

# BIRD IN A >BY NINA SUTTON GILDED CAGE

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE OCCURS EVEN IN  
PRIVILEGED, EDUCATED COMMUNITIES  
LIKE OURS

Two manicured acres, country club membership, luxury vehicles, couture clothing, vacations to all the right places. Some families truly do enjoy the benefits of an affluent lifestyle. For others, however, the image does not accurately represent the pain of what is really happening within the confines of those perfectly appointed homes. In towns like Weston, victims are often isolated by the very privilege that people admire. With October, Domestic Violence Awareness Month, just passed, we cannot let our consciousness of this difficult subject subside.

Imagine that you are at a red light on Post Road. The woman in the next lane is driving a late model Mercedes. She is obviously well groomed, sporting designer sunglasses. While her outer appearance might be the envy of many, what they may not realize is that the woman in that car has most of her belongings (clothing, etc.) in the trunk of that car. Her husband has threatened to kill her. For now, she believes she has nowhere to go.

Residents in towns such as Weston are typically highly educated, financially successful, and enjoy an affluent lifestyle that, from the outside, often suggests a happy life. In reality, residents of such towns are not immune to the pain of emotional and physical abuse and violence. They may not even realize that what they are experiencing is actually domestic or intimate partner violence, that they are not alone, and that help is available. According to Susan Delaney of the Domestic Violence Crisis Center (DVCC) of Norwalk/Stamford, there were 42 hotline calls this past fiscal year (July 2006 –July 2007) from Weston. “We must also remember that people may not identify their town, or change the name to protect themselves or their identity.”

Women from Weston and other affluent towns attend support groups and individual counseling at the DVCC. One might wonder if these wealthier participants are experiencing emotional abuse alone, primarily from the power and control often associated with super egos. This is not the case, according to Barbara Heffernan, LCSW, LADC, a Weston psychotherapist and former Executive Director of the Domestic Violence Crisis Center of Norwalk/Stamford. “The types of abuse suffered by domestic violence victims in wealthy communities are virtually identical to the abuse suf-

ferred in low income communities,” Heffernan states. “The issue of power and control underlies all domestic violence, and in order to exert such control, a batterer uses a number of types of abuse: physical, emotional, verbal, sexual, property and/or pet abuse. A significant amount of research shows that domestic violence, including physical abuse, happens across all socioeconomic groups in the United States.”

Louise\*, a former Westonite, was going through a highly volatile divorce. She and her husband had Ivy-League credentials, and his career afforded them all the trappings of the glamorous Fairfield County lifestyle. Still, as the divorce proceedings reached a crescendo, he pushed her down the marble stairs of their home, an act of violence witnessed by their adolescent children.

Even though domestic violence is prevalent in communities such as ours, it continues to be regarded as a “private matter” and something to be kept secret. As a result, those living in violent situations are often left bearing shame, guilt and community stigma. Family members and friends are left feeling hopeless and unequipped with the necessary information and tools to reach out and lend support. Or, the abuse in relationships and families remains hidden in the painful isolation and confusing denial that surrounds the violence.

Samantha’s husband is the owner of a privately held national company. As a couple, they were enjoying a life of prosperity in one of the most elite suburbs of Fairfield County. It was not until she began meeting regularly with other mothers of young children that she began to realize that hers was not a healthy relationship. She would blame her husband’s ethnic heritage for his being more conservative in his beliefs toward women. But then she began to suspect that he was having her watched and her communication monitored. His employees were instructed to keep track of what she did with their twin sons throughout the day. After several months, she decided to take the children with her to her mother’s home across the country, without telling him of her plans, fearing reprisal. He chagrined her with abandonment. She faces court battles in Connecticut and has had to rely on friends and shelters for a place to live.

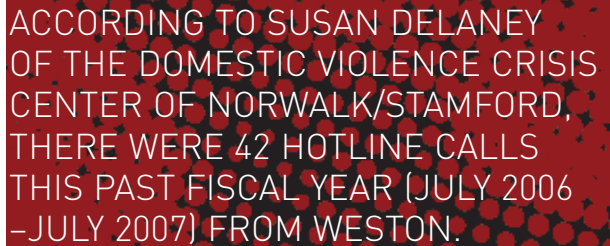
## ISOLATION

Whether the household is rich or poor, certain fundamentals pertain. The partner seeking power creates an environment that ultimately traps the victim in a state of fear, isolation, deprivation, and confusion. Domestic violence episodes are typically not random acts of violence or loss of temper. Such episodes are usually part of a complex, continuing pattern of behavior, of which the violence is one dynamic. Nevertheless, violence is as prevalent in affluent/educated relationships as others, contrary to the belief that emotional abuse tends to prevail.

