

# Making a Difference

Autumn 2010

The Newsletter of the

Domestic Violence

Resource Center

of South County

RI Helpline 800-494-8100

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... Hope and help for all persons in abusive relationships



(Left) Renee Brissette, a SOAR member (Sisters Overcoming Abusive Relationships) spoke at the press conference held at Roger Williams Zoo and testified in the House hearing for the Domestic Violence Child Safety bill in 2010.

visitation.” The report, “Safety for Children,” published in 2010 by Sisters Overcoming Abusive Relationships (SOAR) and the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence (RICAD), studied 101 Rhode Island survivors of abusive relationships. The findings concluded that many victims considered **supervised** visitation as one way to achieve safety for their children, although the report noted that many victims noted flaws in the system.

In our present family court, very few cases cite alleged domestic violence in the complaint, even when a valid restraining order is in effect. This failure to raise domestic violence issues in child custody cases demonstrates a lack of understanding about the risks facing children. “Pettinato vs. Pettinato” is a landmark case that provides “the best interest of the child” guidelines in our state. This case law does NOT mention domestic violence or abuse as a fact to consider in the best interest of the child. It is up to the victim to prove that the abuser will be an unfit parent, or should require supervised visitation, because the court has minimized the effects of domestic violence on children.

So, a victim once again has to worry that the abuse and fear may not stop for the children after a divorce. Frustrated? The six sister domestic violence agencies in Rhode Island

## Freedom From Fear: Your Children

In 2010, we have been talking about “Freedom from Fear,” and most of our supporters have a good understanding that victims fear their abusers for a number of reasons. In fact, leaving an abuser is when a victim is most in danger of physical harm escalating, sometimes to homicide.

Often, knowing that your children witness or experience abuse is the catalyst that enables a victim to leave a harmful relationship. However, divorce does not always end the fear. Startling statistics report that “71% of children in a Rhode Island survey were abused by the abusive parent,” and “53% of this abuse happened during

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Women's Night in Wickford volunteers Pat Hiss, Kay Buttamusco, & DVRCS staff Garrie Borden and Caroline Soares pose with Silent Witnesses.



Nanci Millin of Bay Realty, Gwen Woods, owner of Hanson's Pub, and Mary Jane Long, formerly with Randall Realtors, raised funds for victims of domestic violence.



Toby and Charlie Roberts raised funds at a Battle of the Brothers event held at Meritage Restaurant.



Megan Whelan, DVRCS Education Coordinator, and Marc Ladin, author of *The Playground Bully Blues*, promote his book and awareness of bullying issues.



(Clockwise from top left) Dancing with the South Kingstown Stars planners Jeanne Abate, South Kingstown Chamber of Commerce Director Joe Iaco, DVRCS Garrie Borden, and Master of Ceremonies Courtney Hunter of People's Credit Union are pleased with the response. Russ Maitland, Executive Director of Courthouse Center for the Arts, dances with DVRCS Executive Director Mary Roda, also a planner. The Courthouse Center for the Arts troupe kick up their heels.

are working with SOAR and RICADV to promote a bill introduced last year “that will be re-introduced next year at the State House.” The Domestic Violence Child Safety Bill emulates a similar bill passed in 24 states and the District of Columbia. The bill will establish a classification of domestic abuse risk in child custody and visitation cases where domestic violence is present. In plain and easy language, it will be up to the abuser to prove that he/she deserves visitation with his/her children despite evidence that “a serious incident of domestic abuse or a course of conduct of domestic abuse” has occurred.

In South County, we have an additional burden that the current Family Court Supervised Visitation Program is held in Providence. Most working parents find it a hardship to drive to Providence on a regular basis. Without funding, however, we cannot develop a similar program in Washington County.

The Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence is writing a federal grant proposal to establish a Mobile Visitation Unit (MVU) to provide supervised visitation statewide. It is estimated that this service would meet the needs of 600 families during a 12-month period, including both rural and urban communities, families of different cultural backgrounds, and children ranging from toddlers to teenagers. The MVU would be staffed with professionals, including clinical specialists and advocates. It would travel statewide as needed, including Washington County, with a statewide Coordinator setting the schedules and responsible for the management. This innovative traveling program would provide a safe place for custody exchanges, for visitation, and for counseling appointments. There are no guarantees that the grant money will be awarded to Rhode Island, but at least we are trying and have put together a plan.

