

Stand up to domestic violence

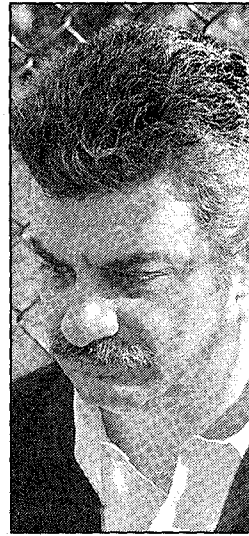
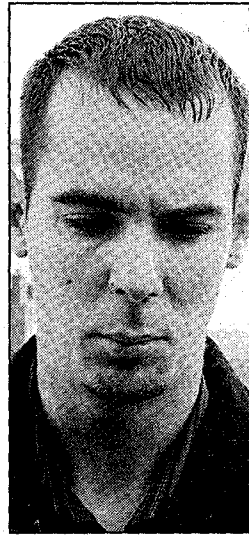
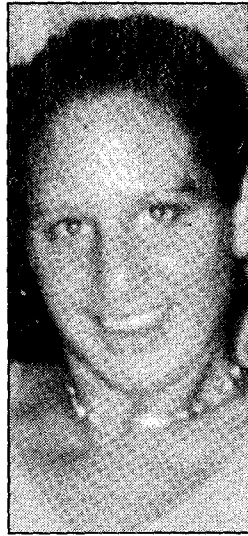
■ Shame, fear and the hope for change must be overcome in cases where the outcome is sometimes deadly

BY CLAUDIA GRYVATZ COPQUIN

A tree is to be dedicated today at the School for Language and Communications Development in Glen Cove, in remembrance of Bethpage teacher Leah Walsh. It's a good time also to recall Carol Kotsopoulos, Lisa Solomon and Annie DiMassino, Long Island women who met violent death at the hands of their husbands — husbands who then attempted to cover up the murders.

In the most recent case, Leah Walsh, 29, was allegedly strangled by her husband of three years. In a scheme to stage her abduction, police say, William Walsh dumped his wife's body in the woods off a service road of the LIE. They say he flattened a tire on her car, tossing her pocketbook out on the grass, and, to throw everyone off, reportedly sent a warm text message to himself from her cell phone.

Then, as if in a rerun of the Scott Peterson case in California and the Mark Hacking case in Utah — both claimed their wives had disappeared, when instead they had murdered them — Walsh pleaded emotionally



From left, Leah Walsh, allegedly killed by her husband, William Walsh; and Carol Kotsopoulos, whose husband, Nikolaos Kotsopoulos, was convicted of murdering her

for his wife's safe return.

For all the hotlines, studies, agencies, orders of protection and public-awareness campaigns, domestic violence runs rampant in our culture. The Women's Center at Southern Connecticut State University estimates there are 28 million battered women in the United States. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, one in every four women will experience domestic abuse in her lifetime.

As a mother of girls, I find those statistics terrifying. My heart goes out to Leah Walsh's parents.

Historically, domestic violence has been underreported. Victims are ashamed or afraid to seek help, or they feel the batterers will miraculously change.

Indeed, Walsh, who had separated once from her husband,

had never called Nassau County police to report abuse and there was no known criminal history of domestic abuse. But Amy Barasch, executive director of the New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, suggests it's likely she had been victimized before her murder.

"It's unusual to go from zero to 100," Barasch says, meaning, frequently there's a pattern of abuse before femicide.

Such appears to have been the case for Manhasset's Carol Kotsopoulos, who was killed by her husband in 2002 and whose diary mentioned beatings.

A typical abuser is a person who wants power and control over someone else, explains Mindy Perlmutter, director of education at the Nassau County Coalition Against Domestic Violence, and abuse by an intimate

partner can take many forms: psychological, physical, emotional, sexual, financial. The abuser can be an adult spouse, ex-spouse or a teenage boyfriend.

And here's where, as parents, we can make an impact. Our sons need to be taught about gender equality, to respect girls, to challenge violent role models in pop culture and the media, and to find ways to express anger without violence. Our daughters need to learn empowerment, and to recognize unhealthy behaviors in potential boyfriends: Jealousy and possessiveness, for example, aren't signs of love but of insecurity and low self-esteem, characteristics commonly tied to control issues.

University of Northern Iowa professor of social work Katherine van Wormer, co-author of "Death by Domestic

Violence," advises young women that before they become romantically involved with someone they should "consider what it would be like to break up. . . . It's a lot easier to get out of a potentially dangerous relationship in the early stages than to wait and see how things turn out."

And of course, parents need to model appropriate behavior at home.

But progress needs to take place elsewhere, too. Domestic violence is a crime, but generally batterers don't receive jail sentences, according to Perlmutter. Perhaps the threat of incarceration would help curb violent impulses.

Also, aside from the possibility of successful prosecution, victims ought to feel confidence in other avenues of help, such as shelters and hotlines.

And because women who are in the throes of domestic violence have given up their power to their abusers, they desperately need advocates. Family, friends, neighbors and co-workers who suspect abuse must become involved, removing the shroud of secrecy, shame, isolation and even denial that often goes hand in hand with domestic violence. Contact agencies such as the Suffolk County Coalition Against Domestic Violence or its Nassau County counterpart, and ask what you can do to help someone you care about.

Need motivation? Just go to the special-needs school where Leah Walsh was a beloved teacher. At 3:15 today, her short, tragic life, which ended in unspeakable violence, will be commemorated.



Claudia Gryvatz Copquin of Northport writes frequently for Newsday.

OPINION