

Child abuse is a fact of life even for Miss America

By Shirley Wild

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Most of us feel we will never need to know that there is help for domestic violence, sexual assault and child abuse. After all, it doesn't apply to us.

But that isn't so. We all need to have this information. Child abuse and domestic violence crosses all socio-economic boundaries. It occurs in all walks of life. It is, unfortunately, a fact of life.

To be able to help someone in need in a time of crisis requires knowledge.

The Long Beach Area Child Abuse and Domestic Violence Prevention Council celebrates its 30th anniversary this year. Its origins were as a child trauma council, the first of its kind in California and the second in the nation. It merged with the Domestic Violence Council in 1993.

The council is comprised of professionals and concerned community members who work to support the healing of abused children, survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault survivors and their families.

They accomplish their goals by organizing workshops and conferences and providing a monthly educational forum for community members to learn, discuss, question, network and share ideas relating to treatment and prevention.

April is nationally recognized as Sexual Assault Awareness Month and Child Abuse Prevention Month (along with domestic violence prevention). Throughout April, several agencies in the Long Beach area are organizing events for the public. See the end of the column for specifics.

One of the council's partners is the Sexual Assault Crisis Agency (SACA), which is also celebrating its 30th anniversary. It began with a group of women who operated a 24-hour rape hot line out of their homes. In 1985 it became state-certified, added prevention to its goals and adopted a new name.

SACA's mission is to provide caring support and advocacy for all survivors of sexual assault and their significant others, and to work toward the elimination of rape and sexual assault by raising community awareness and provide prevention education.

Today SACA serves a population of 1.6 million people living in 21 cities in southern Los Angeles County, including the greater Long Beach, Harbor and South Bay areas.

SACA's services have expanded from a 24-hour hot line to include accompaniment with the Sexual Assault Response Team (SART), community referrals, individual and group counseling and education and prevention services. All of SACA's services are offered free of charge, and all are available in English, Spanish and American Sign Language.

Services are designed to be culturally sensitive, and to meet the needs of women, men, and teen survivors who have experienced any form of sexual violence. Educational and supportive services are also available to the friends and family members of survivors, so they can better assist their loved ones through a crisis.

The 24-hour hot line is: (562) 597-2002. The office number is: (562) 494-5046.

Another important member of the council is the child-abuse prevention program For the Child. Its mission is to prevent child abuse, improve children's mental health and strengthen families through effective education, outreach, intervention programs to children, their parents and the community. For information, call (562) 427-7671.

On April 14, the Long Beach Area Child Abuse and Domestic Violence Prevention Council will offering an important program at the Alpert Jewish Community Center, 3801 E. Willow St., Long Beach, from 8 to 11 a.m. Call SACA at (562) 494-5046 for registration information.

The speaker will be former Miss America Marilyn Van Derbur, who was crowned Miss America and then graduated from the University of Colorado with Phi Beta Kappa honors. She became a professional motivational speaker and was named Outstanding Woman Speaker in America.

Her worst nightmare, of people learning of her deepest, darkest secret, came true when she was 53. A newspaper reporter learned she was an incest survivor, having been raped by her father, a prominent businessman and philanthropist, more than 600 times from age 5 to 18. The next morning it was a front-page story in The Denver Post.

When People magazine put her picture on the cover, there was a national outpouring from survivors who turned to her for help and support. Since then, Marilyn has answered more than 8,000 letters and has spoken in 225 cities. She has written an award-winning book, "Miss America by Day."

On April 14th, Marilyn will talk about her recovery and share knowledge and insights through stories that are both riveting and instructive.

Her story is all the more dramatic because of the prominence of her father in the community. When he died in 1984, his obituary ran on the front page of the Denver newspaper.

Marilyn says, "It doesn't matter if it's our father, our coach, our priest or the man who lives three doors down, (being molested) changes who we are and it smashes our belief system."

When she was 40, as part of her healing, she confronted her father. His only question was whether she had told her mother. He said he would kill himself if she did. The story became public after his death.

Marilyn Van Derbur's story isn't only about betrayal. It's also about unconditional love. Her husband of 40 years, Larry Adler, has stayed by her side throughout her recovery. He was her childhood sweetheart, and the one person, more than any other, she was afraid to tell. She was afraid he would be disgusted and never want to see her again.

She said, "It just takes one person to understand the depth of your trauma and not say, 'It happened a long time ago. Get on with your life.'"

This is the reason she feels so strongly about reaching out to traumatized sexual abuse victims to give them hope that recovery is possible, and life gets better.

Other related events include:

Denim Day on April 27, sponsored by SACA and the Long Beach Police Chief's Women's Advisory Group. The Denim Day campaign began in 1999 with the California Coalition Against Sexual Assault and the Los Angeles Commission on Assaults Against Women as part of an international protest of an Italian Supreme Court Decision to overturn a rape conviction because the victim was wearing jeans. The Italian Supreme Court dismissed charges against a 45-year-old rape suspect because his 18-year-old victim was wearing jeans at the time of the attack. The court stated in its decision that it was common knowledge that jeans cannot even be partly removed without the effective help of the person wearing them and it impossible if the victim is struggling with all her might. The judgment sparked a worldwide outcry from those who understand that coercion, threats and violence go along with the act of rape. The unpopular verdict became an international symbol of myth-based injustice for sexual assault survivors.

A Speak Out on April 29 at Soroptimist House on the campus of Cal State Long Beach, 1250 Bellflower Blvd., from 5-9 p.m. SACA and the CSULB Women's Studies Student Association offer the Speak Out as an opportunity for survivors (women, teens, and men) to share in a supportive environment and for the community to learn about the true impact of sexual violence. A powerful Clothesline project, featuring more than 350 T-shirts decorated by women in this community who have survived sexual and domestic violence, will be on display. Self-defense training for women will be held at 5 p.m. For details, call SACA at (562) 494-5046.

A Rape Prevention and Self Defense Workshop on May 21 from 1 to 5 p.m. at Long Beach City College, 1305 E. Pacific Coast Highway. Because sexual assault is the No. 1 reason why female students do not return to college after their first year, the Sexual Assault Crisis Agency is presenting this interactive workshop for male and female

students planning to attend college in the fall, as well as their parents. Women will learn the truth about sexual assault on campus, how to reduce the risk and how to fight back. Parents will learn how to find out how safe the student's campus really is and what to do if their child is raped. Young men will learn how to confront sexual violence on campus and how to support a friend who may be assaulted. This workshop is sponsored by SACA, the Long Beach Police Chief's Women's Advisory Group, Long Beach Area Child Abuse and Domestic Violence Prevention Council, LBCC, Greater Long Beach Alumni Panhellenic Council and El Dorado Women's Club.

— Please fax material for consideration to Shirley Wild at (562) 594-9668. Send photos to: Richard Howland, Press-Telegram, 604 Pine Ave., Long Beach CA 90844, or richard.howland@presstelegram.com . Be sure to indicate the material is for Scene at the Beach. Identify the organization, the people in the photo and the occasion. Please include a contact number for follow-up questions.