

Durham community combats violence against women

by **Cammie Bellamy**
Durham VOICE Co-Editor

Phone operators at the Durham Crisis Response Center estimate it takes an average of seven calls for a battered woman to leave her abuser. That is seven calls for help to the center's crisis hotline, seven different times, generally triggered by seven acts of violence.

To the staff of the DCRC, which provides services to victims of sexual assault and domestic violence in and beyond Durham, each call is a reminder of the incredible need that exists for their work.

"How do we change what's been called the rape culture?" asks Aurelia Sands-Belle, the center's executive director. "How do we change a culture where it's OK to be abusive to women and children? How do you do that?"

Sands-Belle says when thinking about violence against women, the questions can be just as important as the answers.

"People sometimes say, well why doesn't she just leave ... and I always tell people, that's not the right question. The right question is, 'Why is he battering?'"

A safe space for victims

The DCRC occupies a grand, but inviting, early-20th century home at 206 N. Dillard St. in Durham. The house would be a welcome sight to women whose own homes are no longer safe spaces.

It doesn't take long after walking through the front door to realize the center is a busy place. A chart on the wall of the foyer tracks the locations of its staffers throughout the day: hospital, court, school volunteering, on call.

Sands-Belle works out of an upstairs room that overlooks a children's playground in the center's backyard. Typing away on a computer at a desk crammed with papers, binders and notebooks, she contemplates her workload.

"This is the state of nonprofits right now," she says, turning her hands upward.

But Sands-Belle can be certain her organization's work is having an impact. Last year,

the DCRC served about 2,000 people.

Among those clients, 237 women and children were housed in the center's shelter, 135 victims of abuse received in-hospital counseling, and more than 1,000 victims were accompanied to civil and criminal courts by a DCRC staffer or volunteer. Aside from those services, the center provides victims with support groups, hosts outreach and education events with the Durham community and operates a 24-hour crisis hotline in English and Spanish.

The center uses a four-pronged approach of advocacy, education, support and prevention in addressing domestic and sexual violence. Though the majority of its services are aimed directly at survivors of abuse, it is heavily involved in confronting the roots of violence in the Durham community.

The center hosts frequent educational events with other community organizations as well as churches, synagogues and mosques in the area. Among its many initiatives, Sands-Belle said the center is hosting a violence-prevention program for African-American men and boys as well as sessions on bullying and dating violence in the Durham Public Schools system.

Deanna Manley, the center's hotline coordinator, said the center offers support to women from a wide array of backgrounds. While most of the center's approximately 10 calls per day come from the Durham area, some come from much farther.

"We have actually taken folks from other states into our shelter if that's what they're needing," Manley said. "Because if you think about the domestic violence issue, sometimes them getting away – as far away as possible – is the safest thing to do."

Though Manley sees many women reaching out for help every day, she acknowledges that it can be one of the hardest parts of the healing process.

"Most of our clients are women, and sometimes we as women think that we can fix people and that it'll get better," she said. "And then when it doesn't and actually gets worse because the cycle of violence escalates, then they will reach out to us."

Looking for help

The support the DCRC offers comes at a critical time for victims: the period in which they must determine how to respond to abuse. Though many victims might struggle with these decisions, Sands-Belle said center volunteers only advise clients, never influence them.

"Our job, we believe, is to empower vic-



Executive Director Aurelia Sands-Belle
(Staff photo)

tims to make decisions – we don't make them for them," she said.

"It's kind of helping people regain their own sense of control over their bodies that's been taken away by a rape or a battering ... within those immediate hours, they're making those decisions about, 'should I prosecute, should I go forward, should I tell, he told me if I told he would kill me, this is my husband, I'm scared of him, it's the father of my child, I don't have any place to go, I don't have any money, I don't have any resources.' It's a lot of things."

Though women of all social and economic backgrounds can face abuse, Sands-Belle said women with fewer resources may not be well-equipped to deal with violence.

"Research has proven that people who are in lower economic statuses are victimized," she said. "Someone who might have access to opportunity and resources might just get up and leave."

But women without those resources, she said, might not have the option to relocate after an assault. One such group of women the center strives to serve are illegal immigrants, who have to cope with everything from language barriers to a lack of legal identification in the wake of abuse.

"The question is, who's liable to speak out and get help quicker," she said. "We have people who will call police first because that's their first line of defense. (But with immigrants), you've got police officers in home countries that you don't complain to."

Regardless of a client's background, Sands-Belle said one of the most significant services any advocacy group can offer is consistent emotional support.

"The very presence of another person who stops everything else they're doing ... their presence says, 'I'm here for you,'" she said. "You're the only thing that could get me out of bed at 3 o'clock in the morning – I'm here for you."

DCRC 24 Hour Hotline:

919-403-6562 (English)

919-519-3735 (Español)

Email the Crisis Line:

crisisline@durhamcrisisresponse.org