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Domestic violence - breaking the cycle

By NOREEN SADIK

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Tanya had promised herself that if he hit her or swore at her one more time, she would leave. He beat her regularly, but this time was much worse than in the past.

Tanya, 25, is a recent immigrant from the former Soviet Union. She is an attractive blonde who looks the picture of innocence, but the sadness in her brown eyes betrays that image.



SOME WOMEN are even raped by their husbands. Abuse results of the man's to gain control. Photo: Illustrative Photo by Ariel Jerozolimski

Shortly after, they immigrated to Israel. She thought that the law in Israel was stricter than in Latvia, and that he would be punished if he beat her.

After four months in the shelter, Tanya sees life more positively. She is protected from her abuser and understands that she has rights. She realizes that she can cope on her own and does not have to be economically dependent on her husband.

Her daughter is a happy baby now, no longer afraid of strangers and no longer clinging to Tanya. She knows that once she leaves the shelter, she must remain in Israel because her husband will not allow her to take the baby out of the country.

On a quiet street in Herzliya sits a nondescript house that doubles as a refuge for women like Tanya. From the outside, one would not guess that it houses women who suffered

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silently until they could no longer bear it. Forced to flee from their tormentors, they sought a safe place, where they can begin to heal.

The L.O. Combat Violence Against Women (Lamed Alef - lehima b'alimut neged nashim) was formed in 1977, and opened the shelter in 1978 in an effort to provide refuge for women in danger. Through seminars and lectures, the organization has become a leading voice in education about domestic violence. It has trained police officers how to deal sensitively with victims. Today, domestic violence officers are posted in every police station. The organization, which works to eliminate all forms of violence against women, also helps victims of trafficking and run a free legal aid hotline.

Ruth Rasnic, founder and executive director, was horrified by the callousness of a man who murdered his wife of three months. "His comment that he didn't think that the abuse would ever lead to her death is what triggered my desire to provide shelter for abused women," says Rasnic. "Does that mean that it's okay for a wife to be abused, provided that she stays alive?"

For Rasnic, who had already been involved in women's issues for several years, opening a shelter came naturally. She has since opened three others that have offered a safe retreat to at least 5,000 women and 7,000 children over the past 30 years.

The shelter in Herzliya, which can house 26 women and children, is run as a small commune. The house mother makes a daily schedule, giving each resident a job to do, whether it be cleaning a certain room or cooking the meals. The staff "try to create a normal life in a place that is not normal," says shelter director Naomi Sachar.

The staff and volunteers work with the women on an individual basis or in groups. **Treatment approaches include psychodrama, reiki, shiatsu, psychotherapy, reflexology, dance and art therapy, ceramics,** Hebrew lessons (for new immigrants) and bonding between the mothers and their children.

The residents take care of each other emotionally: When a new woman arrives, not only does the staff take her under their wings, so do the other women, each trying to help her to adjust to her new life. "Some women are petrified when they first arrive, and their insecurity makes them question the lack of police at the shelter, or why the surrounding walls are not higher," says Rasnic. "When they begin to adjust to their new surroundings, they begin to realize that they have to learn to live with fear."

While a woman's confidence may have been reduced by her husband's constant criticism, she receives positive comments from her housemates.

"Some women never cooked before entering the shelter, and some are experienced cooks, so even something which seems so basic can be a learning experience," explains Rasnic. "If a woman's husband constantly complained that her food was not good, and then followed the complaint by throwing the plate of food at her, she'll probably believe she really can't cook. When the other residents compliment a meal, the 'cook' receives instant support and her self esteem increases. Words of encouragement from fellow residents can go a long way, and this is the beginning of the woman feeling empowered."

Since 1989, a hotline run out of this shelter provides assistance to callers in Hebrew, Russian, English and Spanish. The hotline is staffed by 60 volunteers who undergo a three-and-a-half month intensive training course. Twenty volunteer courses have been held since the hotline opened. On average, volunteers answer three calls per day, but on a day like November 25, the International Day of the Elimination of Violence Against Women, they received many more calls. "Most of the calls are from women just wanting to talk, to reach out to someone who will understand them. They may call several times before actually seeking help, and few of the calls are emergencies. The hotline receives approximately 1,800 calls each year," says Rasnic.

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