

First 'Dorothy's Run 5K' held in honor of domestic violence victim —5K run honors murdered woman

The Newburyport Daily News 10/14/08

By Katie Curley
Staff writer

NEWBURYPORT — It was six years ago Amesbury Police responded to a 911 call at 7 Green St. in Amesbury. The night would change the way the police department operates in domestic violence situations and changed the course of the area's women's crisis center.

Dorothy Giunta-Cotter was fatally shot by her husband, ending 20 years of abuse at his hands. Her husband eventually took his own life as Amesbury police stormed the house. Though gone, Giunta-Cotter continues to live each day in the work of those who serve women in violent situations.

"Dorothy's murder profoundly moved us," said Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center Executive Director Suzanne Dubus. "Dorothy did everything right; she worked with us, the police, the courts. She just decided not to go to a shelter." Because of this, the crisis center will hold its first "Dorothy's Run 5K" as a way of formally remembering the lives she touched.

"We all learned from Dorothy's tragedy, and her death has saved so many others," Dubus said, noting the center estimates eight other people would have died since Giunta-Cotter's death if they did not have an increased awareness of the signs.

Dorothy's Run and Walk will be held in tandem with the Walk for Domestic Violence set for Oct. 19 at the Bartlet Mall. The event typically brings hundreds of walkers to the city. This year members of Giunta-Cotter's family are expected to participate along with cheerleaders she used to coach.

Sponsored by the Institute for Savings along with other local banks, race organizers hope the run will bring more attention to programs at the center, such as the award-winning High Risk Response Team, as well as keep Giunta-Cotter's memory alive.

"After Dorothy's death we had a lot of self doubt," Dubus said. "We thought, 'What could we have done better?' The truth is nothing at all, but we were all working in a vacuum. All the jobs done between us, the police, the courts were not going to work well unless we all worked together."

From there, The High Risk Team was formed in 2005, a partnership with police departments from six surrounding communities as well as Caritas Holy Family Hospital in Methuen and Anna Jaques Hospital in Newburyport. The team works to support safety within local families and hold batterers accountable for their actions.

"Her death hit home," Amesbury Detective Robert Wile said. "No matter how tough you are, it sticks will you. You know that saying, 'Someone had to die for changes to be made?' Well, this was the perfect example. It's unfortunate it had to get to that."

Wile noted the time he and the Amesbury Police Department spent talking to Giunta-Cotter in the months and weeks that proceeded her death and said that her tragedy shook the department and changed the way they respond to calls now.



Executive Director Suzanne Dubus of the Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center is planning a run in memory of Dorothy Giunta-Cotter
Jim Vaiknoras / Staff Photographer

"A domestic violence call handled correctly will now take one or two hours," Wile said. "It's not just who hit who and are you OK? And then leave them."

Wile is also part of a training team that works to help other communities institute the successful High Risk model alive in Amesbury.

"Before, the police, the courts, the crisis center all had information tucked away and never shared," Wile said. "A little extra work goes a long way.... Dorothy's name comes up at least three times a week. It's appropriate this race is named after her."

The team meets on a regular basis to train police and partners as well as to assess each case that comes to police to determine what can be done.

"Statewide domestic violence deaths have gone up 280 percent since 2005," Director of Development Elaine Cohen said, noting locally, there have been no domestic violence homicides since Giunta-Cotter's death. "Some say we are just lucky, but I say we are doing something different."

Dubus noted out of the 52 High Risk cases the center has seen since 2005, none have ended in homicide. "We have had an internal culture change," Dubus said. "It's been phenomenal we have no homicides and a four percent re-assault rate. We just heard we have been given the Edward Byrne Memorial State and Local Law Enforcement Grant. It's all because of Dorothy."

If You Go

Dorothy's Run 5K and Walk for Domestic Violence

When: Sunday, October 19, rain or shine

Walk registration begins at 11 a.m.

Welcome and warm-up 12:15

Dorothy's Run 5K begins at 12:45

Walk steps off at 1 p.m.

Where: Bartlett Mall

Information and registration available online at www.jeannegeigercrisiscenter.org

85 cents of every dollar raised will go toward providing a service for women and children at the center.