

# PEACE BEGINS AT HOME

Celia Cuddy's mission is working against violence

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Celia Cuddy



By CYNTHIA POTTS

It's one of the busiest days of Celia Cuddy's year – the annual Take Back the Night March is scheduled to start in just a few hours, and "It's been really crazy!" Yet the executive director of the Women's Rape Crisis Center was willing to take some time to talk with *Out in the Mountains*.

We began with the upcoming event. "We're expecting a larger crowd this year. There's been such a raised level of interest, of awareness, especially after the release of Douglas Bryant." Bryant is a convicted repeat sex offender, a rapist, who has been re-arrested for violating a requirement to provide a "valid address" for his listing on the state's sex offender registry. "This [event] gives the community a chance to come and be heard. We've issued special invitations to the State's Attorney, to the Crime Commissioner, and others. That way they can hear what's important to the people."

Facilitating this kind of dialog is nothing new for Cuddy. Her roots with activism and social change go back to her college days.

"My journey began at college. I attended Hampshire College, which is an alternative college in Massachusetts. I majored in child development and peace

studies. Like so many of us, that's when I came into my feminism and political activism."

After graduation, Cuddy was involved in the anti-nuclear movement. "There were the wars in South America, all types of civil disobedience. I took a broad view of anti-violence activism, looking at global issues."

A number of years later, Cuddy was burnt out. "I was looking for a way to bring my activism closer to home. There needed to be concrete links to the community I was living in." A friend was volunteering at a battered women's shelter in Northampton, Massachusetts, and Cuddy joined her.

"It was at Necessities that I found my passion," Cuddy continued. "It was tremendous to be able to help women on so many levels." It was there that Cuddy met Gail Keilson, who became "my spiritual mentor." Keilson was the inspiration for Cuddy to pursue her Masters of Social Work Degree. She obtained the degree from UVM, in order to "do my work from a deeper place. Gail was so ethical in everything she did, and I wanted to be like that."

It was also at Necessities that Cuddy became a victim of domestic violence herself. "She was another volunteer. We were together 8 months, and it was the classic cycle of violence, with the slow

building and gradual stripping away of myself.

"It's not so uncommon to find batterers acting as volunteers – after all, what better cover exists? We in the Queer Anti-Violence movement can't always assume workers come to us with good intentions.

"This was a pivotal experience," Cuddy continued. "It made me determined to frame my anti-violence work in a way that is inclusive.

"At the core, violence is about power and control. At a central level, someone has to make a choice to use or abuse that power. There are so many ways that power is organized in our society. The classic model is along gender lines, but power is divided among races, classes, ages, even by levels of personal charisma or how out you are."

In the beginning, there was a reluctance to discuss violence in same sex relationships. "People would tilt their heads like dogs, looking at me with this expression of 'What are you talking about? Violence comes from outside our community, not within it.' I think we had to do a little grieving first."

Cuddy chaired the Same Sex Domestic Violence Task Force. "We were very lucky to work with Peter Jacobson, who helped us get the large grant to form SafeSpace."

In 1999, Cuddy came to the Women's Rape Crisis Center. "It's been such a privilege. This is the thing I've been aiming for, to discover how we can do direct work and create social change."

A strong feminist framework influences Cuddy's leadership. "It's important that we pay attention to the process. The journey is at the heart of what we do and sometimes that takes a lot of talk."

Work with victims of violence creates a special kind of vicarious trauma, something that Cuddy is vigilant for. "We pay thoughtful attention to that. We have regular staff retreats, do fun things."

On a personal level, Cuddy is mother to 18-month old Lucy. "She's my greatest joy. She's just learned to say 'Sure'." Cuddy is co-parenting with her former partner. "We very intentionally created our family, acting to form a beloved community." Cuddy also enjoys yoga, reading, poetry, and gardening.

"We have full, complicated lives. I'm very blessed. But the best thing is that I'm Lucy's Mom." ▼

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