According to Susan Weitzman, author of *Not to People Like Us*, “an upscale abused woman typically has not had prior exposure or experience with domestic abuse and is often shamed when it occurs in her life. Buying into the myth that it doesn’t/shouldn’t happen ‘to people like us,’ the woman keeps secret the abuses she is enduring, trying to maintain her image within her community as well as personal and professional spheres. The shame leads to isolation, which increases as her efforts to effect change with her abusive partner fails.”

## WHAT HAPPENS HERE STAYS HERE

It is often easier to maintain the façade and hide the violence when two acres buffer sound from one neighbor to another, as is the case in Weston. In an urban situation, the neighbors are in close proximity and often hear the violence. But here, as one survivor says, “It happens down the long driveway. It can easily go unnoticed.” The stigma and shame prevent victims from talking to friends. Shelters and centers seem like they are not



ACCORDING TO SUSAN DELANEY OF THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CRISIS CENTER OF NORWALK/STAMFORD, THERE WERE 42 HOTLINE CALLS THIS PAST FISCAL YEAR (JULY 2006 – JULY 2007) FROM WESTON.

mean for the educated or wealthy, with plenty of resources at their fingertips. One woman, a former Weston resident and mother of three, was very active in her children’s school and the community at large. In an effort to constrain her, her husband controlled all the cash and credit cards. He would sometimes block her cell phone service and tamper with her computer. He berated her directly and in front of her children. Her attempts to better herself by taking classes were met with ridicule. For years, divorce loomed as a 50/50 proposition. But at the insistence of her husband, she had stopped working after the birth of their first child. She had sought help through several therapists. Yet as is so often the case, she began to take on the blame for her husband’s actions. If she could only make him happy, things would be wonderful. Eventually, an acquaintance in law enforcement told her that the chain of events she was experiencing was actually a form of abuse — through control and manipulation. That person advised her to get to the Domestic Violence Crisis Center in Norwalk as soon as possible. She could not fathom that she was in “crisis.” OK, he was controlling, but that was caused by his addictions. If he would only get help, things would be fine.

## WARNING SIGNS

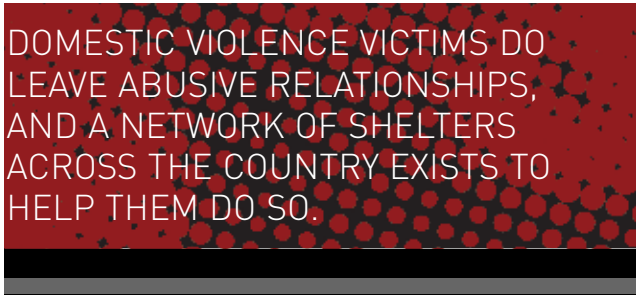
Attractive, polished and well educated, Karen\* represents a major company training other executives. At first, Karen was smitten by a handsome, charming, Ivy league-educated man. Their whirlwind romance led them to believe they wanted a life together. She describes the first warning sign as his unwillingness to take her calls at his office. Then, he wanted her to destroy any “unnecessary” credit cards. His temper started to flare, but only occasionally. “Everyone has some flaws,” she thought. Then there was the jealousy over another man’s business card in her wallet; despite his anger, the attention was kind of flattering.

Without knowing it, the insidious nature of intimate partner violence was taking hold. Karen describes it as being caught in a spider’s web, “Once you’re in, it is very difficult to extract yourself.” As more and more unsettling events occurred, Karen tried to extract herself. But, he would

## BIRD IN A GUILDED CAGE

make promises. She would pull away and he would close in. Then when she sought more intimacy and commitment, he would pull away — a sick sort of dance. Her friends saw the signs, but she did not want to believe them. Everyday was a challenge in how she could please him. Could this be the day that she would be able to make him happy — all day?

