

Editor's note: Following is the story of one woman, but it is much like the stories of many battered women, Native and non-Native, all around Alaska. Because of the personal nature of the account, we have used a pseudonym to protect this woman's privacy.

Here is a list of telephone numbers women can call if they need some kind of help, shelter or counseling because of domestic violence:

Anchorage: AWAIC hotline (24 hours), 272-0100; AWRC, 276-0528; ASRAA, 277-7043.
Kenai: Women's Resource Center, 283-9479.
Homer: South Peninsula Women's Center, 235-8100.
Juneau: AWARE, 586-1090.
Valdez: 835-2999.
Palmer: Valley Women's Center, 746-4080.

Kotzebue: Women's Crisis Phone, 442-3969.

Fairbanks: Women in Crisis, 452-2293.

Bethel: Tundra Women's Coalition, 543-3444 (days) or 543-3424 (evenings).

Nome: Bering Straits Women's Center, 443-5491 or 443-5444.

A story of violence, fear — and hope

by G.D. Renkes
for the Tundra Times

The "polite" term for what has happened to Mary is "domestic violence." But there's no polite way to describe the welts, the bruises and the anguish Mary felt after all the times her husband beat her up.

Mary comes from a large Native family and grew up in a small village in Southeast. She was raised by her grandparents, who were "strict and religious." Mary says she led a "sheltered" life, so when she moved away from home at the age of 17 to get married and move Outside, it was a big change. It turned out to be a violent change as well.

Mary's husband beat her up again and again. She escaped the beatings by returning to Alaska.

"When I returned, most of my family was gone," she says. "I met my second husband and moved to his village."

But while a new marriage and another move may have changed some things in Mary's life, things did not change in one important way.

"The violence started a week before we were married," says Mary. "He was married before and from what I have learned, she [his first wife] went through the same thing."

The facts about domestic violence are alarming, but they have only recently come to light. In 1975, a major national survey shattered the notion that battering is a rare and inconsequential occurrence in America. At that time, the researchers estimated that more than 1.7 million Americans had faced a spouse wielding a knife or a gun; well over 2 million were estimated to have been severely beaten by a spouse. Another survey in 1985 showed the violent trends rising, and Alaska is no exception.

Men who beat their wives give a lot of reasons for their actions, and Mary's experience fits that mold.

"He kept telling me it was Vietnam, that was what his problem was. He could have gotten help from the V.A. [Veterans' Administration] or . . . A.N.S. [Alaska Native Services], but he didn't want it. He just wanted to do what he always wanted to do, which was fish in the summer and do nothing all winter."

"The seasonal work creates a problem because people have more time to think and more time to blame each other. You can't get out unless you have the money, and during the winter people don't have the money," Mary says.

The seasonal work problem wasn't the only cause for the eight years of beatings Mary got at the hands of her second husband, she says. "My husband couldn't keep a job because of his use of alcohol and drugs. He needed a punching pole and I was it. I got beat up on my birthday every year. I don't know why."

"He usually never bruised me where people could see. He would hit me on my arms and my legs and the back of my head. I kept sticking around and hoping it would change but it didn't."

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The people Mary consulted, from Alcoholics Anonymous to the psychiatrist she went to see, said things wouldn't change until her husband controlled his alcohol and drug abuse and found a steady job.

Melinda Fremon, a counselor who Mary said helped her a great deal, says that the reasons men beat up their wives are more complex. Fremon, who works with the Association for Stranded Rural Alaskans in Anchorage (ASRAA), explains that while some batterers are substance abusers, others are not.

Fremon cites more subtle psychological reasons. First of all, violence is a highly effective means of control. After one or more beatings, a victim tried hard to avoid another assault. That often means catering to the whims and wishes of the abuser.

Fremon also cites a simple physical reason for the violence: Men batter because they can. In most cases, no one has told them they must stop.

Mary, who has since been granted a divorce from the second husband, said the man's violent behavior could also be traced back to his own family. "At first I didn't understand his family. They were very old fashioned. Their views and values are from a long time ago."

