

## More than Rough Sex: SafeSpace Provides Help For Victims of Violence Within Queer Families

BY EUAN BEAR

**“**I was Thanksgiving, 1999. I was a junior in college, and I had invited 10 friends over for dinner.” Peter Jacobsen is remembering when he finally decided that enough was enough, that he would not allow himself to be hit by his then-boyfriend any more.

“I’d been seeing this guy for two months, tops. He had a habit of slapping or hitting me whenever he disapproved of something I said or did. I made some comment during dinner, and he just reached over the table and slapped me in front of all my friends and over this dinner I’d spent all day preparing.”

We’re sitting in the offices of SafeSpace with Director Kara DeLeonardis. Peter continues, “I was embarrassed. I was tired of feeling miserable. I’d spent two months feeling scared and never knowing when the next time [he’d hit me] would be.”

None of his friends said anything at the time, either to the abuser or to Peter. “There’s no protocol,” Peter adds, “where friends can say, ‘This is not appropriate.’”

Peter got out of the relationship then, but the abusive boyfriend didn’t leave him alone, even going so far as to get the college housing department to assign him a room in the off-campus house where Peter lived.

There were other ways ‘Andrew’ (a pseudonym) controlled him, Peter recalls. “He controlled where we spent time – in his room and not at my house, because I had friends there. He controlled my grooming and appearance. He wanted me to be as much of an object as possible, and he enjoyed showing me off as an object.”

There’s a pause. “A small vain part of me enjoyed being objectified,” Peter says with a little embarrassment.

Peter Jacobsen knows with his mind that being battered was not his fault. He is, after all, the chairman of the board of directors of SafeSpace, the new LGBTQ agency set up to address domestic violence and hate crimes in the lives of our community members. But sometimes the emotions need more time to catch up.

Even a short-lived abusive relationship of two months is not easy to get out of – and it can be even harder when the relationship is of long standing. Peter moved out of ‘Andrew’s’ room and went back to his off-campus house. But the next semester, ‘Andrew’ got himself assigned to that house, saying he needed to live in a ‘gay-friendly environment.’ And ‘Andrew’ lived two doors down from Peter for the next 18 months.

“It was really creepy. I locked my door nights and put furniture against it. My housemates knew, but they had no control over

getting him out of the house. Actually, I was the house manager,” Peter says, “but I thought I was just being petty” in wanting him gone.

It is common for the battered partner in an abusive relationship to return to the relationship. In fact, says Kara DeLeonardis, on average, a battered partner returns seven times before escaping for good.

Abusive partners are not abusive all the time. They can be charming, warm, apologetic, even caring at times. When a partner returns to an abusive relationship, that’s the part of the relationship he or she is returning to. There’s always the seduction of hope that this time it will be different, and the good times will go on, uncontaminated, uninterrupted by violence and control.

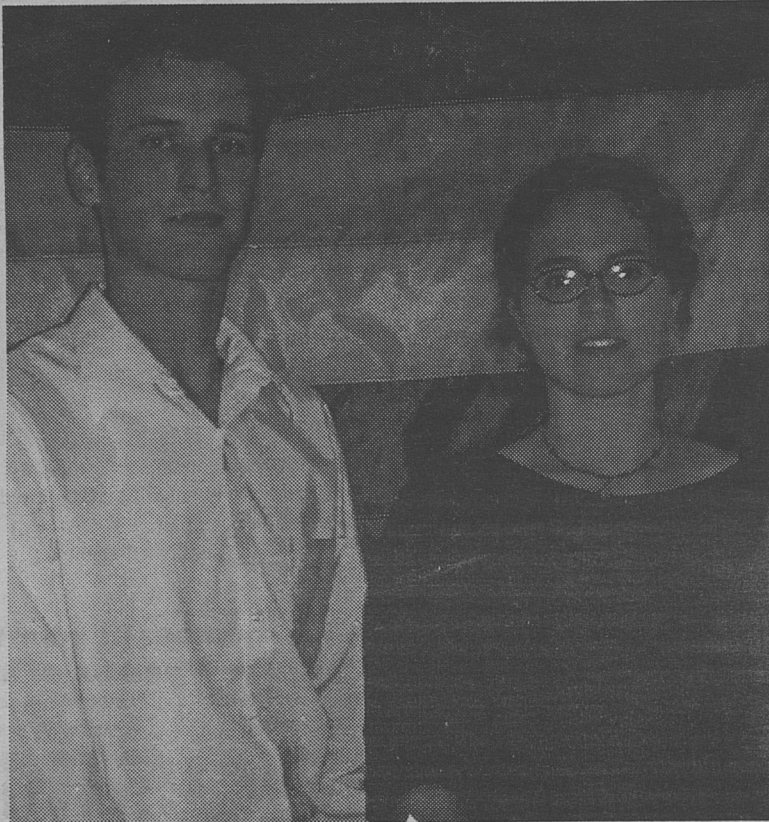
“I didn’t get him out of the house because I really thought *he* needed a place to feel safe. But what he really needed was to control me,” Peter remembers. “And the change from ‘just’ control to violence can happen right in front of your eyes in a second’s time. When you’re so worn down by being controlled, you can’t even think about how to resist or escape. It’s more comfortable to stay and not run away, not disrupt your life, your home.”

