

UNITED FORCES
CFJ President
Debra Greenwood
and head of the
Justice Legal
Center, Angela
Schlingheyde work
 long hours to fulfill
 CFJ's mission.



Hope Starts Here

CT'S FIRST CENTER FOR FAMILY JUSTICE // BY ROBIN H. PHILLIPS

» NOTHING is more complicated than a human relationship, and most of us are not strangers to the ups and downs that befall even the most successful ones. But sometimes the downs can be more than that—sometimes “intimate partners” can turn on each other—becoming abusive, even violent. Statistics from the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence show that in Connecticut, on par with the nation, one in three women and one in four men will experience some

form of physical violence in their lifetime.

But if it happened to you, where would you turn for help?

Not too far over the Fairfield/Bridgeport line, at 753 Fairfield Ave., there's a nondescript '60s-era building. What goes on beyond those doors is nothing short of miraculous. It is the Center for Family Justice—Connecticut's first such center. “Inside these walls, teams of dedicated professionals are offering free and confidential crisis services to victims

and survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and child abuse—all under one safe roof,” explains Debra Greenwood, CFJ's President and CEO.

Clients have been using the services since CFJ's open-

ing last year, and for some, it has not just empowered them, but saved their lives. You would probably recognize Alexa Simonsen (not her real name)—she was like so many other stay-at-home Fairfield moms. She drove a nice SUV,

♥ **Resources Galore:** In addition to support groups, education, and childcare services, CFJ has two new sponsored spaces: **THE BIG-ELOW TEA WELLNESS ROOM**, where clients can participate in yoga and meditation, and the **VERIZON EMPOWERMENT ROOM**, which features 20 computer stations and serves as a training hub for clients seeking to build employment skills.

shuttling her kids to different activities. She had a large home and a successful husband working in Manhattan making a six-figure salary. But what was happening in her private life was a pattern of abuse that Greenwood explains occurs more often than you think—and it knows no socioeconomic bounds. In fact, 33 percent of the calls into Fairfield Police are concerning some kind of domestic violence.

“He became controlling after the arrival of our first child, and the abuse escalated after the second,” explains Simonsen. It began with verbal and financial abuse. “He set up a series of nanny cams in the house, even though we had no nanny, and put a GPS tracker on my car.” She slowly extracted herself from all social relationships. “There was no being a mystery reader at school,” remembers Simonsen.

To Simonsen’s surprise, her husband asked for a divorce. She hoped the abuse would end there, but it turned out to be the beginning of a more virulent kind of torture—one that involved actions like turning off the utilities in the home. After one encounter that endangered her child, Simonsen decided to report her husband to the Fairfield police.

During the intake, she told the officer a little bit about her experiences. The officer, immediately recognizing domestic violence, told her, “I believe you.” It was the first time she had shared any of her story. The officer referred her to Detective Kerry Dalling, a 20-year veteran of the FPD with specialized training in domestic and sexual violence who connected Simonsen with CFJ, and the team there has been helping her ever since. Detective Dalling can’t stress enough how important it is to recognize the signs and get help. “People need to know they are not alone—we can protect and support,” she says. Dalling spends one day a week at the CFJ helping clients and she trains other officers to recognize domestic violence and abuse. “We are so lucky to have Detective Dalling and Chief Gary McNamara on our team,” says Greenwood. FPD Chief McNamara is a long time advocate of programs that address domestic and sexual violence and works tirelessly to help victims.

In addition to the police presence at the center, CFJ also houses a legal services department. Fairfield resident Angela Schlingheyde, a former Miami prosecutor, heads up all the civil, legal, and court advocacy services at CFJ.

Recently Schlingheyde and her team launched a pioneering program—a “legal incubator” for the center. “I realized we needed to have a steady supply of attorneys and legal services here so I created the Justice Legal Center to offer offices to several attorneys at a time who can help our clients, while maintaining their own clients as they begin to build their solo practices,” explains Schlingheyde. “It is a win-win for everyone,” though she is quick to add, “we can always use more legal help. Serving around 2,500 cases a year, the need is endless.”

This summer, Greenwood is elated to see one of her special projects come to fruition: Camp Hope. Created in partnership with the Coastal Connecticut YMCA and Camp Hi-Rock, “this is the first summer camp and mentoring program for children impacted by domestic and sexual violence and child abuse in New England,” explains Greenwood. Camp Hope will be free to deserving children and teens from Bridgeport, Fairfield, Monroe, Stratford, Trumbull, and Easton. “Focusing on helping the children in these situations heal is not just beneficial for them right now but also for the future, and we hope, live lives free of violence.” says Greenwood.