After a few attempted break-ups, there was another attempt to make things work. He would work on his anger issues. She had hope. They planned a romantic trip to the islands. Upon their arrival, she went



into the hotel to speak to some former colleagues who were also there. This sent him into a rage. After pushing her to the bed and putting a pillow over her face momentarily, he punched a hole in the wall. He booked a separate room. It seemed to be over.

Back in Connecticut, she wanted to leave things as friends. Yet time passed and they were lovers once again. It would not be long before the incident in the hotel room would be repeated, several times. The final straw came after Karen was choked nearly to death. At this point, Karen describes herself as having become “a shell of my former self.”

### GETTING HELP

According to Heffernan, one of the toughest myths to break in our society about domestic violence is that the victim “never leaves,” and that she continues to return to the relationship because there is something wrong with her. When people lack empathy for the problem of domestic violence, they probably believe these myths. People need to understand that domestic violence victims DO leave abusive relationships, and a network of shelters across the country exists to help them do so.

Ironically, it can be wealth and education that becomes a barrier to getting help. Too many times, the upscale and/or educated woman is met with the bias that she has so many advantages that she should be able to help herself. She is inadvertently re-victimized by the various systems set up to help the battered woman. “Upscale violence is also marked by the fact that the upscale batterer actually has the means, leverage, and power to make good on any threats he makes toward his partner,” according to Weitzman. There are virtually thousands of women in the United States today who have lost custody of their children due to the well-financed type of legal suits their wealthy partners were able to bring to bear against them.

According to Debra Greenwood, President and CEO of the Center for Women and Families in Bridgeport, “Women worry, ‘What would I do? Where would I go? What about my children?’ CWF provides 24-hour coverage, 365 days a year, for client crises through a hotline des-

igned solely for domestic violence victims.” The center is considering satellite offices in an attempt to reach victims in suburban areas.

Places like the DVCC are often the places where one should turn to first, before things get to a crisis state. According to Susan Delaney of the DVCC, “It is crucial to take action before things get to a crisis state. The more time he has to tear down your self-opinion, the more difficult it will be for you to believe that you deserve better treatment. The more time he has to hurt you emotionally, the more likely your energy and initiative are to diminish, so that it gets harder to muster the strength to get out. The more damage he does to your relationships with friends and family, the less support you will have for the difficult process of ending the relationship. The longer you have been living with his cycles of intermittent abuse and kind, loving behavior, the more attached you are likely to feel to him.”

The Domestic Violence Task Force of Weston is a community group of adults and students that is dedicated to raising awareness and educating itself and the community on the complex issue of domestic violence. Task Force meetings are held monthly on the first Friday of each month, at 9 am in the Town Hall Meeting Room. Each meeting includes an educational piece to further advance awareness and knowledge of the issue. All members of the public are welcome to attend Task Force meetings and events. *W*

*Nina Sutton, MA, is a former Weston resident and founder of Grow Strong, LLC. She counsels and writes about issues related to life transitions and domestic violence.*



Whether the issue is one that touches them directly, or indirectly through their family, friends or co-workers, individuals can find information and assistance from several sources in the community.

#### **Domestic Violence Crisis Center (DVCC)**

DVCC offers a 24-hour, toll-free hotline, confidential counseling, advocacy, safe housing, and public education.  
**24-hour Emergency Hotline:** (888) 774-2900  
**Norwalk Office:** 853-0418  
**Stamford Office:** 965-0049

#### **Charlene Chiang-Hillman, MSW, L.C.S.W., Director of Social Services for the Town of Weston**

Charlene provides free confidential crisis counseling, diagnosis and referral for Weston residents of any age.  
**Phone:** 222-2663  
**Email:** [chillman@weston-ct.com](mailto:chillman@weston-ct.com)

#### **Weston Police Department**

**Emergency:** 911

#### **The Center for Women and Families (CWF)**

753 Fairfield Avenue, Bridgeport  
**24-hour Emergency Hotline:** 203/384-9559  
**Statewide Toll-Free:** 888/774-2900

#### **Barbara Heffernan, LCSW**

108 East Avenue, 2nd Floor  
Norwalk, CT 06851  
203/854-9950, ext. 2