The Challenges of Domestic Violence Victims in Leaving Their Situation

My name is Nancy Larsen, and I’m the community liaison for the Pinal County Attorney’s Office in Florence, Arizona. Prior to this job, I was a victim advocate for the Compass Center, in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, which is a rape and domestic abuse center. During my first week as an advocate there, a victim came into our office and was near hysteria. Not having any knowledge of domestic or sexual violence, I asked my boss, “Why doesn’t she just leave him?” I got quite an earful and have since often answered that question myself.

Let me try to explain it this way. My husband and I have one son, Josh, who is now an adult. I have never lived in an abusive relationship; however, if Josh’s life had been threatened or mine had been threatened, I would have stayed. If my spouse told me he would hunt me down to kill me, I would have stayed. If I had no money, no job, no car, and no place to live, I would have stayed. If my family and friends had been alienated, I would have stayed. If our family pet had been threatened, I would have stayed. And if we had a gun in the house, I would have stayed.

So what about a protection order? Would that guarantee safety for my child and me? The reality is no—it’s just a piece of paper. So why not flee to a shelter? That’s an option. However, would that guarantee safety for me or my child? Again, no. It wouldn’t. There’s no option that’s 100% guaranteed. Besides, once I left the shelter, the abuse I would endure would be even worse. If I stay in the relationship, I can better protect my child.

Even more compelling is the fact that 75% of women who are killed by their batterers are murdered when they leave or try to leave the situation. Ideally, it would be great if every victim could leave, but for those who can’t, we need to listen to their concerns and not judge them for their decision to stay. Instead, we need to help them formulate a safety plan, and offer resources that may be of help to them. We need to build them up, empower them, empathize with them, but never, ever ask them, “Why don’t you just leave him?”

For additional information or resources, you may contact:

- The National Domestic Violence Hotline: (800) 799-7233
- The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence: www.ncadv.org
- The National Network to End Domestic Violence: www.nnedv.org
- The National Resource Center on Domestic Violence: www.nrcdv.org

You can also reach out to state coalitions against domestic violence.

Thank you.