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Workplace often the only haven for domestic violence victims

It can also be catalyst for positive life change

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P-I REPORTER

Sophie Doe was skeptical, at first, when her co-workers were friendly to her.

After a childhood of whippings and verbal abuse, followed by a boyfriend who'd threatened to kill her, the work-study student at Lake Washington Technical College was not used to kindness.

But it was those co-workers who first believed in her.

"This is the light of my life -- I had people who cared," she said Tuesday at a benefit for domestic violence prevention. She disguised her real name.

For domestic violence victims, the workplace can be the only haven they have. And it also can be a catalyst for positive life change.

"For most of us, home is the refuge at the end of the work day. If you've had a rough day, you come home and you relax," said Lois Loontjens, executive director of New Beginnings, a Seattle nonprofit that provides shelter, advocacy and support services. "If home is the place of danger, then you never have that chance."

Sophie found more support at a subsequent job at Genie Industries. One colleague took Sophie under her wing and another slipped cash into her purse.

But getting through the workday was difficult. She left her abusive boyfriend only to marry an alcoholic. He'd keep her up all night, flicking her and twisting her arms and legs -- using sleep deprivation as a form of control.

"I'm just doing my job and go home," she said. But "I never missed a day at work."

The workplace matters

Nordstrom Inc. hosted the Tuesday luncheon to benefit New Beginnings. The Seattle-based fashion retailer employs about 60,000 people, and 73 percent of them are women. It also has a largely female customer base.

"You're probably wondering, what's a shoe guy who grew up on Mercer Island doing talking to a bunch of ladies about domestic violence? ... Unfortunately, this particular serious issue in our community kind of goes below the radar screen a little bit," President Blake Nordstrom said.

"For me as a businessperson, seeing what was happening to our employees and customers alike was pretty sobering."

One of the most basic ways for people to help colleagues is to notice warning signs.

"Women talk a lot about showing up at work with bruises or a black eye or with something conspicuously wrong and nobody says anything," Loontjens said. "If you're at that point, you really do feel invisible."

Employers can also help by being open to employees' concerns and giving them time off to get help. The state Supreme Court ruled this month that employers cannot penalize domestic violence victims who take time off to seek help for themselves and their children.

The legal system alone won't solve the problem because abuse is not always reported.

"Every day, my colleagues and I ... see women who are abused, threatened and, in the worse cases, murdered," said David Martin, senior deputy prosecutor in the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office. "An arrest, a prosecution is just not enough to help those in danger. We must give survivors a chance to rebuild their very broken lives."

Martin said his mother was a domestic violence victim who finally got the courage to leave his father.

Although it's tempting to want to respect a co-worker's privacy, domestic violence is everybody's business, experts said. Too often in the name of discretion, people are afraid to speak up.

"As long as we continue to believe that, we create space for the abuser to perpetuate the abuse," said Sara Parker, a women's advocate with New Beginnings. At a given time, Parker advocates for roughly 50 women. Some of them make more than \$5,000 per month and one recent victim earned \$37,000 per month.

Domestic violence clearly knows no income demographic.

A new life

Domestic violence is an issue important to many Seattle employers. Major sponsors of the Tuesday luncheon included Nordstrom, Banner Bank, Costco Wholesale and Microsoft Corp.

Each year, domestic violence costs U.S. businesses \$727.8 million in productivity, with more than 7.9 million paid workdays off, according to a 2003 report by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Employers pick up much of the \$4.1 billion tab for domestic violence-related medical and health care services.

Helping domestic violence victims makes good business sense, said Scott Charlston, Pacific Northwest regional spokesman for Verizon.

"All large companies spend millions of dollars training, hiring employees -- it really makes sense to protect that investment and provide employees with what they need to be safe," Charlston said.

"We're not so naive as to think that this is a problem that we're immune from."

Verizon offers optional training for employees to help them recognize the signs of domestic violence and encourages victims to get help.

Though men are sometimes victims, most are women. One in four women experiences domestic violence in her lifetime, according to one CDC report.

In King County, 23 percent of women age 18 and older report injury by an intimate partner in their lifetime, according to the Women's Funding Alliance in Seattle.

Being a victim doesn't have to be a life sentence.

Sophie, who has two children by her abusers, is now working toward a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies at University of Washington. Through support groups, she's learned that the way she was treated wasn't her fault.

"I didn't think I could live in peace," she said. "There is help out there. No one should deserve to be treated like this."

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