

## Enlisting the Aid of Hairstylists as Sentinels for Domestic Abuse

Martha Castillo knew her client had a problem because their weekly hair-straightening sessions were always interrupted by phone calls from a boyfriend angrily accusing her of being with another man. Magda Florentino noticed cigarette burns on a woman's temples when she pulled back her hair for washing — and did not buy the explanation that they had happened accidentally while she was bartending.

And Candida Vasquez received a hysterical call from a customer soon after she had spent three hours knitting extensions into the woman's hair. Her boyfriend hated the look, and in a fit of rage he had cut off not only the extensions, but also the rest of her hair.

Ms. Vasquez said she was not surprised by the call. Troubled clients tell her their personal stories all the time. "They are so tormented, they just come in and share," she said.

The privileged, often therapeutic relationship between hairdressers and clients has long been the subject of magazine articles and movies. A growing movement in New York and across the nation tries to harness that bond to identify and prevent domestic violence, a pervasive problem that victims are often too ashamed to reveal to law enforcement or other public officials.

Ms. Vasquez, Ms. Castillo and Ms. Florentino are all stylists in Manhattan who have been trained (or are being trained) as part of a one-year-old program by the city's Administration for Children's Services in beauty salons in the Washington Heights area, where many cases of domestic abuse and neglect include violence that is not necessarily aimed at children.

The initiative joins similar efforts that have been sprouting across the nation; perhaps the best known, called Cut It Out and based in Chicago, has trained 40,000 salon workers in all 50 states to recognize signs of domestic abuse. In the past few months, the Cut It Out program was also adopted by the Empire Education Group, which has 87 cosmetology schools, and endorsed by the American Association of Cosmetology Schools, the trade organization representing another 800 schools.

Nearly 600,000 women and girls and 144,000 men and boys nationwide were victims of violence by an intimate partner in 2006, according to the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics. In New York last year, the police received hundreds of domestic disturbance calls every day and recorded about 55,000 crimes connected to domestic violence.

Neither the city's program nor the much larger Cut It Out, founded in 2002, tracks how many women the programs have referred for help, so it is hard to assess their effectiveness. But law enforcement officials in New York and nationally have praised the beauty-shop approach for reaching a population that normally hides from authorities.

Kathy Ryan, chief of the Domestic Violence Unit of the New York Police Department, said that battered women were such a hard population to reach that "preventing even one death should be considered success."

The police have tried doing outreach to victims by, among other things, setting up domestic violence-education tables at community events, only to find that no one wants to be seen near them. But the atmosphere is different in the safety of a beauty salon.

"The salon may be one of the few places women might be without their abuser around," said Laurie Magid, a former state prosecutor who is acting United States attorney for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania. "This program really



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Divas Unisex Hair Salon in Inwood is one beauty shop where stylists are being trained to recognize signs of domestic abuse.

addresses a need. You don't have a case unless you have a crime reported in the first place and that is the difficult area of domestic violence."

While Cut it Out trains stylists offsite, the Washington Heights workshops, conducted in Spanish, take place inside beauty parlors during the hours that clients are served. This not only makes it easier for people to participate, but also enhances the comfort factor.

"The salon is a place where everyone already feels at home," said Sharon Kagawa of the Administration for Children's Services, the agency that recruits salons for the program. "So they can be more honest."

The Washington Heights program started in 2007, when a woman walked into the Porto Pelo Unisex salon, just north of the George Washington Bridge, and unashamedly began telling her story to everyone in shouting distance.

She told of how her children had been removed from her home by the city because her husband beat them and her, but said she could not leave him because she feared deportation. As she wept, stylists and customers gathered around to offer comfort, but they had little advice on how to get help.

But Ingrid Dominguez, the director of the child welfare agency's Washington Heights Family Preservation Program, who happened to be getting her hair done at Porto Pelo that day, knew where to get help. She knew all about nearby therapy and community resources, and knew all about violence in the home. She estimated that domestic violence was the root cause of about 95 percent of the hundreds of cases that crossed her desk each year, some as seemingly simple as student absenteeism.

"The child in question would have missed school, but it was to stay home and protect the mother," Ms. Dominguez said in an interview. "Or they would be getting bad grades, but it was because they were so worried they could not concentrate."

The episode gave Ms. Dominguez the idea of recruiting salons to help fight domestic abuse. Since then, the city has trained 116 stylists at 19 salons across Washington Heights and Inwood. Most were familiar with the problem; at the Tauro Unisex Salon, one of the first beauty shops to sign up, a stylist was killed right out front by a jealous lover in 2004.

The plan is to reach all of the roughly 400 salons in the neighborhood in the next four years. "We love our salons up here," Ms. Dominguez said. "By our research, we have one on every

block on the main avenues."

The point of the training is not to turn stylists into law enforcement officials, but to teach them how to identify victims and let them know their options.

The message was hammered home at a recent mid-morning training session at the Divas Unisex Hair Salon, a 10-chair shop on Dyckman Street in Inwood. Karina Vargas, a social worker, set up a projector on a counter between vases of orchids, flashing slides on the red walls as the stylists, all speaking Spanish, snacked on doughnuts and casually offered up abuse stories.

Ms. Florentino worked on a client's hair as she told shared the story of the woman with cigarette burns on her temples. She spoke through a translator, as did all the other stylists. Never pausing from unrolling curlers, then tugging hair out under the hiss of the dryer, she said she had grown impatient and told the woman that if she would not listen to her warnings, she should stop coming there to get her hair done. And the woman stopped coming.

Over the drone of the dryer, Ms. Vargas gently explained that turning the woman away was probably the wrong move. Instead, she suggested patiently offering advice on resources like domestic-violence shelters. "She is the professional in her own relationship," she said. "Only she knows when to leave."

Next time, Ms. Florentino said, she would handle it differently.

Suddenly, her client, Aida Sosa, stood up to admire her hair and, in a puff of hairspray, burst out with her own story. "When my children were small, I was verbally abused," she said. "I had to get out of it in my own time."

Sonia Nieves, the owner of Sonia's Beauty Center on 180th Street in Washington Heights, said she had already seen results since the trainers visited in February. The material about domestic violence that child welfare gives her to pass out, including phone numbers for resources like nearby safe houses and counseling, disappears quickly.

She said she has intervened with a client who said her husband punched her in front of their children. After Ms. Nieves gave her the information about available services, the woman called recently to say things were getting better. Ms. Nieves said she was unsure whether the client had left her husband or was working it out at home.

"I will find out when she comes in to get her hair done," she said. ■