

Working to end DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

By Kathryn Kingsbury

A background in limnology — the study of inland bodies of water — isn't exactly what one would expect for the executive director of a social services agency that serves more than 2,500 clients annually. But then again, Shannon Barry of Domestic Abuse Intervention Services (DAIS) seems to specialize in the unexpected — like choreographing musicals.

Yes, the executive director of DAIS mapped out the dance routines to the 2004 premiere of *Walmartopia*, the musical satire by Madisonians Catherine Capellaro and Andrew Rohn that went off-Broadway in 2007. Barry has studied dance since she was seven years old and began teaching it at age 17.

So how did she end up in social work? It happened not too long after her 1996 graduation from Lawrence University in Appleton. A talented scientist, Barry took a job at the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in her hometown of Madison. But it was only a matter of months before she realized she needed a profession that brought her into contact with more people. "I decided I could not spend the rest of my life in a lab," she says.

She moved to Seattle, Wash., where she took a job in a group home for teens who were transitioning out of the criminal justice system. "What was just so sad was how many young people were being directed to juvenile justice," she says. "They were reacting to violence they'd experienced."

Barry realized something else, too: She loved working with these kids as much as she

disliked working in a lab. Barry had always had an affinity for social issues; "I was raised by a feminist. ... There was always a commitment to social justice in our house and giving back to our community," she says. But it hadn't occurred to her to make a career out of it.

So she moved back to Madison to study social work as a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin. She wasn't exactly a fish out of water. Besides her experience at the group home in Seattle, she had been involved in sexual assault prevention in college, serving as one of two student representatives on a university-wide policy committee.

All these experiences — her feminist upbringing, her desire to break the cycle of violence that flung young people into crime, her connections with women who had survived sexual assault — made her jump at the opportunity to work at DAIS when a program coordinator position opened up in 1999.

"Truly, at the core of what we're doing is homicide prevention," she says about her work there.

Barry rattles off some sobering statistics: Domestic abuse affects a quarter of all women. One in three arrests in Dane County is related to domestic violence. And, although battered women are frequently blamed for staying in abusive relationships, they often do so to prevent even worse violence. "Nationally, victims are six times more likely to be killed while trying to leave," Barry says.

The staff and volunteers at DAIS are

trying to bring down those numbers through a number of programs:

- A 25-bed shelter for women and children that gives them a safe space away from the batterer.
- A 24-hour crisis hotline (251-4445 or 800-747-4045) that received 6,600 calls in 2007.
- A team of legal advocates who help victims of abuse or stalking to negotiate the justice system.
- A drop-in support group for community members experiencing abuse from their partners. (DAIS used to offer more drop-in groups, but funding cuts forced a reduction.)
- Programming for children in households where domestic violence is an issue.
- Educating law enforcement and human services professionals about domestic abuse.
- Programs for adolescent males to prevent dating violence and sexual assault.

Barry played a pivotal role in starting programs for adolescents at DAIS. "No one was talking about teen dating violence when I started here," she says, even though it is closely tied to domestic violence. She was given the go-ahead to launch a program geared toward teens and teamed up with school social workers to teach students relationship skills and how to address conflicts

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To reach DAIS

Crisis Hotline: 608-251-4445 or 1-800-747-4045
www.abuseintervention.org

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— Shannon Barry



without coercion.

That program has since lost its funding, but DAIS continues to partner with other Dane County agencies on violence prevention among teens. The multiagency DELTA Project works with adolescent males on developing “healthy masculinity not rooted in violence,” Barry explains. It has two components. The Fraternity Action Coalition trains fraternity members at UW-Madison to bring sexual assault prevention strategies to their organizations, while Men Encouraging Nonviolent Strength (MENS) clubs in the Madison Metropolitan School District and community centers reach high school-aged males.

Barry’s commitment to youth even led her to leave DAIS for two years to work with the Madison school district’s Affiliated Alternatives program, which provides customized education to at-risk adolescents. She returned to DAIS in February 2007 as executive director.

“When the executive director position came up, I thought, ‘There’s no way I’m ready for that,’” Barry recalls, but the DAIS board thought otherwise. Her self-described “Type A” personality, combined with an absolute passion for ending domestic violence, makes her an effective leader. “I look forward to coming to work,” she says. DAIS, she says, is “an incredibly joyful place to work.”

Really?

Her answer is an emphatic “yes.” Certainly, the things that victims of abuse have been through are horrifying. But Barry gains incredible hope from their willingness to better their lives and to reach out to other victims of abuse. “To be in a support group and witness the transformation, and to watch how women can transcend their own pain to help someone else, is inspiring,” she says.

Barry is confident that society can change so that domestic abuse is no longer accepted. She points to the breast cancer movement as a model. “Years ago, nobody ever talked about breast cancer. Now, everywhere you look, somebody’s talking about breast cancer. Statistically, breast cancer affects one in eight women. Domestic violence affects one in four. ... As women, we have an ethical responsibility to stand up and address this issue.”



Kathryn Kingsbury is a Madison-based writer.