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Legal Aid helps Cobb woman escape abuse

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Wife beaters, be forewarned: There's a hard-hitting team of legal eagles making it their mission liberate your victims.

And it's sisters helping sisters.

A mostly female staff at the Cobb County branch of Atlanta Legal Aid takes on cases like that of former Kennesaw resident Barbara (not her real name, which has been changed to protect her identity).



'They couldn't make him leave'

She said her now ex-husband, eventually "diagnosed a sociopath," was like a knight in shining when they met.

"He was very clean-cut. He drove a Lexus. He was very good at putting on the image he wanted," Barbara said. "I was a single mom. I wanted to be taken care of. Here was Prince Charming, cc

to rescue me.”

After they married in October 2010, the mean drunk emerged, she said.

“He started off being very verbally and emotionally abusive, isolating me from everybody,” Barb said.

The police came to their door one night after he had been drinking heavily.

“He was removed and taken to the drunk tank for the night and brought back the next day at 5 : Barbara said. “Cobb police said that since we’re married, they couldn’t make him leave.”

Not only was she frightened at what her spouse had become, she said she couldn’t get anyone her husband’s dark side.

“We were in counseling, and he would lie to the counselor. She would believe him. I don’t think any good,” Barbara said.

The turning point

By March 2011, his bad behavior turned violent.

“He was drunk and refused to let me leave,” Barbara said. “He beat me really badly. “The beating went on for an hour and a half.”

She escaped to her children’s bedroom and called 911.

This time, he was booked for assault, and Barbara was referred to legal aid.

“They helped me get a temporary protective order against my husband,” she said about a year-enforced separation. “They were really helpful because when he was released from jail, his par hid him so he couldn’t be served.”

Staff Attorney Kate Gaffney took her case, becoming Barbara’s champion.

“She was with me when I had to go to court to get the restraining order. I was terrified, not just because he was there,” Barbara said. “You have to tell the judge everything that happened. You

a courtroom full of people, and you're laying everything out for everyone to know.”

With Gaffney in her corner, Barbara got the breathing room she needed to move on.

“It was a huge relief,” Barbara said.

A new life

Barbara made some changes, empowered both by her representation and her ex-husband's move to Texas.

“I moved out of our old apartment. My phone and address are unlisted,” she said.

“I didn't change my name. I didn't want to give him that much power. I took his name when we married and dropped it when we divorced.”

Barbara said she learned important lessons from the experience.

“I could go down the bitter road and be a victim and not trust anyone again, or learn from it and move on,” she said.

“I decided to learn and move on. I figured out some things about why I was attracted to him and changed that.”

Now she wants to help others.

“It's important to know people can get out and get safe before something traumatic happens,” she said.

She praised Gaffney, who is on staff at Atlanta Legal Aid along with Christina Dumitrescu, Sara Austin, Jennifer Yankulova and James Ausenbaugh.

“She was great. She was a very strong advocate. I had bruises and was scared to death,” Barbara said. “She gave me a lot of moral support.”

A lawyer's view

Gaffney said cases like Barbara's are why she became a lawyer.

"I want to help people," she said. "To be part of the solution, to help someone get away from the abuser in a really quick turn around, it's a wonderful experience to be a part of."

Gaffney said she and her team are chipping away at domestic violence, one case at a time.

"It's part of making a change in this community," she said.

For a young attorney, there are other benefits.

"It's a crash course in lawyering in that I get to do everything that's part of being a lawyer: I prepare evidence, I go to court and advocate for the client," Gaffney said. "If there's a trial, I cross-examine the witness."

Witnesses have included defendants who testified, "She hit her own self in the eye."

The foundation

That case was represented by volunteer lawyer Luke Lantta, a Marietta resident who practices downtown Atlanta law firm Bryan Cave LLP.

He is one of about 100 attorneys who sign on every year to provide free representation for domestic violence victims.

The volunteers fall under the umbrella of the Cobb Justice Foundation, legal aid's pro bono arm created in 1995.

"It's specifically geared to match private attorneys with cases that come through legal aid," said foundation director Amanda N. Moulthrop.

The foundation's TPO Project, headed by Gaffney, has helped more than 100 domestic violence victims like Barbara.

"We have so many great regular volunteers for that project," Moulthrop said. "We provide them an attorney to get that TPO."

Clients also get other civil law services, according to legal aid Managing Attorney Catherine C. Vandenberg.

“It’s good for victims to get the safety of the TPO, but we’re also able to get child support for the she said.

“That’s really helpful to get them to manage financially without their abuser. Without that, the ch of them going back to the abuser is increased.”

Their services, while not including criminal law, go a long way to stop family violence.

“We help them get the home, because they often flee, of course. The abuser’s in the home. Wit that order, there’s nothing to order him from that home,” Vandenberg said.

Depending on kindness

While helping others, the foundation also gets help.

“The work of the foundation is recruiting private attorneys to take cases. We’re very fortunate th lawyers of Cobb County are generous in volunteering their time,” Moulthrop said.

“They’re giving back to their community because they’re living here in town.”

Of the 12 firms participating, 10 are in Cobb and the other two employ Cobb residents.

Moulthrop said the county has earned bragging rights to the foundation.

“Outside of metro Atlanta, it’s very hard to find this commitment from the private bar,” Moulthrop

“This is something Cobb County should be proud to have.”

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