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Demanding healthy love

Isolated and ashamed no more: Gays and lesbians abused by their partners are finally speaking up and getting help.

By Patrick Moore

“If you two girls don’t get along, you should just stay away from each other.” That’s what a male judge told Emely Ortiz in 2001 when she petitioned the court for a restraining order against her ex-girlfriend.

Over the course of their relationship, Ortiz’s girlfriend had gone from a possessiveness that at first felt “cute” to escalating demands that isolated Ortiz and kept her too intimidated to fight back. “You’re ugly. You’re selfish,” the woman would scream—untrue accusations but insidious nonetheless. It took the support of other women at Boston’s the Network/La Red—one of very few programs in the United States that deals with same-sex domestic violence—to help Ortiz leave her batterer.

Thanks to a legal system that couldn’t see how women could be a threat to one another, Ortiz was stalked for 10 months. “It’s like, no matter where you go or what you do, there’s this invisible thread,” Ortiz remembers. “Her voice on my voice mail, an e-mail, letters coming in the mail, finding her in places she knew I went. What was scary was how benign it was to other people.”

Ortiz eventually chose a desperate solution for a desperate problem: “I moved. I disappeared.”

Domestic violence sometimes appears to be a dirty secret that the gay community would rather not address in a time of assimilation and fighting for gay marriage. Though Los Angeles, Boston, and a handful of other large cities have programs that specifically address the problem, nationwide services geared toward the particular needs of same-sex couples are rare, even in places with visible LGBT neighborhoods. That’s partly because, with HIV as the first priority, most cities don’t have enough resources to go around.

Now at least one state is kicking in to help. The California legislature recently passed—and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed—a law that will add a \$23 surcharge to each domestic-partner registration. Proceeds will fund same-sex domestic-violence programs.

In practice, the program is modest. It stands to provide no more than \$10,000 in seed money to individual LGBT programs. Susan Holt of the Stop Partner Abuse/Domestic

Violence Program at the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center cautions: “It’s a very, very tiny first step.”

John is a sweet, earnest young man who wants to be with just one special guy. But his boyfriend repeatedly called John a “whore” and inflicted levels of physical violence previously unimaginable to the 23-year-old, who looks 16.

When John moved to Los Angeles from his Texas hometown of 4,000 people, he was open to a broad range of possibilities. Attending the University of California, Los Angeles, and working at Abercrombie & Fitch, he entered urban gay life in the typical way: He went to a bar. At Rage in West Hollywood, Calif., John met the man who would become his first love—and his abuser.

“I was 21, and he was 24,” says John.

“The first six months were wonderful. It was nice being held by somebody for the first time.” Then his boyfriend began to rage with jealousy. “He would throw things,” John says. “But I never saw it as abuse because he wasn’t hitting me with them.”

The first time John’s boyfriend hit him was after a party where another man had paid attention to John. On the way home John’s boyfriend punched him in the face. “I didn’t have any other options, so I got in the car,” he says. “All I could really do was cry, and he was crying with me. The idea of leaving crossed my mind, but he just kept on apologizing.”

Blackened eyes, destroyed furniture, and isolation quickly became the hallmarks of John’s life, which was also interspersed with what therapists call “honeymoon” periods, when the violence subsides and the abuser draws the victim back in. Young, disconnected from other gay people living in a town 40 miles north of Los Angeles, and unaware of domestic-violence programs, John never sought help.

Even when he ended up in the emergency room with a shard of glass embedded in his bloodied neck, John continued to defend his attacker. “I still loved him. They asked me in the E.R. what had happened, and I said I was mowing the lawn and a piece of glass hit me. I didn’t tell them the truth because I knew he’d get into trouble.”

When John finally did leave, he was drawn back in by terrible circumstances; he had developed a brain tumor and required surgery followed by a long hospital stay. “He would come to the hospital, and we ended up moving in together again. I went back and forth to Texas a lot to see my family, and I guess I started to see things more clearly. When I came back the last time, I broke up with him.”

