

Finding Our Voices event sheds light on ways to help stop domestic violence

Survivors in Maine encourage others to speak out, lend a helping hand and not judge those going through ‘absolute hell’



Riley Kennedy (front row, from left); Patrisha McLean, founder/president of Finding our Voices; and Melissa Quintana.

Nicole Libbey (back row, from left), Janet Desmarais, Deb Gould, Mary Lou Smith, Sarah Greven Chaousis and Courtney Billings.

BY MARIA SKILLINGS TIMES RECORD STAFF

Every 2 1/2 hours, Maine law enforcement responds to a report of domestic violence, according to The Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence.

The prevalence of domestic violence has advocates pushing for ways to prevent others from becoming part of that statistic.

Last week, the nonprofit Finding Our Voices hosted an event at the Freeport Community Library featuring a panel of domestic abuse survivors aged 18-83 to share their stories of struggle, healing and newfound freedoms. Hoping to inspire others to speak out, ask for help and erase the stigma of being a survivor, the women said it was important to share their experiences.

When asked how they ended up in these relationships or why they didn't leave sooner, common responses from the panel were: "I stayed for the kids," "The relationship didn't start that way," "He was a respected member of the community," "It didn't get physical until the end" and "He controlled all the finances."

Cumberland County District Attorney Jackie Sartoris said speaking out is key to prosecuting offenders and reaching out to local advocacy groups like Finding Our Voices, Through These Doors, New Hope Midcoast and Family Violence Project, to name a few.

She said victims seeking safety from an abuser should file a protection of abuse order (PFA) to document the violence and gain space from the offender.

DO PFAS WORK?

Survivor Melissa Quintana said she filed for a PFA after her husband kicked her repeatedly on the ground for trying to leave with their daughter.

After making her way to her car and placing her 2-year-old in her lap, her husband followed her and began punching her through the window, just missing their child's face.

When the police denied a PFA for her daughter because he never made physical contact, Quintana dropped her PFA to stay and protect her child.

She said her husband wasn't arrested until a year later when he kidnapped

her, tortured her and attempted to murder her in the presence of their 3-year-old child.

Even while in prison, he continued to harass her on social media via a family member. She said he was never held accountable for the continued harassment.

Other members of the panel said their abusers violated their PFAs countless times and were not held accountable either.

“If we don’t know about it, we can’t do anything about it,” Sartoris said.

“You have to call the police. They know what they’re doing, they are good at it. The first thing you do is call the police if you think there is a violation of a PFA.”

Finding Our Voices founder Patrisha McLean said too often abusers are granted a plea deal or deferred disposition where the number of offenses they have committed is reduced and/ or expunged from their record after a year.

From 2014-2019, there were 3,613 deferred disposition cases in Cumberland County and 2,573 cases in Knox, Lincoln, Sagadahoc and Waldo Counties, according to a report from the Cutler Institute, Muskie School of Public Service.

Some victims reach the point of desperation where they want to take their own life.

After 43 years in an abusive marriage with a respected college professor, Mary Lou Smith, 83, considered taking her own life in August 2005.

Smith said she told her husband she was desperate and was considering suicide, and in response, he brought her his gun and said, “I’ll show you how to be successful in committing suicide.”

McLean stressed the importance of calling domestic violence hotlines in your local area, including Finding Our Voices, which will help victims create an escape plan and pay for temporary housing, food, legal fees and hospital bills.

Most importantly, she said, “break the silence,” call 911, tell a friend or tell a family member what is happening to you.

“I called the Family Violence Project in Kennebec County,” survivor Deb

Gould said. “A woman answered the phone, and I said ‘I need your help.’ It was the bravest thing I’ve ever done in my life. And they saved me.”

Sartoris said she wants to make resources more accessible to victims.

“What I need to do, because this is an area burgeoning so much public interest, we need more voices, we need more lobbying in Augusta,” she said. “I do think my office should set up a separate domestic-violence page on our public website to connect victims to resources and know what the current status is for legislation and policy.”

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH YOUR NEWFOUND FREEDOM?

Some of the panelists who have made a complete break from their abusers shared what they did with their newly obtained freedom. Hairdresser Courtney Billings said she cuts her hair however she wants and loves herself. Gould said she wrote a novel. Quintana watched the movie “Magic Mike,” because she wasn’t allowed to before. Nicole Libbey said she hung pictures on the wall because no one was there to punch their fists through it anymore. Smith said she went to Sicily because her exhusband hated all things Italian.

“I’m free; I don’t have to ask permission for anything,” Smith said.