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# Airing Dirty Laundry

Secrecy Keeps Domestic Violence Going

BY BETTY COLE

**N**ews Flash: Some of our relationships are so unhealthy, it's a crime. And that crime goes under several names: battering or abuse, both physical and emotional; sexual assault; and "domestic violence."

Alcoholism is a health problem that used to be kept a secret — both inside and outside our communities. Cancer and more recently AIDS were not talked about, either. The same has been true for abusive relationships in lgbt communities, often for the same reasons: prejudice, discrimination, and their internalized corollary, shame.

There are two persistent comments SafeSpace Director Kara DeLeonardis and Program Coordinator Hannah Hauser hear when they talk about domestic violence within lgbt communities: "You're making us look bad by airing our dirty laundry," and "Why don't these people just leave?"

Hauser thinks the "making 'us' look bad" belief stems from internalized homophobia. "People assume a strong case for equality and civil rights has to be built on our being flawless. But we're human, flawed people. No person is just queer — we're vulnerable to life's complexities and our own history."

DeLeonardis sees the impact of "airing dirty laundry" in the difficulty the agency has had fundraising, both from individual donors and from lgbt-focused foundations.

Although discrimination in employment, housing, insurance, child custody, credit and public accommodations on the basis of sexual orientation was outlawed in Vermont in 1992, Hauser still sees the lgbt communities as "marginalized." And being marginalized contributes to unhealthy relationships. It creates barriers to leaving. Since Vermont still allows discrimination in housing and employment against transgender people, where does a transwoman without funds go? If your own first same-gender lover hurts you, how would you expect anything different from others? And once you're in a vulnerable position, how do you keep saying no,

and what do you do when it's over?

Some of the survivors of lgbt domestic violence who have used SafeSpace's services are willing to tell their own stories, with names and identifying details changed to protect them from possible retaliation.

**"Julianna" is a rural 32-year-old transwoman:** "I had been living with my girlfriend Miriam for 2 years. I was not on the lease but I was signing over my paycheck to her to pay all the bills and rent on top of supporting us both and her child. I was extremely isolated and didn't have friends or know of any supports or transgender community groups.

"I never really thought it was abuse because she never directly hit me, but she constantly wore me down with comments and threats. Miriam was verbally and emotionally abusive, very transphobic and hateful. Eventually Miriam kicked me out for good, and I didn't have any money or any place to go.

"In the local homeless shelter I was put on the 'male' side and was very uncomfortable. The shelter wasn't supportive or accommodating and definitely not safe. I only stayed there one night. The second time was during the winter months, and it was three days until my next paycheck. I couldn't go back to that shelter because it's not safe for transwomen, and the only other option was to stay the night in my car. That was the month the temperature didn't climb above freezing at all."

**"Kelley" is a 40-ish lesbian** who lived on the outskirts of Chittenden County with her lover after leaving a marriage to come out:

"At first I loved 'Amy's' insistence that we were everything each other needed and the closeness we had. She was my first lesbian relationship, and I thought that we were *supposed* to be everything to and for each other.

"Over time, however, that closeness became smothering and turned into control and suffocation. Amy controlled most of the relationship, including what doctors I saw and what medications I took. She also encouraged my abuse of prescrip-

tions. I ended up with weekly seizures and daily migraines.

"Amy demanded that I do all the cleaning and cooking, and controlled how much I spent on groceries. If I went to bed early because I was exhausted or sick, she insisted that I was not fulfilling my commitment to her. I can't remember how many times she would wake me in the middle of the night and demand to make love right then. The physical hurt was easier to deal with than the emotional hurt that I am still trying to figure out."

**"Jim" is a 20-something guy** who found his casual sexual relationship had turned into sexual assault when his partner refused to pay attention to the limits he set:

"We met at a bar after catching each other's eye earlier in the evening. He bought us both several drinks.

"After talking for a while, I accepted an invitation back to his apartment. Before doing so, however, I made it clear that although I'd like to fool around, I'm not into anal sex.

"Back at the apartment, we had another drink before beginning to fool around. We kissed each other and gently explored each other's bodies for a long time before he grabbed some lubricant and stimulated my anus with his fingers. I felt uncomfortable, but I didn't think it would go any further so I didn't say anything.

"Almost before I realized it, he was on top of me, inserting his penis. When I flinched and said, 'It hurts,' he said, 'That's OK, it'll feel better in a few minutes.' He continued to penetrate me harder and harder. After he reached orgasm, he kissed me, told me how hot the sex had been, and then rolled over and fell asleep."

These stories are not unique. According to the SafeSpace survey distributed at the July 2005 Pride celebration, 23 percent of the 179 respondents experienced violent incidents, intimidation and/or abuse from their partner within the last year. In 2004, the agency worked with clients in nine Vermont counties.

Domestic violence within our communities needs airing for us to get healthier and stronger. We need to care enough to not overlook it when someone is shoved down the stairs in a public place. We need to care enough to support the agency that is there to help on our behalf. ▼

For information about lgbt domestic violence, contact SafeSpace: 802-863-0003, or safespacevt.org.