



Marinda and Jason Hewitt, Bennington (photo by Tom Dorsey / Salina Journal)

A very unlikely 'happily ever after'

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New Start Family Life Skills Center programs help break cycle of violence

By ERIN MATHEWS
Salina Journal

It was about three years ago that she opened a letter her boyfriend had written from prison in which he threatened to kill her if she cheated on him.

She took it seriously. Jason Hewitt had jealously stalked her in the past, and part of the reason he was behind bars was because he had beaten her.

Theirs was a story more likely to end in grim headlines than

"happily ever after."

But when Hewitt got paroled, something happened that changed all that. As part of his parole requirements, the Bennington man had to complete a 32-week batterers intervention program at the New Start Family Life Skills Center, 1125 W. South.

Vera Johnson, executive director, said Hewitt was one of 11 men enrolled in the first session of the program, which is applying for state certification under new requirements for programs designed to protect victims by getting batterers to change their behavior.

The program helps offenders build character and remove malignant behaviors, Johnson said. Hewitt is one of three men who have completed the course so far.

Hewitt came out of the class "a totally different person," said Marinda Hewitt, the girlfriend who has since become his wife.

"He has not hit me. He has not threatened to hit me," she said. "Whatever this class did, if it can change him, it can change anybody. I think it's great. Honestly, I think it's wonderful."

Marinda and Jason are now working together to provide a two-parent home for five children, ages 1 month to 9 years. The children will not grow up thinking abuse is a normal part of life, Marinda said. If the couple argue, Jason has learned to walk away and cool down and no longer becomes physically abusive, she said.

"It changed my attitude," Jason said. "It changed the way I look at life. I learned there's more to life than being angry and violent."

It didn't come easily

The change didn't come easily, and it didn't happen over night. When he was first paroled, Hewitt resisted the required class, and even got Marinda to help him try to get out of taking it. Now they're both grateful he was required to stay.

"The first three weeks, I couldn't tell you a word (Johnson) said because I was too busy cussing this class and cussing my parole officer," he said. "But after I figured out there's no way I could beat the system, I did the best I could. When I finally started listening, I really got a lot out of it.

"I wish I could still go. I really wanted to go a second time just so I didn't miss anything."

Matt Ade, parole officer for the Kansas Department of Corrections, referred Hewitt and others to the batterers intervention program.

"In general, most everybody who's required to go is resistant," he said. "I don't think I've had anybody say, 'That's great. That's exactly what I needed. I can't wait to go.'"

However, he said he has heard from several parolees after they've attended the class for several weeks that they are getting a lot out of it. He's hopeful about the difference he's seen in participants who have exhibited positive attitude changes.

"Vera's helping them examine their choices, and she's showing them the repercussions," he said. "She's showing them there is another way to live and behave."

Ade also served on the state advisory board that helped develop standards for state certification.

"Domestic violence really is a choice -- how conscious a choice differs from individual to individual," he said.

Reducing re-offenders

Johnson, who is working with batterers, and Andrea Quill, executive director of Salina's Domestic Violence Association of Central Kansas, an organization that assists victims, are the co-chairs of a domestic violence task force for Saline County.

The newly formed task force, for which they hope to recruit more court personnel and representatives of city and county law enforcement, is working to reduce the recidivism rate for people convicted of domestic violence offenses and standardize procedures for treatment of victims and perpetrators. Victims must be helped, and perpetrators must be held accountable for their actions, Johnson said.

Not all batterers are men, and not all victims are women, she said. Incidents in which a woman batters a man are probably the most underreported, so Johnson said she believes it's probably more common than most people realize.

Deadly domestic violence

October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month, but Salinans hardly need a reminder of how deadly domestic violence can be. On Oct. 8, a Salina woman and her co-worker were killed by the woman's ex-husband who then turned the gun on himself.

Johnson said the shootings show the critical need for the task force to evaluate the current system for handling domestic violence offenders.

One new procedure is Johnson's batterer's intervention class, which is now required for all violent offenders on parole.

"These people are redeemable," she said. "I can't say that enough. If a person chooses to try to learn from their mistakes and make themselves better, and we don't help them become productive citizens, then we're not doing anything to better our community."

Quill said half of the caseload handled by Salina Municipal Court involves incidents of domestic violence.

A new emphasis on attempting to reform batterers makes sense to support the ultimate goal of victim safety, she said. The reality is that many victims return to their abusers, or if they don't, the untreated batterer may move on to victimize someone else.

"I'm excited about it, actually," she said. "They're in line with what we're wanting to do -- hold the perpetrator accountable. It's definitely a step in the right direction."

The fear of being alone

Another concept being discussed by the task force is a crisis team trained by DVACK to respond with law enforcement on domestic violence calls. Often victims fear being alone more than they fear continued abuse, she said. Knowing that services are available and they will have an advocate on their side may cause some victims to make a different choice.

Funding would have to be secured for development of the crisis team, she said. In the past year, 1,000 victims of domestic violence were served by DVACK.

About 180 women and children stayed in the organization's emergency shelter, she said.

Johnson said there's been a cultural shift in the attitude toward batterers.

"Until recently, people wanted to burn the batterer," she said. "Now they want to know how they can be helped so they'll quit reoffending."

Johnson said she hopes to find area employers who will be willing to give the course's graduates a chance at a job. Finding employment is a big problem for a convicted felon. The chances of battering increase when a man feels like he is incapable of providing for his family, she said.

They hate themselves

A batterer's problems go deeper than what can be addressed in a 12-week anger management class, which was previously the only treatment available in Saline County for batterers, she said.

"Many batterers hate themselves and hate what they are doing," she said. "They don't know how to make sense of their craziness and don't know how to change."

Johnson uses a curriculum developed by Dr. Paul Hegstrom, a former batterer who once faced attempted second-degree murder charges. Hegstrom, of Denver, developed the life skills curriculum to help batterers grow emotionally so that they can handle

conflict in a more mature way and become better spouses, employees, parents and leaders.

What a woman will do

Johnson said there are productive ways to channel anger so that it helps other people. She said she uses the anger and pain she experienced in her own physically abusive relationship to understand the feelings of those taking her class.

Johnson said she spent 10 years in an abusive relationship, until she got arrested when she punched back. She pleaded guilty and was referred to a life skills class, where she found peer support and hope for a better life free of abuse. When her partner refused treatment, she left.

"I have a Ph.D. in being a victim," she said. "That class went on for me for 10 years. I know what a woman will do to survive and preserve her family."

She said the knowledge that pain and trauma from their own pasts have made batterers what they are gives her the empathy to help them work through their issues so they can move forward. Most came from dysfunctional families torn apart by drug or alcohol abuse or domestic violence.

"They have to make the choice to learn and apply it to their lives," she said. "If they apply it to their lives and use it, it works. If they don't, it's just head knowledge."

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says....

I lived 30 years in Chicago and never experienced abuse until I came to Salina the red neck capital of the drug ridden world. And the cops never notice a thing.

10/20/2009

says....

Thank you for this article. I hope more people are able to participate in Ms. Johnson's class.

10/19/2009

says....

There are many different life skills classes available and they really do help the people that want to change! I am thankful for the classes!

10/18/2009