (43 children)

#### Non-residential services

- 2010-2011: 131 victims (94 with children)
- 2011-2012: 146 victims (43 with children)

#### Hotline calls

- 2010-2011: 177 calls
- 2011-2012: 349 calls

#### Outreach to victims named in domestic incident reports

- 2010-2011: 183
- 2011-2012: 219

## Join the conversation

Share your thoughts on this issue in the story comments section for any of the articles in this series. In addition, [auburnpub.com](http://auburnpub.com) will feature a live blog discussion at noon Wednesday with local professionals on the front lines of the fight against

domestic violence, including Cayuga County Sheriff David Gould, District Attorney Jon Budelmann and professionals from Seneca/Cayuga Community Action Agency.

## **If you go**

**What:** Take Back the Night, a community rally to support victims and survivors of child sexual abuse, sexual assault, dating violence and domestic violence

**When and Where:** Kicks off with a march in downtown Auburn starting at 6 p.m. Wednesday, April 24, from Memorial City Hall, 24 South St., Auburn. The march will be followed at 6:30 p.m. by a rally on the steps of City Hall.

Take Back the Night (No More Secrets) T-shirts are available for purchase for \$10-\$12 through Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency. See designs and download the order form at <http://www.cscAA.com/TBTNtshirts.pdf>.

**More information:** Contact Vicky Myers at (315) 255-1703