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ST. VRAIN VALLEY VOICES

Searching for answers

By JACKIE LIST
SAFE SHELTER OF
ST. VRAIN VALLEY

A sunny August day is shattered by the news that a 3-year-old child has been murdered in our community. It is unthinkable. Later, when news sources reveal that the preschooler was murdered by one of her parents, the concept is incomprehensible. The community is stunned; we cannot take it in. Our thoughts turn to the survivors, to the family who knew and loved the little girl best. We want them to know that, though we cannot imagine their pain, we stand with them in mourning the loss of this beautiful, innocent child.

Then we begin to ask, "Why did this happen?" "What did we miss?" Early statements from the Longmont Police Department indicated that nothing anyone knew about the Heydenburg family would have raised alarm. To people outside the family, even though the couple was divorcing, everything appeared to be amicable between Allyson's parents.

While we cannot make assumptions about what occurred in this relationship, we know that abuse in many relationships is a well-kept secret. Secrecy is vital to the offender's ability to maintain control over the family. Emotional and psychological abuse are sometimes difficult for even the victim to recognize. Victims' shame and confusion often prevent them from disclosing abuse even to family or friends.

We may never understand what led to the murder of Allyson Heydenburg. Violent incidents are motivated by the particular mindset of each offender. We understand, however, that family violence is most often driven by the need of one adult to maintain control

over an adult partner and their children. Offenders may use threats, intimidation and violence to accomplish their goals. When victims regain personal control by leaving abusive relationships, they and the children are at much higher risk of violence. We know, too, that children often continue to be exposed to abusive parental behavior through custody orders and court-ordered visitation. Too frequently, children become pawns in offenders' strategies to regain or retain control over their adult partners.

The incidence of family violence in our community is difficult to determine, chiefly because it often goes unreported. What we do know is that over 40 percent of the domestic violence incidents reported in Boulder County in 2010 were reported in Longmont. To avoid the misconception that Longmont is more violent than other communities, we need to focus on the key word: *reported*. Longmont residents are more diligent in responding to violence in their town and are less tolerant of family, friends and neighbors being coerced, threatened, intimidated and assaulted.

Therein lies our hope. Our residents are concerned about and engaged in the prevention of violence in our community. Our police department works diligently to respond quickly and effectively when family violence occurs. Local service organizations collaborate to provide comprehensive support, safety planning and resources to survivors.

In 2010, Safe Shelter of St. Vrain Valley served nearly 600 adults, teens and children who were experiencing domestic abuse. By June 2011, staff had provided services to 100 more individuals than were served in the

same six months last year. These are bittersweet numbers for our community. It is concerning that so much family violence and abuse occurs. It is encouraging that many more people have received information, counseling, legal advocacy, housing assistance, and referrals in 2011.

We are privileged to live in one of the most beautiful places on earth, in a wonderful community whose residents care for and protect one another. The murder of Allyson Heydenburg has shaken us; we cannot allow it to immobilize us. As a community, we can best serve Allyson and her family by continuing to work together to end interpersonal violence, and by making whatever systemic changes are necessary to better protect children.

Safe Shelter staff and volunteers would like to thank law enforcement, local community organizations and Longmont's residents for partnering with us. Together, we search for answers to the questions that surround the deaths of innocent victims; we seek the most appropriate ways to address family violence within our community before it becomes lethal; and we resolve to honor Allyson's life by using this time to strengthen our community's response to family violence in all of its forms.

For information about services and resources available for adults, teens and children who are experiencing family violence, or to learn how you can become part of positive change in our community, please visit the Safe Shelter website at www.safeshelterofstvrain.org or call our 24/7 Crisis Line at 303-772-4422.

Jackie List is executive director of Safe Shelter of St. Vrain Valley. She wrote this on behalf of the board of directors, staff and volunteers of the agency.