

by Stacie Dubay, L.M.S.W.

THE DOOR



A DOOR. A SUITCASE.

Picture a woman. She is living in fear. Every breath of every second of every minute of every day, she lives in fear of the person she loves. She is filled with hope; she is filled with despair — a seesaw of emotion that accompanies the bruises, the burns, and the scars to her body...to her heart. One day she finally finds the courage to walk through the door, taking with her only a suitcase filled with years of living.

I have worked with survivors of domestic violence for over eleven years as a counselor at a domestic violence shelter, and I feel honored and privileged to have shared in their lives. Some of them have been forced into prostitution, had cigarettes put out on their bodies, slept in dog feces, lost family ties, been beaten with belts, brooms, hangers, guns — all by a person who tells them they love them. And through it all, these women find the strength and courage to pick themselves up (and their children) and walk through the door to face a new day. Sometimes they are able to break free. Sometimes they are not. I am also

a survivor of domestic violence and I created “The Door” to honor the strength and courage of women who have experienced domestic violence and to encourage others to take action. I want survivors to know they are not alone, and I want people to finally understand the answer to the often-repeated question of “Why don’t you just leave?”

As you look at the door, you will see that one side is full of positive messages, while the other side portrays the darker images of abuse and violence. In a domestic violence relationship, the line between the good times and the bad times isn’t always so clear. The suitcase in the middle of the door represents this. If you open the suitcase up, you can see through to the other side of the door. In the suitcase are mementos of happy times, reminders of scary, hurtful times. The suitcase symbolizes the life of the woman traveling from victimization to freedom from an abusive relationship. She may have finally broken free from the past, but the memories will always be with her.



In 2004, I was asked to participate in a domestic violence documentary and share my experiences within a lesbian battering relationship as well as create art on film. The documentary fell through, but I completed my part of the project — an interactive, traveling art exhibit entitled “A Woman’s Journey from Domestic Violence Victim to Survivor” constructed to encourage thought and action as people go about their daily activities. I began creating art as both a physical and emotional escape from my batterer, who was also my first lesbian relationship.

Statements on the door illustrate experiences I have heard in my work and the suitcases reflect my individual struggles as a survivor. Viewers are invited to walk through the door and open the suitcases. Survivors are invited to sign the back of the door. A comment book, artist statement, resource materials, and information are available to the public.

“A Woman’s Journey from Domestic Violence Victim to Survivor” has been displayed in publicly accessible locations such as a coffee shop, Lansing City Hall, university campuses, the Michigan State Capitol, a Judge’s courtroom, a gay and lesbian community center, and a local hospital. In February 2008, the exhibit found an online home at Gift from Within, a non-profit organization for survivors of trauma

and victimization with resources for survivors, caregivers, and professionals on posttraumatic stress disorder (<http://giftfromwithin.org/html/artpage3.html>). Encouraging comments to the online display have been received from over 20 states and other countries including Canada, Italy, and Switzerland.

Art has the power to foster change and this piece has accomplished more than I could have imagined over the past several years. This traveling interactive art exhibit has inspired a variety of responses: a law professor taught her class in domestic law around it; a men's group organized an event to discuss men's roles in ending violence; several eighth grade boys wrote heart-warming letters about being positively affected by viewing the door during a class trip; a domestic violence victim contacted her local domestic violence agency for services after seeing the exhibit at a local coffee shop.

With the exhibit as an instrument, I have spoken about my experiences as a survivor at area events. I am currently sharing my experience

in a case study for an article addressing lesbian relationship violence as well as for a website gallery that will serve as a resource of hope and healing.

Through art, I hope to continue to educate communities, encourage dialogue, motivate others and validate others' experiences. My goal is to increase visibility and inspire communities to take action. Just as the title refers to a woman's journey, the art exhibit is taking its own journey and hopefully inspiring others to join in. ▼

Stacie Dubay is the Counseling Supervisor at End Violent Encounters (EVE), Inc. in Lansing, Michigan (www.eveinc.org). Although she has been working in the field of domestic violence for eleven years, in the past six years, she has served as a field instructor for over 70 master's level and doctoral level student interns. She received her Masters Degree in Social Work from Grand Valley State University and her B.S. in Psychology from Michigan State University. She is a member of the Michigan Maternal Mortality Surveillance Team (MMMS), a multidisciplinary committee that reviews injury related maternal mortality cases within the state of Michigan to design strategies for reducing such deaths. She may be contacted by calling (517) 372-3382 ext 22 or by email at stacdubay@sbcglobal.net.

“The door in the art gallery moved me and touched my heart. The way the men were treating these women was devastating. It made me want to help these women and more women who are having trouble like that.” –eighth grade boy

Did You Know

- One in every four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime.
- An estimated 1.3 million women are victims of physical assault by an intimate partner each year.
- The majority (73%) of family violence victims are female. Females were 84% of spousal abuse victims and 86% of abuse victims at the hands of a boyfriend.
- Historically, females have been most often victimized by someone they knew.
- Females who are 20-24 years of age are at the greatest risk for intimate partner violence.

Children Who Witness

- Witnessing violence between one's parents or caretakers is the strongest risk factor of transmitting violent behavior from one generation to the next.
- Boys who witness domestic violence are twice as likely to abuse their own partners and children when they become adults.
- 30% to 60% of perpetrators of intimate partner violence also abuse children in the household.

Sexual Assault and Stalking

- One in six women and one in 33 men have experienced an attempted or completed rape.
- Nearly 7.8 million women have been raped by an intimate partner at some point in their lives.
- 1 in 12 women and 1 in 45 men will be stalked in their lifetime.
- 81% of women stalked by a current or former intimate partner are also physically assaulted by that partner; 31% are also sexually assaulted by that partner.

Homicide and Injury

- Almost one-third of female homicide victims that are reported in police records are killed by an intimate partner.
- 76% of homicide (the act of killing a woman) victims had

been stalked by the person who killed them.

- Less than one-fifth of victims reporting an injury from intimate partner violence sought medical treatment following the injury.
- Intimate partner violence results in more than 18.5 million mental health care visits each year.

Economic Impact

- The cost of intimate partner violence exceeds \$5.8 billion each year, \$4.1 billion of which is for direct medical and mental health services.
- Victims of intimate partner violence lost almost 8 million days of paid work because of the violence perpetrated against them by current or former husbands, boyfriends and dates. This loss is the equivalent of more than 32,000 full-time jobs and almost 5.6 million days of household productivity as a result of the violence.
- There are 16,800 homicides and \$2.2 million (medically treated) injuries due to intimate partner violence annually, which costs \$37 billion.

Reporting Rates

- Only approximately one-quarter of all physical assaults, one-fifth of all rapes, and one-half of all stalkings perpetuated against females by intimate partners are reported to the police.
- Domestic violence is one of the most chronically underreported crimes.

Protection Orders

- Approximately 20% of the 1.5 million people who experience intimate partner violence annually obtain civil protection orders.
- The time immediately after a protection order is served can be a particularly dangerous time for the victim.

Domestic Violence Facts. National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Retrieved April 11, 2008 from <http://www.ncadv.org/files/domesticviolencefacts.pdf>