John doesn’t cry telling his story. He is composed. But on finding out that the relationship ended only two weeks ago, it becomes apparent that his composure is actually numbness.

There are many similarities between gay and straight domestic violence. For instance, drug and alcohol use is reportedly involved in about half of all domestic-abuse cases, regardless of gender (though the prevalence has been shown to be highest in instances of male-on-male violence). But chief among the differences exhibited by gay and lesbian partners of abusers is that they tend to fight back in self-defense. While that might seem hopeful, it actually creates difficulties when police are trying to differentiate between the abused and the abuser—two people who often seem like physical equals. Many times, the battered spouse is revictimized by being arrested along with the abuser.

Larry Hymes, a therapist at the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center who runs domestic-violence groups, says that those victims who stay with their abusers are often plagued by low self-esteem, and abusers relentlessly exploit that character flaw.

Tim (a pseudonym) is a hyperarticulate, intelligent man, but he carries with him memories of struggling in school. Knowing of this insecurity, his boyfriend regularly calls Tim a “retard.” Tim and his boyfriend are one of the rare couples who remain in their relationship as they are trying to work through their problems. They now attend separate groups run by the center for batterers and victims of abuse.

Tim admits, “What I’m having to

acknowledge at this point is, on a purely rational level, that I shouldn’t be in this relationship anymore. My general stereotype of an abusive relationship was physical violence. I never realized that verbal and emotional abuse is as real as physical abuse. I’m getting emotionally beaten up.”

The Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center began providing support groups and counseling services for domestic-violence victims and abusers through its mental health services department as far back as 1988. A more extensive formal program was founded in 1996: The Stop Partner Abuse/Domestic Violence Program, in addition to support groups and counseling, offers court-approved intervention, crisis services, and prevention workshops. Stop personnel also act as advocates and liaisons with law enforcement and other agencies on behalf of LGBT victims and survivors. Rounding out its offerings to this underserved group, the center expanded its legal services department a couple of years ago to provide assistance with restraining orders and other legal actions.

Still, the center’s most important function may lie simply in letting the abused know that they are not alone. Breaking that isolation is particularly important for gays and lesbians. It can be like a second coming-out: Those who haven’t lost their families when coming out about their sexual orientation sometimes do so when they reveal they’ve been abused. Relatives can respond not with compassion but by saying, “Told you so.”

George has a smoldering sexiness and beautiful eyes. But when his ex told him, “You’ll never find anybody else like me,” George believed it. His relationship of more than four years ended late this summer in a night of horrific violence. After having been attacked and beaten, George watched in amazement as his partner began to punch himself in the

face and cut his arms, screaming, “I’m going to call the police and tell them you beat me up. You’re going to jail. I don’t have anything to lose.”

After his boyfriend ran from their home, George soon heard helicopters and was greeted at the front door by a policeman with a drawn gun. “I came down the front stairs and they immediately cuffed me and wouldn’t let me talk. My neighbors were all outside.”

George felt numb for the first month after breaking up with his boyfriend. Lost in waves of anger, he would forget to eat. His voice breaks as he explains, “I’d go to bed at night and put my head on my pillow and ask myself if I was crazy. I have to keep believing I’m a good person, that I’m not a violent person. Even though the whole time he was beating me up I was only protecting myself, I still felt like I was part of the violence. I’m a good person. I’m a peaceful person.”

Although there is much to be sad about regarding domestic violence among LGBT people, effective programs bring much hope. Emely Ortiz has moved from being a victim to serving as lead victim advocate in the newly created Domestic Violence Legal Advocacy Project at the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center. She seems whole again and is in “the best relationship ever.”

Her eyes are bright as she says, “I look at my abusers and I think of them as the exceptions. I just don’t let those relationships color how I see other people.” Still, Ortiz doesn’t intend to forget the past entirely. In situations when she feels hurt or threatened, she has a new rule: “Don’t even bother saying you’re sorry. Just don’t do it again.”