

Why I Care About Domestic Violence

By Dave Bartholomay

Thursday, July 30, 2009, was a devastating day in Circle Pines. Erica Ann Wilson had moved from her home in Wyoming, Minn., to a secret apartment in Circle Pines just a couple weeks earlier to start a new life and get away from an abusive partner of 25 years. That morning she carefully left her new apartment only to be shot and killed in the parking lot by her former partner, who then killed himself. As mayor, I got the call explaining what had happened and letting me know that our police and fire departments had the situation under control.

Nobody could remember a murder-suicide ever happening in our small town. I tried to calm community members over the next few days by telling them this was an extremely rare occurrence, that it wasn't a stranger attack or a threat to the general public, reminding everyone that we have a wonderful, safe community. And then I heard myself rationalizing the tragedy by saying, "Well, she just moved into town, and I didn't know her."

As soon as the sentence came out of my mouth, I knew I had made a mistake. Like hurtful words you say and can't pull back, my comment was wrong and inappropriate, and shocking to myself. Maybe it was a typical defensive and rationalizing response, but even as I was saying the words I realized that if I truly believed them, I needed to do some soul searching. What difference does it make how long she lived in town, if she was a new arrival or a long-time resident? What difference does it make if we knew her or not? A woman's courageous break to the freedom of a new life had been tragically ended, and it happened in our town, and on my watch.

It was at that point I decided I needed to attend her funeral and learn

more about Erica and her life. After the funeral I went up to one of her three children and said words that I remember to this day: "Hi, I'm Dave Bartholomay and I'm the mayor of Circle Pines, where your mom was living. We think of ourselves as the kind of community where when a woman is in trouble, we wrap our arms around her and keep her safe. I'm sorry we were unable to do that for your mother." And then I drove home.

It was the day I began to think about what I could do to help avoid unnecessary tragedies like this in my community. As mayor, sometimes you find that your elected position, and your personal commitment, can make a real difference on a particular issue—especially one that is not well understood or even admitted to in "polite company."

The fact is that domestic violence is real. Did you know that nearly 35 percent of all Minnesota law enforcement calls are domestic disputes? And that domestic abuse victims account for 25 percent of all violent crime victims in Minnesota? But that's only a portion of the victims of this horrible crime because, unfortunately, about 80 percent of domestic assaults go unreported. Learn more about domestic violence from the website of Alexandra House, a shelter and service for victims (see sidebar).

Domestic violence happens in all kinds of neighborhoods in every Minnesota community, no matter how large or small. In the past many of us may have thought it was a "personal, family matter," but now we've come to realize it has tremendous costs all across our community. It impacts children in our schools and employees of our businesses. It diminishes a sense of safety for all of our citizens, and drives up the cost of our largest expense—public safety. Cities need to play an important

role in helping residents understand this complex issue by working with county and nonprofit organizations to increase awareness and stop the violence.

If you want to learn more about domestic violence—and how you can help prevent it in your community—I would encourage you to check out the resources listed below and also watch a video that I worked with North Metro Television to create. This powerful, 30-minute video comes with a discussion guide outlining domestic violence issues and steps each of us can take to help. To access the video and materials, visit the Circle Pines website at www.ci.circle-pines.mn.us (see right side of home page). If you would like a free copy of the DVD, contact the Circle Pines City Hall at (763) 784-5898.

By learning and working together we can stop the often unseen violence and build safer communities for our children, our neighbors, and ourselves.

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DOMESTIC VIOLENCE RESOURCES

- Alexandra House: www.alexandrahouse.org
- Minnesota Center Against Violence and Abuse: www.mincava.umn.edu
- Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women: www.mcbw.org
- National Coalition Against Domestic Violence: www.ncadv.org
- Violence Against Women Online Resources: www.vaw.umn.edu