"Women weren't supposed to do anything but listen to their husbands, and it was his right to beat on you. That's the way they raised their sons."

This type of pattern is not unusual, says Fremon of ASRAA. Domestic violence tends to get worse — and more frequent — as time goes by. And it is often a "like father, like son" kind of situation — the pattern follows from one generation to the next.

Even if the children themselves are not victims of the batterings, they get the message that "this is how families behave," says Fremon. ASRAA works hard to tell people that this is NOT how families ought to behave, but getting help to victims isn't always easy.

Mary herself says that in the villages, law enforcement authorities such as Village Public Safety Officers "just close their eyes to the violence."

"They figure it's just domestic and they'll be back with each other and it will be all over."

So the cycle continues. But even when women in the villages get help, it isn't always the best kind. The first time Mary sought medical help for a violent beating — her husband had thrown her through a glass door — the doctor took care of the physical injuries, but the help for her mental

duress wasn't the kind Mary needed.

"The doctor that was picking glass out of my back saw that I was a nervous wreck so he put me on medication."

"They had me on mood stabilizers for two years — 16 pills a day," says Mary. "I was walking around like a zombie, unable to help myself. I felt like the whole world was against me."

The medication wasn't helping Mary at all, so she gradually managed to wean herself off it. But she was still in a violent home.

So, why didn't Mary stay away? And why do so many other battered women remain in such brutal circumstances?

The reasons, according to Melinda Fremon, are many.

Some women are paralyzed by fear. They worry that if they do something about the violence, their husbands will step up their abuse.

Some women are stalled by lack of money. A trip away from the village and the costs of living away are just too great for most women. In other cases, their husbands are the sole support for the family.

Mary says breaking the cycle of abuse and starting a new life is tough, but it can be done if the victim gets help from the right people.

Some women simply don't know where to go. Counseling, medical help and financial support services are often non-existent in the villages.

And for many women, the pressure from family and from the culture to keep the family together at all costs often keep them from walking away from violence.

As Mary explains, "After I left, his family would not leave me alone no matter where I would go. I could either go and take my lumps, go back with him, or leave and take their abuse. They would say to me, 'You belong to this family and you do as we say, not as you want to do.'"

Mary also got caught in the cycle of violence, promises to stop, more violence and more promises.

"Promises made me go back," she says. "Promises that he would go to AA. Promises that he would change and that I'd have a new home. Just promises and thinking things would be different. I thought I was still in love with him, but I wasn't."

"When I was away from him I felt I had no choice. I had to go back. I was physically handicapped from my injuries so I couldn't work. I couldn't make it on my own and his family kept calling, telling me to come back. It was a lot of pressure."

Ultimately, Mary refused to give in to that pressure. She stayed away with the help of Melinda Fremon and ASRAA, Alcoholics Anonymous, Alaska Native Services, and a fierce inner strength that came "from a higher power, from God."

But like so many other women in her situation, Mary left for the final time because her husband went much too far in his abuse.

"When I left for good he had gotten carried away and used my face. He broke my ankle and shattered my nose to where I couldn't breathe, and he did it in front of my father. That's when I knew I couldn't keep going back," she says.

With surgery and strong support from the services in Anchorage, Mary has gotten her life together. ASRAA helped her in her divorce proceedings. A son from the first marriage lives in town and has helped her "a lot," she says. And, of course, her spiritual strength has made a great deal of difference.

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"It was difficult to leave the relationship. I had to leave a lot of the things I valued. I just had to pack what I could in a suitcase . . . and just close my eyes and say that's the end of that chapter and go on."

"It was hard but I had to try not to think about it, which hurt. I had to start from scratch, brand new, and not let him know where I was at."

"You get married with the idea that you're married for good and that you're going to have someone there to take care of you. You have to realize that you're on your own and not think about him."

"I want to tell others who have been beaten not to go back, even though it hurts. Because if you go back it's going to hurt worse."