

# Shattered Lives

## Carmen Knox Victim Assistance Program

*Editor's note: The following story is a fictional event, written to convey important information regarding domestic violence. October is Domestic Violence Abuse Prevention Month.*

Selena had only been married a short time when I met her. Everyone thought she and her husband had a bright future together. He was an officer in the Marine Corps and she was going to school full time trying to earn a degree. They lived on a military base and had few bills. Selena's husband always seemed nice but that doesn't always match the person behind the closed doors of a home.

I met Selena at a Women's Health Fair we had on base. She was gathering information for a paper she was doing for school on relationship abuse. Selena asked a few questions and took some of our brochures. She seemed to be a very ambitious person. I too, thought she had a bright future ahead. I asked if I could read the paper when she was finished.

A few days passed and Selena called my office and asked if she could come talk to me. She had the brochure I had given her at the Health Fair. The checklist read:

- Does your partner's temper frighten you? Do you make excuses or minimize your partner's behavior?
- Are you afraid to disagree with him?
- Do you feel you have "put up with it" because you feel you can "change him"?
- Do you feel you need to apologize for your partner's behavior?
- Are you frightened by your partner's violence toward others?
- Are you afraid of doing the "wrong" thing, even if you're not sure what that is?
- Do you ever feel that this person is running your life, keeping you away from your family or friends, or preventing you from going to work or school?
- Does your partner keep track of what you do, where you go, who you talk to on the phone, or your computer activities?
- Do you have to ask your partner for money or does your partner give you an allowance?
- Do you fear going home or your partner coming home because you don't know what kind of mood he will be in? Do you constantly feel like your walking on "eggshells"?
- Are you ever embarrassed or humiliated by your partner's attempts to control your behavior, at home or in public?
- Does your partner accuse you of being unfaithful, or are you ever wrongly accused of flirting or having sex with others?
- Have you ever been forced to have sex or perform sexual acts that you find disgusting?
- Has your partner ever injured you physically, no matter how slightly? Have you had things thrown at you, been hit, kicked, or shoved?
- Does this person threaten to destroy or destroy things you own or care about?

Selena said, “This is a long checklist but I can answer yes to most of these questions.” She had such a sad look in her eyes. She and her husband had been married for eighteen months and hadn’t known each other very long when they got married. “I thought it was fate,” Selena said. “He was so nice and concerned about me and everything I did. At first I was flattered by all the attention and thought it was cute when he would become a little jealous when I talked to one of my guy friends. I thought when we got married he would have no reason to feel threatened and he would change; but it only got worse.”

Selena considered quitting school because every time she came home her husband would question her about who she spoke to at school. She was late getting home from school one night and her husband accused her of having sex with someone in her class. He lost his temper while she was trying to explain what happened, and shoved her causing her to fall backward against the coffee table. She told herself he didn’t mean to push her that hard. When asked, she explained the bruises away. He had to approve of what she wore before she left the house. The control had gotten so bad that he began taking and picking her up from school. She thought he would be happy if she quit school and got a job. She told herself she would go back when he felt more secure.

After she quit school, she worked as a secretary, but the situation was worse because she stayed late most days. Sometimes on her way home she would have knots in her stomach playing out the scenario in her head. She didn’t know if she would be yelled at or ignored. Sometimes, she would be relieved that her husband wasn’t home when she got to the house. He constantly called her workplace to check on her. She had to call him most days before she left so he would know when she would arrive home.

Selena told me, “One time he made me get out of the car because I was waving to a friend and her husband. He accused me of having an affair with her husband because he didn’t like the way he looked at me.” Selena then started to cry. She quit her job because he punched her in the face and she was too ashamed. She didn’t know how to explain the bruises to her coworkers. She had had other bruises before, but if anyone asked, Selena told them she was clumsy and fell or she got into a biking accident. She could always think of something but this time she was just so tired of trying to do better. If only she knew what it was she was doing wrong, she cried.

I assured Selena that she was doing nothing wrong. These things that were happening to her were not her fault. Her husband has a problem that he needs help controlling. Selena’s husband was a good Marine. He had excellent conduct at work. His superiors never had any problem with him. Selena was afraid to seek help because he threatened her each time an incident happened. He told her nobody would believe her and if she told anyone she would only be hurting herself. He said, “You can’t make it on your own. You can’t do anything. You can’t keep a job and you quit school so what are you going to do?” Selena was starting to believe something was wrong with her. Again, I reassured her. There was nothing wrong with her.

