

?Why doesn't she just leave?? is a question that indicates a big problem



By Brock Weir

Why doesn't she just leave?

That is a common question fielded by Lorris Herenda, Executive Director of Yellow Brick House, as she aims to increase awareness of domestic violence faced by women in York Region.

People often don't realise the obstacles in making that simple sentiment a viable option for many women in these situations.

?If she is leaving the home, she is leaving that home with only the clothes on her back and her children,? says Ms. Herenda. ?She is basically starting her life from scratch. When they come to the shelter?we are able to provide them with, obviously, shelter, but food and the basic needs. Once they leave the shelter, these women are basically starting from having to get the basic necessities that many of us take for granted. Let's face it: we want to say pay equity has taken place, but it has not. Women are still underpaid [compared to] a man for the same jobs. You add legal costs for the lawyers going through the family court system and it becomes a financial nightmare for these families and women sometimes go back to the abuser and accept those conditions of abuse because they are a little bit more financially stable and can take care of their families.?

Ms. Herenda hopes to make the question, ?Why doesn't she just leave?? a thing of the past for those attending the human rights panel hosted by the Aurora Public Library on Thursday, March 5, to coincide with International Women's Day. Ms. Herenda will serve on a panel which includes other advocates for women's rights ? and human rights as a whole ? on the local, national and international levels.

Raising public awareness of the many issues and facets relating to domestic violence is an important step towards eradicating the issue, says Ms. Herenda, adding one in four women, and their children, are living in violent homes.

?That is often met with surprise,? she says. ?There are no boundaries in who this can happen to. There are no educational or societal boundaries. Anyone can be a victim of domestic violence. It is not something that they ask for, they just find themselves in a situation with a partner that believes it is his right to control and intimidate another human being.

?Domestic violence is about power and control. I think we really need to talk about changing the system, where we address those issues and we look at the number of women that are killed.?

People are often shocked, she says, when she notes that a woman is killed in Canada every six days as a result of domestic violence, a statistic which breaks down to one woman every 12 days on the Ontario level. Domestic violence has almost become 'an acceptable occurrence' and that is the primary challenge in making a difference.

'If people hear about violence, or they suspect there might be domestic violence happening with their neighbours, they need to take a proactive approach and they need to get the police involved,' she says. 'It shouldn't be treated as private business anymore, as it has for so many years.'

It is hard to estimate whether domestic violence in York Region is on the rise. Over the last eight years, Yellow Brick House has seen their numbers double but, in turn, they have also rapidly increased their outreach and public education programs. Increasing awareness is a double-edged sword in that it is informing women that there are options, such as shelters, out there to help them get out of their situation, but that too can put stress on the amount of resources available.

'[When Police advise they] can seek services through Yellow Brick House, all of a sudden a whole new world opens up to her because she understands there are support systems in place that can help her with shelter beds, counselling or support to the legal system,' she says. 'Hence, that is just the first step on that journey that needs to take place.'

Often, a next step includes a court battle involving both the criminal and family court systems. The problem is these two court systems do not communicate with each other, says Ms. Herenda. A man might be charged with assault, but it has no impact on having access to the children and, thereby, her.

'We're trying to get the courts to really take a look at taking a holistic approach with this because if there is a criminal charge that has been perpetrated due to an assault, and hence the women, there has to be a concern for the safety of the children as well, and that is often lacking.'

Free tickets to the panel are now available at the Aurora Public Library by calling 905-727-9494 x275.