

WEAR PURPLE DAY HELD IN AUBURN TO RAISE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AWARENESS

'A living hell': Community vows to fight domestic violence on Cayuga County's Wear Purple Day



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AUBURN | Leslie doesn't like to call herself a victim. Instead, she prefers to introduce herself as she currently is: a survivor of domestic violence.

The mother of two, who used her first name to protect her safety, said she and her infant son recently boarded a bus and fled north with only one diaper bag, one suitcase and \$23 — all in an attempt to escape her abusive partner.

"The fear I felt is hard for most of you to imagine," Leslie said.

But leaving behind her home, most of her belongings and her financial security was the decision Leslie was forced to make in order to survive. And every day, dozens of Cayuga County residents weigh making the same impossible choice.

On Wednesday, Leslie spoke at the fifth-annual Wear Purple Day — a rally organized yearly by the Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency to raise awareness about the [high rate of intimate-partner violence plaguing Cayuga County](#). She was joined in the Cayuga County Courtroom by law enforcement, lawmakers, advocates and her fellow survivors.

Marie Montgomery, deputy director of C/SCAA, started off the event by pointing out a startling fact.

"It's unacceptable that a woman is more likely to be hurt by a former partner than in a car accident, rape and mugging combined," she said.

Cayuga County is no exception.

As of 2013, the county-wide rate of domestic violence was about two times the state average. In Auburn, the rate was even worse — with known cases occurring at a rate four times the state average.

Stating that the community was aware of how "serious" Cayuga County's domestic violence problem is, District Attorney Jon Budelmann shared a direct message with victims: You are not alone.

Fighting the devastating problem, he said, will take the whole community "not allowing it to continue in darkness and secrecy."

"You don't have to be an attorney, a police officer or a victim," he said. "All of us have the strength in ourselves to make a difference."

For Leslie, the community's efforts were life saving.

Thanks to C/SCAA's Domestic Violence Intervention Program, the nurse has started to rebuild her life. Leslie said C/SCAA's advocates helped her face her abuser in court, obtain housing and apply for jobs.

But a giant part of her heart remains missing.

Despite a 10-year history of domestic violence and 38 police reports documenting the times he hit her badly enough to seek help, Leslie — who petitioned for custody when she was financially stranded and emotionally desperate — lost custody of her 9-year-old daughter to her ex.

Fighting back tears, Leslie said she now only has sporadic visits with her daughter, who is terrified of her father.

"It is a situation much like a living hell," Leslie said. "There are thousands of women who go back to those situations just to see their child grow up."

For breaking free, that is an opportunity Leslie has — for now — been denied.

To protect others from going through the pain Leslie has experienced, Sarah Barnard, C/SCAA's supportive services director, presented attendees with a challenge.

"Today is the the day to recommit ourselves to victims of abuse in our county," she said. "As you exit the courthouse, release your balloons as a symbol of that commitment."

Attendees obliged, stepping onto the courthouse's steps and sending dozens of shiny purple balloons — and promises — into the cloudy sky.

Local domestic violence data

Over the past four years, the Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency's Domestic Violence Intervention Program has served more victims of domestic violence.

Bed nights used at emergency shelter:

- 2010-2011: 784
- 2011-2012: 1,535
- 2012-2013: 1,700
- 2013-2014: 2,273

Number sheltered:

- 2010-2011: 30 families, 25 children
- 2011-2012: 37 families, 43 children
- 2012-2013: 35 families, 33 children
- 2013-2014: 43 families, 33 children

Hotline calls:

- 2010-2011: 177
- 2011-2012: 349
- 2012-2013: 373
- 2013-2014: 380