Selena and I went over a safety plan before she left my office. Together we talked about:

- Finding safe allies who live close by and alerting them of the danger she may face. She would speak to them about using a signal to alert them when she needs help.
- She would identify which door, window, elevator, or stairwell would be best then practice how to get out of the house safely.

- If an argument seemed unavoidable, she would try to have it in a room or area where there was an exit and definitely not in the kitchen or any room where things could be used as weapons.
- Finding a safe place away from the house to place some items such as: money, credit cards, driver's license, checkbook, medications, social security card, or change of clothes and personal items.
- Not to tell anyone elsewhere she would go.
- Using legal resources for protection. I explained that I could do a Temporary Protection Order. Also, his command can do a Military Protection Order.
- We also discussed never underestimate how dangerous an abuser can be. The most dangerous time is when you are trying to leave.

Selena said she had only been able to keep a couple of good friends because her husband wouldn't allow her to socialize with or go to any family functions with her mother or sisters. When friends and family would call and ask why she never kept in touch she would apologize and say she had a busy schedule. Selena made an appointment with a counselor from my office and then left to go home.

Later that day, she called me in a state of panic. "It's my husband," she said, "He is on his way home and I don't know what I should do." I asked if something was wrong. She said her husband had been looking for her and she didn't want him to know where she was so she lied. He found out she lied and now he was on his way home. She knew she was not going to be able to explain. He never listens. "I know he is coming home to punish me. He doesn't like me talking to anyone. He thinks I'm always cheating on him. Oh my god, he's here." I told her "Follow your safety plan!! I will call the police." I heard her husband come into the house, slamming the door, then yelling at her to get off the phone. I tried to keep the line open and I heard her screaming "Please don't do this again." Then the phone went dead. I immediately called the MP's and asked them to respond. I left my office and went over to their residence. By the time I arrived the MP's had Selena's husband handcuffed and in the back of the police car. Her nose was bleeding and her eyes were swollen. She had red marks down her arms from trying to protect herself. I spent the rest of the day at the hospital, looking into the swollen eyes of this battered woman, assuring her help was there. Selena had been punched in the face, threatened and choked. She asked to keep a photo of her battered and bruised face. She wanted to look at it, to remember, so she wouldn't "soften up." That's when I knew in my heart she would change her mind. Four days later Selena stood on the steps of the court house with her husband at her side screaming at me and a prosecutor from the District Attorney's office to stay out of her life. Selena and her husband moved off base. She became even more alienated from family and friends, from help. I tried to keep in touch in a friendly way Selena always said everything was better and hurried to get off the phone.

Once you understand the cycle of violence, you won't be frustrated when this happens with a battered woman. You begin to understand that she really believes things will change, that she can love him enough to change him. But it never works. This wasn't the first time her husband harmed her physically. It wasn't the last time either. Five months later Selena's mother called me from her daughter's home where she found my business card in Selena's wallet. It was hidden between a couple of pictures. When I asked what happened she told me Selena had been nearly beaten to death by her husband and was still unconscious at the local hospital. Her mother started to cry and said, "I

didn't want her to live the pain she grew up seeing. I thought she would have a better life."

To this day, one year later, Selena still has not regained consciousness. Her mother is her caretaker. Selena's husband is in prison.

October is Domestic Violence Prevention Month. Our theme this year is, "Peace at Home." Domestic Violence is real violence, often resulting in death or permanent injuries and making home one of the least safe places for a person that is battered to be. It accounts for more injuries to women than rapes, muggings and automobile accidents combined. Unlike crimes by strangers, domestic violence is likely to be repeated and often involves a perpetrator who will go to great lengths to prevent the victim's escape. Domestic violence is a crime that uses abuse as a tool to intimidate and control the behavior of another person. Domestic violence is been the primary factor in 46 percent of all female homicides since 1987, and domestic violence is responsible for 53 percent of all homicides.

How can we help? It's not hard to help. In fact, it's very easy. All it takes is overcoming your own discomfort with talking about a taboo subject and reaching out to someone who really needs your friendship and support. You can help just by letting your friend, family member or coworker know that you care about what is happening. You help them feel less isolated, abandoned and alone. You help them realize there are options and people to help them feel safe and supported. You don't need to have all the answers. It's important that you let the person know you care. Please seek help before the violence ruins a marriage, family, career or life. Thank you for reading this article and taking the first steps toward a better understanding of abuse. If you need any help with this matter or any information please contact:

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