

EAST TEXAS CRISIS CENTER HENDERSON CO.



BATTLING THE SILENT EPIDEMIC

By Michael V. Hannigan

EAST TEXAS CRISIS CENTER OFFERS ABUSED WOMEN A WAY OUT

Crisis Center staff (from left): Gwen Cox, volunteer coordinator; Donna Johnson, outreach coordinator; Estella Perales, legal advocate; and Dori Fortney, receptionist.

THERE IS A nondescript brick building near the heart of Athens where horror stories are the order of the day. The stories are of our mothers, daughters, sisters, friends and neighbors who suffer through family violence and sexual assault, usually inflicted at the hands of someone they once trusted. The building stands as a lighthouse for these women, a beacon of escape.

The mission of the East Texas Crisis Center is to provide “safety, shelter and education to victims of family violence, sexual assault and other violent crime and to restore dignity and purpose in their lives while promoting public compassion and awareness to reduce violence in the community.”

The Crisis Center serves five counties — Henderson, Smith, Van Zandt, Wood and Rains — and offers programs including a shelter for battered women; a hotline for crisis counseling; legal advocacy; community education; crisis intervention in both individual and group settings; family protective orders; victim services and more.

“What we do is work with victims all the way from [providing] safety and shelter to ... providing every possible service that we can [in order] to help them become sustainable so they can get out of the abuse,” said

Crisis Center Outreach Coordinator Donna Johnson. “We’re here to help them have the resources and the safety and the protection so when they make that final decision to leave for good ... they don’t have to return.”

Unfortunately, the Crisis Center’s services are in high demand. In 2012, the center served 247 new clients in Henderson County and another 200 who returned from previous years. That’s between 400 and 500 victims that the staff of four works with each year.

Johnson calls it the silent epidemic. “It is hard to understand unless it’s in your own backyard, and we have to open up the dialogue to help people realize it is in their own backyard,” she said.

Only an estimated 18 percent of sexual assaults are reported nationally. That means four out of five assaults never come to light. It’s not hard to understand why the problem stays hidden. “You get a victim who comes in and everything is so overwhelming,” said Johnson. “Not only are they trying to be safe and go through the

steps to stay gone for good, they are also dealing with law enforcement and the criminal justice system.”

And leaving for good is the most dangerous time for an abused woman. “When a person who has been abused takes action to end the violence or leave the relationship, there is an immediate increased risk of danger to the survivor and her children,” according to a statement by the Texas Health and Human Services Commission.

Johnson said it is even more dangerous for women in this county. Along with Van Zandt County, Henderson County is in the top 10 percent per capita for domestic violence murders in the state of Texas. The East Texas Crisis Center works along with other groups such as the Family Peace Project, the Child Advocacy Center, law enforcement, healthcare providers and the courts to fight this terrible problem.

“We all have to work as a group to make sure that victim gets every possible need [met],” Johnson said. “... We have a great working relationship with [law enforcement] now. They feel confident and we feel confident about being able to pick up the phone and talk to the investigator. ... They listen, and they are wanting to do the right thing by the victim. I think that, as far as our law enforcement and our criminal justice system [goes], we’ve come a long way.”

Johnson knows there is still a long way to go in fighting the silent epidemic. She also believes the solution isn’t really up to her. It’s up to a different group entirely.

“Where do we find a solution? By educating men,” she said. “By trying to put a system together that shows offenders that we will not stand for this; that men will not condone this; that they bring their sons up to [understand] gender respect and that you don’t hit women; that there are other ways you can deal with [anger]. So it starts with your own sons at a very young age and what you show them in your own environment, because this is a learned behavior.”

For more information or to make a donation, call 903-675-2137. The emergency hotline numbers are 903-595-5591 or 800-333-0358. You can also visit online at www.etcc.org.

Michael Hannigan is the editor of Henderson County Now, an online news journal at HendersonCountyTexasNow.com.

WALKING IN HER SHOES



There’s going to be a very unusual sight at the Old Fiddlers Reunion this year. A group of big-hearted men will stuff their big feet into high heels and clumsily (we assume) make four laps around the Henderson County courthouse.

Why in the world would they do such a thing, you ask? To bring awareness to a terrible problem. The June 1 event, called “Walk a Mile In Her Shoes,” is an opportunity for men in the county to show support for ending rape, sexual assault and gender violence.

According to the event website: “Our mission is to create a unique and powerful public experience that educates individuals and communities about the causes of sexualized violence, provides them with prevention and remediation strategies and empowers them to further develop and implement these ... skills interpersonally and politically.”

Walkers will also be raising money for the Crisis Center, which receives nearly 50 percent of its budget through donations. The registration deadline to walk in the event has passed, but you can still participate by donating to the ETCC. And if you see the men walking at the Fiddlers Reunion, be sure and give them a pat on the back ... if not a foot massage.

