

## **Holidays and hitting, a violent partnership in domestic abuse**

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**By Angeljean Chiaramida , Staff writer**

While some people celebrate and love the winter holidays, others have good cause to fear them.

Jill Hrubes of Amesbury remembers only too well fearing her former husband's behavior during the holidays. Married in 1983, her early history of marital abuse was not violent, but was about control. By the time the second of her three sons was born, however, things were getting physical, and Christmas was something to endure, not cherish.

"The first time it happened, we were putting up the Christmas tree," Hrubes recalled. "(My then-husband's) idea of putting up the tree was getting drunk. Then it started: I wasn't putting up the tree right; I wasn't putting the lights on right; the living room didn't look perfect. I hadn't consulted him about buying the gifts for his family ... There was so much tension you could cut it with a knife. I was afraid to say anything or do anything because I couldn't say or do anything right. ... He started to punch the wall; he just punched holes in the wall.

"As the years went by, I just tried to get through Christmas," she continued. "He'd punch things, go downstairs and beat up my washing machine, anything to express his anger. ... I would never sleep; I just stayed up all night Christmas Eve. ... I was always in tears before we even left for the visit to the relatives."

Hrubes' tale is far from new to those at Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center, which helps women extricate themselves from domestic abuse. Services include support programs covering all facets of the issue, from responding to incidents at the call of local police departments, to providing emergency shelters, counseling, legal advocacy and everything in between.

Kelly Dunne, associate director of the crisis center, understands the problems only too well. One in four women lives in an abusive home, Dunne said. She knows too many of them who dread the holidays.

"We often see an increased demand for services after the holidays are over," Dunne said. "People come to us when they're ready to leave, and many don't want to leave during the holidays. They try to hold the family together during the holidays. It's afterwards that they come to us."

During the holidays, she said, the center also sees an increase in requests for legal help from its clients, as abusers with restraining orders against them go to court to try to get the orders lifted or relaxed so they can see their children.

"The day before Thanksgiving a man under a restraining order filed with the court so he could see the children," she said. "... We went to go to court and fight that. This was a very dangerous case."

Why, during the winter holidays - when the land is filled with Christmas carols, goodwill towards man and prayers for peace - does domestic abuse increase?

Amesbury police domestic abuse Detective Robert Wile, who monitors many of the domestic violence situations in that town, said the holiday's financial demands, along with the normal stresses of life and a liberal dosing of alcohol, set the stage for violence to erupt.

"I'd say domestic violence calls go up about 50 percent over the holidays," Wile said. "We've pulled up and seen a Christmas tree come flying through the window. ... We get all kinds of calls. Some are from women with a history of violence in their homes, and some from those who are experiencing it for the first time."

The violence, Dunne said, is part of a cycle that most domestic violence cases follow.

"There's the tension phase as tensions build and victims try to appease," Dunne said. "Then something happens that brings on a violent incident. Then afterwards, (the batterer) is sorry, and there's a honeymoon phase. But, the longer domestic abuse goes on, the shorter and shorter the honeymoon phase gets."

Georgetown police Chief James Mulligan said during the holidays, the largest percentage of cases are men battering women, but it can be anyone: parents abusing children, wives abusing husbands and relatives abusing elderly grandparents.

"Many people are stressed over the holidays because they don't have enough money to buy the gifts they want and they can't meet expectations. Some respond by going home and taking it out on their families," he said. "And then there's alcohol that only adds to the problem."

Dunne agrees stress plays a role in holiday abuse, but she qualifies the role liquor plays in battering.

"Domestic abuse is about power and control," Dunne said. "Alcohol increases the level of violence, but it doesn't cause domestic violence."

With alcohol in the mix, inhibitions are loosened, Dunne said, those predisposed to abuse because of a desire to control may increase the severity of their attacks. Yelling can become slapping; slapping can become punching; and punching can become strangling or grabbing a weapon.

Wile agrees alcohol is the catalyst and not the real reason violent people beat up family members. And after 19 years working with abuse victims, Wile estimates about 98 percent of batterers are men.

"Think about all the reasons for stress," Wile said. "It comes from things like the economy, lack of money, your job, your family. In many cases, there isn't much control a man might have over those things. When things go wrong for most men, they don't go home and beat their wives. But for others who are frustrated and need to grab control to feel powerful, they can go home and use violence to control their families."