

Women Are Safe, Inc.

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Dealing With Domestic Violence: A Former Cop's Perspective

When I hit the streets as a patrol officer in 1982, the most frustrating thing I faced was the lack of a domestic violence law in Tennessee. Time after time, a door would open and a woman with a bloody wash cloth in her hand, trying to staunch bleeding from a lip cut or injured nose, would tell me nothing was wrong, while the husband or boyfriend sat smugly in the background sipping beer and watching television – secure in the knowledge that I couldn't do anything because assault was a misdemeanor and had to be personally witnessed.

Like many officers, I became very creative. For instance, I remember going to a house trailer where an obviously battered woman told me she had “walked into a door.” I sent her out of the room and said to the man, “Women. Can't live with them and can't live without them. They never know when to shut up, do they?”

Surprised, he looked at me and grinned slyly. “You got that right.” Before he could speak again, I said: “That's a fine looking Harley outside. You must have put a lot of time and money in it. One day when I'm not working, I'd like to come by and let you show it to me.”

“Hell,” he said, “I'll show it to you now. I got more money in that bike than I got in my trailer.” He slipped on his shoes and led me outside. “The artwork on the gas tank was done by...” His spiel ended as he hit the ground face down and I placed him under arrest for being publicly drunk.

After he had spit out the grass and dirt, he told me: “This won't work the next time,” and I replied: “But you won't hit her again tonight, will you? Besides, you can't stay in that trailer forever and I'm a creative man who despises cowards and bullies.”

The brute was right, though. It never worked the second time – if there was a second time. In the 1980s, the FBI announced after a study what cops had known all along -- very often, batterers stop after being arrested once, not because they became good people but because jail wakes them up to the fact that wife-battering, child-battering and cruelty to animals – which are part and parcel of the same problem – are socially unacceptable. It didn't stop all of them but it worked with many.

I became an unpaid lobbyist for a domestic violence law and Tennessee finally got one that went into effect July of 1987. On the very day it went into effect I was able to arrest a wife-batterer who had been at it for twenty-five years. His tactic was to throw his wife out of the house naked, after working her over. I still remember the expression on his face when he realized the world had changed and his order for me to leave didn't work. He tried to run but I caught him. After an arrest in his underwear before all his neighbors, he cried like a baby and never did it again as long as I was on the beat.

Of course, in situations where the battering was being done by a politically powerful man, perhaps even a police officer, the situation was never simple. Such men are rare in modern law enforcement, but that is no comfort for women who suffer because of a misplaced loyalty by other officers or because the batterer

knew the law well enough to flee the scene before fellow cops showed up. But it got easier all along to enforce the law as the general public learned the scope of domestic violence. Now, no person convicted of domestic violence can legally carry a weapon in this country, let alone work as a police officer. I have personal knowledge of cases that stripped bad cops and even judges and lawyers of their judicial cover.

The problem has not gone away. And to battered women I can say with certain knowledge -- a confirmed batterer doesn't get better, only worse. Get out of the situation for the sake of yourself and your children. There is no guarantee of safety, but there are people available to help now.

I still have a bumper sticker that I got the year Tennessee's domestic violence law passed. It says: "There is no excuse for domestic violence." There never was.

David Hunter

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