Currently freedom from fear for children is not possible for many victims of relationship violence. According to “Safety for Children,” 75% of the surveyed victims’ children expressed fear of the abusive parent. Passage of the Domestic Violence Child Safety Bill and funding for a Mobile Visitation Unit would be giant leaps, not baby steps, forward -- not only for the children’s and parents’ peace of mind, but to help break the cycle of violence. We know that many child witnesses and victims either become abusers or victims themselves as adults.



## A TRUE SOUTH COUNTY STORY

*One of our clients in South County told us that “tears came to my eyes as I read the draft article [about the proposed Domestic Violence Child Safety Bill]. She added, “It’s too late for me, but if this bill passes, it will help so many others.” Deb (not her real name) has attended DVRCS support groups for a number of years. She says her custody and visitation court proceedings continued for well over a year. This is her story:*

My divorce settlement was nerve-racking, but we arranged supervised visitation with even his relatives able to act as the third party present. The first year went fine, and then my husband did not see his children for two years. He took me back to court to reduce his child support and change our visitation settlement.

It was a lot of work to document his pattern of abuse to demonstrate that his neglect and scare tactics were not just random acts of an immature and irresponsible man. The courts want to reunite families, and the burden of proof was on me. The judges and attorneys didn’t even seem concerned that he didn’t see his children for two years. Isn’t neglect a form of abuse? They even brought up the “time card” with “that was four years ago” implicating “give the guy a break. He wants to see his kids and make it better.” My ex-husband lied to and manipulated the children and me, and he lied and manipulated in the courtroom.

The attorneys and judges seemed to feel that I was trying to “get back” at my ex-husband. His abuse was more verbal and emotional, but it scared our children, and there was some physical abuse. The attorney and judges thought that I was acting like an overly-protective mother and made too much of my ex-husband’s behavior. They minimized the difficulty of putting up with his verbal abuse, intimidation tactics and irresponsible actions. They said in my case, the abuse was not that bad. They practically accused me of not wanting to move forward. In actuality, I wanted to be fair and let him see his children, but I also wanted to ensure that the children felt emotionally safe. They had been scared to be alone with him and still have issues of anxiety and lack of trust. I felt mentally intimidated by everyone in the court process and felt like I had to defend myself.

We finally settled on one daytime and one unsupervised overnight visit per month. I worry and lose sleep every time my children go for an overnight visit. It’s getting a little better now that they are older, but I still have fear of his erratic and vindictive behavior. People should take our fear more seriously.

# 2010 Fall Shopping Boutique

A fundraising benefit for the Domestic Violence Resource Center of South County

## The Ocean House

One Bluff Avenue  
Watch Hill, RI

Tuesday September 28  
Gala Preview Party, 6-8pm  
\$50/supporter or \$100/patron

Wednesday, September 29  
Shopping, 10am-5pm

Thursday, September 30  
Shopping, 10am-3pm

**Shop a fabulous collection offered by clothing and gift vendors from across the country  
gathered together in a single location for your shopping pleasure.  
Shop for holiday gifts or indulge yourself!**

Catch All Gifts CM MDesigns Trillion Janet Egan Designs Richard Tsao Tish Bodell Hopkins Loweco The Belted Cow Company  
Notables M. Swenson Monograms Indo Chic AND MUCH, MUCH MORE!

Complimentary valet parking  
A percentage of all sales will be donated to DVRCSC

For questions regarding this boutique or the Preview Party, call Susan Stone at 789-5562 or email [Suestonecroft@msn.com](mailto:Suestonecroft@msn.com).

NEWSLETTER BY  
Carrie Borden

Visit our website  
for special event  
updates. We offer  
many ways to have  
fun and support  
our work to help  
victims of  
domestic violence.

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