

GUEST OPINION: Abuse victims can find help under one roof

By DENISE FREY

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Marina first came to one of the YWCA's support groups a few years ago. Her story was like any other story of an abused woman. She had met a man who was charming, who seemed to truly love her, and it wasn't until she moved in with him that his behavior changed.



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A student walks past a display at Santa Rosa Junior College marking Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

He wanted to know where she was all the time, who she was with and what she was doing. He told her that it was because he wanted what was best for her and to protect her. Marina wouldn't realize until much later that she did, indeed, need protection. She needed protection from the man she loved.

The physical abuse began when Marina became pregnant. It began with him slapping her across her face and progressed to him punching her in her abdomen. Miraculously, Marina delivered a healthy baby boy. She was now faced with the fear that her son would be abused. She was also faced with the threat of deportation more than ever.

Yes, Marina was like any other abused woman except she had come here from Mexico with her parents as a child and did not have legal status. This made her even more vulnerable as her abuser, a legal permanent resident, constantly threatened to have her deported, which meant she would lose her son, who had been born in the United States and was therefore a U.S. citizen.

One night, Marina was beaten badly enough that she called 911, badly enough to risk deportation and losing her son. Her abuser was arrested, and she was taken to the hospital where she received medical treatment for her injuries and more importantly, information about a special visa for victims of violent crimes, the U-Visa.

Marina contacted Catholic Charities, and there she met an immigration specialist who assists with U-Visas. The U-Visa was enacted to protect our communities from violent criminals by protecting victims who can then cooperate with police and prosecutors. Marina did just that, and her abuser was found guilty and sentenced.

Three years later, Marina is a legal permanent resident. She continues to work full-time to support her son and is raising him to be a man who respects women. This woman who had once lived in fear can now look forward to a life free of abuse.

Marina is a productive member of society, a woman any country would be proud to call its own.

October is National Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Here in Sonoma County, we're celebrating the opening of the Family Justice Center, bringing many of the services that Marina needed under one roof. She wouldn't have to take a bus now,

with her son in tow, from agency to agency, telling her story again and again.

YWCA is there along with Catholic Charities, Legal Aid, the Council on Aging, Verity and other organizations that, with the Sonoma County District Attorney's Office and other law enforcement partners, are dedicated to making sure victims of domestic violence and other violent crimes receive the services they need first to survive and then to thrive.

One building, one roof, and yet we must remember that it's not the building or the roof that makes it a Family Justice Center. It's the professionals under that roof, who dedicate their lives to making victims safe and holding offenders accountable.

The YWCA has been serving victims of domestic violence and their children for more than 30 years and is proud to be an Family Justice Center partner.

Denise Frey is executive director of the YWCA Sonoma County.

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