

POINTS OF VIEW

Strangers tell of beatings (and making peace)

Strangers in emergency rooms don't usually talk much. They've got private worries. So, I listened to the girl next to me when she blurted out she was waiting to see if her baby was all right after getting beat up by her boyfriend.



JEFF COUNTS

I pointed out that kicking a car is different from punching a pregnant woman in the stomach. Again there was no glimmer of understanding in her eyes.

charged with assault herself. She was still waiting for her friends to show up as I left the place with my son, who had been injured playing football. Just a sprained ankle.

She was sitting on the floor near the door, and with her high school letter jacket on, she looked like a cheerleader waiting for her mom and dad to pick her up. It's too bad her parents were no where to be found.

"You're friends haven't showed up, eh?" I asked.

"No."

I tried one more time. "Why don't you go to the police? They'll arrest him and you won't have to get in trouble yourself."

Her eyes were blank. Yes, she would think about it. No, I'll never know what happened after that or understand why people put up with that kind of treatment.

As I walked away, I wished she was a cheerleader waiting for her parents and looking sad after her team lost a football game. But the reality was that there was a serious loss and her parents were no where to be found.

Jeff Counts is the editor of the *Plymouth and Canton Observer Newspapers*. He can be reached at 459-2700.

Incidents of abuse aren't usually seen publicly, nor are they commonly acknowledged if suspected. But two Observer & Eccentric editors found recent incidents difficult to ignore. Acknowledging abuse is only one battle; winning the war comes in terms of getting the public involved in making abuse unacceptable, and in getting help for the abusers and the abused. Today we take a look at the problem and what you can do.

There's a guy I'd like to meet in Birmingham. He drives a late model, burgundy station wagon. I've only seen him once; it was last week as I walked from our offices on Maple across Poppleton to the grocery store for a salad.

What caught my eye about this guy, and the boy seated next to him in the front seat, was the beating the two were giving each other. The boy was about 10; the man old enough to be his father. I don't know who started it, but the man's size was apparently no reflection of his capacity for common sense.

As I walked in front of the car, I tried to catch his eye, hoping to embarrass him enough so that he would come to his senses and stop. It was the least I could do for the pretty girl with the long, dark hair who, while sitting in the back seat, tried to separate the two of them.

There probably isn't much a girl of about 16 could do in such a situation, and I, too, felt helpless. Turning one last time toward the car, I could hear the boy's screams as I watched the car turn left on to eastbound Maple.

Seeing incidents of abuse is a lot different than just reading statistics, as my colleague, Jeff Counts, attests to in the column at left. Nevertheless, reading the statistics tells one that these incidents witnessed by Jeff and myself aren't isolated ones.

Last year there were 50,125 cases of abuse/and or neglect reported statewide. A case can involve more than one child. And earlier this year, Sandra Murphy, executive director of the Child Abuse Prevention Council of Out- Wayne County told me "The rule of thumb is that for every report of abuse, there are two that go unreported."

Reaction to my story from those who have heard it have ranged from "don't get involved" to "Why didn't you call



SANDRA ARMBRUSTER

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the police?" Truth is, I never even thought of calling the police. And I guess that I lacked the courage to knock on the guy's car door window.

Calling the police would have been the correct response, according to Birmingham's Cmdr. Richard Dimmock.

"What we would have done was an investigation on the spot," Dimmock said. If the assailant were gone, police would have used a license plate number to locate him. Also helpful, according to Dimmock, would have been a description of the person, including characteristics and clothing.

"One of the problems with communities . . . is that instances of abuse aren't seen in public often," Dimmock said. "The ordinary citizen doesn't know what to do."

But how could something like this happen in wealthy, well-educated Birmingham. Fortunately, such reports are few. "If there were a dozen in the last year there were a lot; there were many more instances of spouse abuse," he said. "Just recently a husband reported abuse that was real. It's a legitimate problem, but usually the male is the abuser."

Dimmock said that police, teachers and medical personnel, if evidence of abuse is found, are required to notify the Department of Social Services by phone and later in writing.

If the incidence of abuse were still happening when police arrived, an arrest could be made. Even if it had stopped, "if it looked like more than assault and battery, an arrest could be made."

Frequently those who are abused are afraid to say anything, Dimmock said, but under what's commonly referred to as the spouse abuse law, police can make an arrest and seek a warrant. Spouse abuse is a misdemeanor, Dimmock added. It can apply to any two people cohabitating, whether of the same or opposite sexes.