October is Domestic Violence Awareness and Prevention Month. SafeSpace has seen at least 16 clients as of mid-September, according to advocate Mike Bense, the majority of them lesbians dealing with domestic violence. But there has been a recent influx of male clients, some coping with domestic violence, others with hate crimes.

SafeSpace director Kara DeLeonardis says the take-home message is that “domestic violence is not something that only happens to straight women. For whatever reasons a person chooses violence to meet their needs, it happens within gay and lesbian relationships too.”

It has been difficult for us as members of an outsider community often discriminated against by police and social service agencies to consider seeking help in an abusive situation. In years past, a lesbian who called the police on an abusive partner was considered to have betrayed her community. A gay man in a similar situation risked being arrested along with the abuser – or having the incident arbitrarily dismissed – because the investigating officer couldn’t make his usual gender-based snap judgment about the identity of the abuser.

But at SafeSpace, the staff is all queer. And they aim to change the situation in the rest of the world by training police and other social service agency staff and volunteers about violence with and against the gay, lesbian, transsexual and queer community,



**“When you’re so worn down by being controlled, you can’t even think about how to resist or escape.”**

Safe Space chairman Peter Jacobsen, with director Kara DeLeonardis

and the barriers that have traditionally prevented us from seeking help. “It’s homophobia, usually. But it can also be the fear of homophobia, that a person might have to come out in order to get services they need,” says Kara DeLeonardis.

Domestic violence is defined as violence within an intimate relationship. The violence may or may not be sexual in nature. It may occur with a sexual partner, a roommate, or a member of someone’s family of origin. Most domestic violence is about power and control. When you feel isolated by arbitrary limits a partner or family member enforces, when you feel physically and emotionally afraid of what will happen when you break those boundaries, that’s domestic violence. It can be shoving and threatening, as well as hitting, and it often comes with emotional abuse, put-downs designed to break your self-confidence and keep you attached to the relationship. It’s abuse. You don’t deserve it. No one does.

“We have our own myths about our relationships too,” says Kara DeLeonardis, “like ‘lesbian utopia’ – how could there be any abuse when it’s two women?”

“Or boys will be boys,” Peter Jacobsen chimes in.

Domestic violence might be dismissed within the LGBTQ community as “rough sex” or S & M.

The difference is consent.

One past theory suggested that any violence in the LGBTQ community was a form of “horizontal hostility” – that is, because we were oppressed (there was pressure from “the top”), we took out our anger and rage against other members of our own community.

DeLeonardis rejects that explanation, in favor of a more complex, nuanced view. “Who knows exactly why any individual chooses to use power and control and escalate into violence? People can have control in so many ways – race, class, education, support, why does someone need to use violence? It always comes down to a choice of how to deal with anger. Our hope is that people can unlearn that, or learn new [less hurtful] ways.”

Peter remembers that ‘Andrew’s’ father routinely slapped his mother, setting an example that his son followed.

Hate crimes of violence may occur with anyone – neighbors, even strangers. The perpetrators yell, throw things, damage your property, make threats, maybe kill your pets – because they don’t like it that you’re gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.

According to the Vermont Incident-based Reporting System, well over a third of the hate crimes last year – the single largest category

with 36 incidents – were listed as anti-homosexual. Anti-African American incidents were the next most reported category with 20.

SafeSpace documents the incidence of both hate crimes and domestic violence in our communities. According to their Pride Day survey, 12 percent of the 200 people who filled it out have experienced domestic violence within the last year.

A much larger group – 58 percent – reported experiencing harassment or a bias-related incident because they were lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans. Nineteen percent of that group reported that the incident could qualify as a hate crime (assault or property destruction).

Currently, there is no shelter for gay men escaping an abusive relationship, and they are not welcome at the Women Helping Battered Women shelter. There is now a network of potential safe houses for such men, but according to Kara DeLeonardis, it has not yet been necessary to use it. “The guys who might have needed shelter have been able to find it with friends or family – and we always support that. It’s much less disruptive to a person’s life and their psychological health to have the support of friends, rather than be dropped into a system of well-intentioned strangers.”

SafeSpace offers support one-on-one with victim advocates Mike Bense and Martha Dyson. An advocate from SafeSpace will help explain the legal ins and outs of getting a relief from abuse order and accompany a client to the hospital, a police interview, court, and to other agencies as necessary to help him or her get whatever services are needed to be safe and begin healing. They offer short-term counseling and referrals when longer-term therapy is needed. They offer a place for women to talk about their abusive female lovers without being disbelieved or scoffed at.

Part of healing from emotional and physical trauma is telling others about what happened. And LGBTQ survivors of domestic violence or hate crimes can do that in a support group through SafeSpace. It’s a safe place for men – who get an extra layer of shame as male victims – to be with men who’ve had similar experiences.

The real message is that if you’re in an abusive relationship, you’re not alone with the problem, whether the abuser is a member of your family of origin or an intimate partner. You’re not alone when a hate crime of violence is committed against you. There’s help and support for you at SafeSpace: Helpline Monday through Friday from 10 am to 6 pm – 1-866-869-7341 (toll-free); 1-802-863-0003 (voice and TTY). ▼