

Upon their return to Kansas, Terri began to see a different side to her new husband. He began making it nearly impossible for Terri to continue working as a teacher in the public school system. He dropped her off in the morning and waited outside the school as the bell rang, often yelling at her from the vehicle if she was late.

"He began to be a little controlling, but I grew up with an abusive father so I was used to controlling men," Terri said.

Repressing Decisions

Controlling quickly turned into abusive. The longer they were in Kansas the more Terri questioned the holes she found in his stories, and consequently the more abusive he became. With numerous bruises, Terri was even afraid to sleep at night for fear of what he would do.

"The abuse was exactly the same things my father said and did only 10 times worse," Terri said. "Even though I had a master's degree before I married him, after the abuse started I wasn't even able to make a decision. I was so convinced I couldn't do anything to help myself. It was the encouragement of a friend that got me to a meeting; the encouragement at the meeting that got me to make a plan. I couldn't have done it myself."

Terri's plan included having a friend call each day. While in the midst of an

abusive episode, her husband would not let Terri talk to her friend. That day Terri's friend helped her escape from the home and Wichita, providing the first step toward breaking away from what had become a pattern of abuse.

Two months, 84 e-mails and hundreds of phone calls later, Terri moved back to Wichita and three months later moved back home. Research shows 97 percent of women, particularly those in abusive families while growing up, return to their abuser.

Just three weeks later she suffered the most severe abuse sustained during the marriage, including head injuries, which left her vision so damaged that to this day she can barely read street signs or papers. For Terri this would be the final blow. Being employed as a special education teacher afforded Terri an escape route, which many victims struggle to find. The following day Terri left work and sought safety at a shelter.

Empowering Escape

Eventually Terri regained her freedom and control of her life. Coming from a broken home, Terri was initially determined not to divorce. However through the process she learned she and her husband had entered into and persisted in the relationship for entirely different reasons. His own family members explained he had calculated to marry her after Bob Fleming's death.

"I was fighting to save my marriage; he was after whatever Bob left me," Terri said.

By the time the divorce was final, they had been married eight years. In court he tried to hide his strong 6'7" frame by losing weight and slumping over. Though his acts were once convincing to Terri, they did not persuade the three judges presiding over her case. He walked away with a year's probation, which according to



Terri is considered severe in Kansas for a first-time offense, and through the divorce, one half of everything, which included the paintings Terri and Bob Fleming had collected. Terri walked away with a lifetime protection from abuse (PFA) court order, unprecedented for a first-time offense in Kansas Terri said; two years of visual therapy; and payments for his defense lawyer.

"I shouldn't have had to pay for his defense lawyer. The abuse didn't cost him anything; it's almost as if he was rewarded, but I won. I'm free. I have friends and family; he has no one. I can build a good life; he can't," Terri said.

Terri no longer fears him, but also makes it difficult for anyone to find her, providing all the companies with which she does business a copy of the PFA.

"I have forgiven him. The reason is that I believe God has forgiven me and blessed me with so many things, so I can forgive him. In doing so he has no control over me. I don't live in terror because I have forgiven him," Terri said.

During the three years after initially leaving him, Terri has only seen him

once — last summer when he tried to cut her off on the highway.

"He was trying to bully me. I should have called 911, but I just started laughing," Terri said.

Bestowing Wisdom

Terri now draws on knowledge gained from her own personal experiences to assist others in a variety of ways.

"I use the awful, horrible nightmare to help someone escape. God brings good out of everything, even the ugliness of our experiences," Terri said.

She battles Kansas' weak laws, writing government officials and accepting speaking engagements.

"A man can beat up a stranger and go to jail, but beat up his wife or child and not go to jail until the third offense," Terri explained.

Beyond legislators, Terri encourages citizens to go to the polls and get involved in order to change laws and perceptions concerning domestic violence.

"So many people, men and women, said 'You must have enjoyed it,' including my defense lawyer," Terri said.

Terri tells her tale to change this perception. She also advises citizens to consciously keep in contact with women, never allowing them to become isolated. Terri follows her own advice, providing insight to other victims so they understand the options available to them.

"I tell women and children we are not hopeless, and we are not helpless. I can guide them, but they have to do it themselves; it takes a lot of courage, but freedom is worth it," Terri said. "I tell them they have to make a plan; the same thing that was told to me."

Women who do escape their abuser often leave with nothing but the clothes on their backs with no hope of gains through legal aid divorces. Many victims possess limited formal education,

job training or budgeting skills, which leaves them unprepared to survive on their own. Eventually, like Terri, they may return to their abuser.

"There is always a good time before the bad. Women will remember the good times and forget the bad when everything else seems out of reach," Terri said.

According to Terri, the work of local organizations such as Catholic Charities has helped to shed light on the realities of domestic violence. Organizations such as this rely heavily upon donations, but needs change from week to week. Terri advises those interested in donating to call to identify what gifts are needed. The most valuable gift for Terri

was support from a group of students' mothers who were present in court.

"Every woman needs a support group or someone to go with them to court or the doctor. It's scary being alone when around every dark corner you expect him to jump out," Terri said.

So Terri shares her story in order to rewrite laws regarding domestic violence, influence citizens ignoring situations and support victims seeking escape.

"People listen to me because I've been there. That's why I'm writing to senators and meeting with people in Washington, D.C. It might make a difference; it might save someone's life," Terri said.

WORKSHOP OPENS EYES TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ISSUES

BY KATIE KELLERMAN, SENIOR

During National Domestic Violence Awareness Month in October, Friends University presented a workshop titled "Domestic Violence: The Quiet Crime." More than 100 individuals from police officers to therapists attended the Oct. 24 workshop, which featured a variety of speakers, including special guest speaker Lynn Rosenthal.

Lynn Rosenthal has been the executive director of the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV) in Washington, D.C., since January 2000. The NNEDV is an organization of state domestic violence coalitions supporting more than 2,500 local service providers. In 1998, Rosenthal received the Florida Governor's Peace at Home Award, which celebrates an advocate who has made a difference in the lives of battered women and their children.

Additional speakers included Terri Fleming, 67, who shared her own personal experience as a survivor of domestic abuse; Fran Betzen of Catholic Charities-Harbor House who shared information about recognizing domestic violence; Lt. Tom Bridges of the Wichita Police Department who provided a law enforcement overview; and Shawna Mobley, director of Correctional Counseling of Kansas, who discussed "Batterers Intervention." The day concluded with a panel to discuss community response to domestic violence. Panelists were: Risa Remert of the Wichita Children's Home; Christine Ladner of the Sedgwick County District Attorney's Office; Carol Harness, a substance abuse counselor; and Lynne Patton, a court advocate.

If you or someone you know needs help:

National Domestic Violence
Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7223)
www.ndvh.org

Kansas Crisis Hotline:
1-888-END-ABUSE
www.kcsdv.org