Well, I learned my lesson. There are things a private person can do when witnessing or suspecting abuse.

But I would still like to meet that guy in the burgundy wagon. I'd like to tell him about a day-long parenting class being offered at 9 a.m. Saturday at the Bloomfield Township Library, Lone Pine and Telegraph, by Sinai Hospital on the "10 Greatest Gifts I Can Give My Children."

I'd like to urge him not to become just another statistic. What a gift that would be.

Sandra Armbruster is Oakland County editor for the *Eccentric Newspapers*. You can reach her by calling 901-2587.



child abuse

frustrating situations that social workers face everyday, but office workers like myself rarely see. Her story went like this. She was a couple of months pregnant and living with friends. No, she couldn't go back to her parents. They were moving, as though that was a reason they couldn't help.

She had walked to a coffee shop and was eating when her boyfriend showed up in a rage. He supposedly had seen her with some guy in a Mustang.

"He hit me three times," she said, and then added: "But I did kick his car a couple of times."

I pointed out that kicking a car is different from punching a pregnant woman in the stomach. Again there was no glimmer of understanding in her eyes.

After being knocked around, the girl, who didn't look to be much older than 19, called friends who took her to the hospital. There she sat, alone, with a possibly damaged baby in her stomach and talking to a stranger, looking for some answers.

During her stay in the emergency room, she gave me updates on the tests she was getting. Eventually, she came back crying. "Either the baby has some damage or I'll have a miscarriage."

I told her to go to the police and press charges. Again, there was no understanding in her eyes.

"I'm going to call my friends and we're going to go over and beat him up," she said.

And again, there was nothing in her eyes when I told her she could then be



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Make education a process to help your child develop

When should I visit school to discuss my child's progress? Parents ask me that question more often than almost any other. My immediate response is also the most logical: "Before your child has any problem." Now, to paraphrase Paul Harvey, let me tell you the rest of the answer.

School is not a destination but a process. It should be the catalyst or framework for everything you want for your child, intellectually, emotionally and socially. Especially during the kindergarten through 12th grade years, your school, public or private, is a natural extension of the direction you give your child's everyday growth and development.

As a parent, there are strategies you can adopt to maximize this supervision. The best analogy is with preventive medicine. Start a program to cut down on fatty foods, reduce smoking, exercise more and practice stress reduction techniques. Before you know it, you not only avoid the dreaded heart disease but learn to enjoy life more. The path to a healthier education is much the same.

There are ways to get involved. One approach is attendance and participation in formal groups, like parent-teacher associations. Volunteer efforts are also excellent. They can range from helping at extracurricular school dances or school trips, to chaperoning school dances or school trips. These experiences will give you a sounder basis for judging your school's strengths and weaknesses and the opinions of teachers and school officials.

In addition, you establish your own credibility, especially if you have taken the time to compliment teachers when justified. Everyone likes attention when things are going well, not just when there is a problem.

Be fair when there is a problem at school. Don't jump to conclusions. You already have seen your child's teachers in action or know them well, so it will be easier to objectively handle negative assessments or other problem areas. Also try not to communicate any dislike or distrust of teachers and school officials through your children. Let them form their own opinions.

You are the professional parent. This follows from my last point. You should make a formal visit as soon as you are unsure or uncomfortable about anything at school. Please discuss the is-

GUEST COLUMNIST



THOMAS HERBST

You are the professional parent. You should make a formal visit as soon as you are unsure or uncomfortable about anything at school. Please discuss the issue on an adult level, not through your children.

sure on an adult level, not through your children. Then you will be on an equal standing with teachers and school officials. We realize that we don't "know it all," any more than anyone else. A teacher, in one sense, is your employee. What is more important, he or she is also your ally.

Be organized when there is a dispute or problem at school. Don't hesitate to monitor and evaluate teachers and school officials. Some parents like to prepare a written list of questions to help them through meetings, such as we might have in hand when we visit our doctor. I like the idea. It keeps these meetings from unraveling; they are tense enough to begin with. Make notes after the meeting and consider submitting a memo to the person or group you met with. This professional, businesslike approach helps us focus on solutions to problems, not personalities.

When should parents come to school? All the time. For the school play; to help with the soccer team; to chaperone the senior trip; whenever there's even a hint of a problem. You are welcome and you are needed.

Thomas Herbst is headmaster of Kensington Academy, an independent, coed, Catholic day school for students in prekindergarten through the eighth grade.

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