

Amesbury detective on front line of battle to stop domestic assaults

The Newburyport Daily News 01/10/08

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AMESBURY - Last week, Robert Wile worked what he called one of the three worst domestic violence cases he has seen since he became an Amesbury police detective in 1999.

The 21-year-old victim was strangled, bitten, and hit so hard in the face that it turned purple. Wile said the injuries were inflicted by her 22-year-old boyfriend - the father of her 3-year-old daughter.

To say she was "black and blue" is an understatement, Wile said.

The beating took place over two days, and Wile said the father of the boyfriend knew what was happening and didn't call police. The young woman was so badly beaten, Wile said, she could only make eye contact with him three times during the half-hour interview. She flinched as officers examined her face and wondered how to explain her appearance to her toddler, Wile said.

After friends and co-workers urged the victim to come forward, Wile arrested the boyfriend, Nicholas Lavallee, who is being held pending a dangerousness hearing today on charges of domestic assault and assault with a dangerous weapon - his teeth.

As a detective in the domestic violence/sexual assault unit for the Amesbury police, Wile's days are filled with cases like this one, though, he says, not normally as bad.

He is a member of a regional High Risk Team, started in 2005. The advocacy team includes police and the staff at the Jeanne Geiger Center and works to identify abusive relationships, monitor cases and share information.

And Wile is urging others to participate in Massachusetts' first "White Ribbon Day" on Feb. 14 and don a white ribbon to take a stand against domestic violence.

Amesbury has the most reported cases in the region and has for years. In 2007, there were 400 domestic violence cases reported to police in Amesbury - 39 in December alone - and police say there are likely countless others that went unreported.

'Can't understand it'

Working in a unit that focuses on sexual assault, domestic violence and mental health cases, Wile has a number of job descriptions as he tends to victims - he's part social worker, therapist, marriage counselor, police officer and listener, he said. And his daily job is based on a fact he simply doesn't understand - how a man can hit a woman.



Detective Robert Wile, head of Amesbury Police Department's Domestic Violence Unit, left, and Suzanne Dubus, director of the Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center, promote the first White Ribbon Day with members of local police departments, court and city officials. Wile is hoping people will wear a white ribbon on Feb. 14 to show that domestic violence should be stopped. Bryan Eaton/Staff Photo

"I could never, ever see why people hit women," Wile said. "For the life of me, I can't. I can't understand it, I never will."

A Newburyport native, Wile spent a year working for that city's department when he first joined the police force. He later moved to the Everett Police Department, where he spent four years before transferring to Amesbury.

He's been in Amesbury for 13 years, becoming more involved with domestic violence and sexual assault - particularly after he became a detective in 1999.

The names and faces stick with him. The memory of Dorothy Cotter is still vivid. The week before she was shot to death by her husband, William, in 2002, she was in Wile's office, where he spent hours trying to convince her to go to a shelter.

Most of his days are spent on the phone - talking with victims, following up with active cases, or talking with staff at the Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center in Newburyport, an organization he works with closely. Amesbury comprises about 33 percent of the Geiger Center's total domestic violence cases, according to the center. The next highest is Newburyport, with 22 percent.

Every domestic violence report that officers file reaches Wile's desk - some days he might arrive at work after a few days off and have 15 folders waiting for him, Wile said. Other days, there might be none.

Some days, he might sit down at his desk and not move until his shift ends as he engages in phone conversations. Other days, he might get the chance to get out and make house checks on victims.

It's nearly impossible to leave his job behind at the office at the end of the day, Wile said. While he no longer gives his cell phone number to victims, dispatchers and officers will call him when an emergency comes through.

"I used to take phone calls 24/7, that's not healthy," Wile said.

He spends time at the gym and running outdoors to help relieve the stress and tension that the job brings. "People say you can't take that stuff home with you; how can you not?," Wile said.

Over Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, eight domestic violence calls came into the police station. Typically, July and December are the two biggest months for domestic violence cases, Wile said.

Domestic violence cases are defined as an incident involving an argument, Sgt. Mark Gagnon said. During the holidays, the number of domestic violence cases climbs. The increase could be due to increased alcohol intake, Gagnon said, or stress over finances.

The number of cases rose in 2007 in Amesbury from 320 in 2006 - which could be a sign that women are coming forward more often to report domestic violence, Wile said.

In Massachusetts last year, there were 56 domestic-related homicides - 43 of the victims were women and children, and 13 males who killed themselves after the murders

'White Ribbon Day'

It's statistics like these that push Wile to reach out to his law enforcement colleagues, town officials and the public to ask for their participation in Massachusetts' first "White Ribbon Day" on Feb. 14. The project is sponsored by Jane Doe Inc., and it is the first time the state will join in the program since it was launched in 1991.

The assignment is easy, Wile said. He's asking men to wear a white ribbon on their shirt or lapel on Valentine's Day to take a stand and to show support to end domestic violence. While the program is geared toward "men of good heart" to stand up and be counted as allies against domestic violence, women are also asked to participate by wearing a ribbon.

Wile has asked each of the police departments involved in the High Risk Team to participate. Every staff member at seven area departments - Newburyport, Amesbury, Salisbury, Rowley, West Newbury, Newbury and Merrimac - will wear a ribbon. Also joining in are the staffs at the Geiger Center and the local courts.

Suzanne Dubus, executive director of the Geiger Center, said her staff "immediately thought of Bobby" when looking to draw participation in the White Ribbon Day campaign.

"We know that he really believes in getting men involved with this," Dubus said. "He's one of our go-to guys. He has been a wonderful partner in helping us train other police departments about domestic violence."

Wile has also spoken with Newburyport Mayor John Moak and Amesbury Mayor Thatcher Kezer, both of whom have pledged their support.

With a sea of white ribbons everywhere, Wile said, it could have an impact.

"If enough abusers know they are being watched, they might think twice," he said. "If it smartens up one person, then it works."

"I want to get everyone up here involved in it," Wile said.