

# HEALING AND HOPE



**"I have learned that I'm stronger than I ever imagined one person could be. I can do anything," says Barbara-Leigh Tonelli.**

At age 48, Tonelli is a woman committed to advocacy for awareness and prevention of domestic violence and sexual assault. It's been her passion since she and her three children escaped an abusive relationship 15 years ago. Tonelli is one of approximately

35,500 victims annually who successfully escape a violent environment with the help of the Sacramento non-profit organization WEAVE, Inc. (Women Escaping A Violent Environment) since its inception in 1978.

"I've come a long way," says Tonelli, now the proud recipient of a doctorate degree in business administration. In addition to her Ph.D. (all but dissertation), she holds countless speaking engagements at women's conferences, colleges and universities, delivering an emotional and moving presentation. Dressed to the nines in a business suit with manicured nails, Tonelli tells the story of a young girl that she knew 15 years ago who was brutally beaten by her husband; she suffered black eyes, fractured ribs, countless bruises, second and third degree burns, facial stitches, a scratched cornea, cracked vertebrae, among many other severe injuries.

After one severe beating, the girl fled for her life, sleeping under bridges and eating whatever scraps of food she could find before making her way to a shelter. At this point in her presentation, Tonelli reveals, "That girl was me." Once the audience gasps, she says, "I know I've gotten my message across." It's a powerful message, one perpetuated by a woman's need for security and acceptance, surrounded by the complex issues of self-confidence, warning signs, and controlling behaviors.

WEAVE offers clients what Tonelli describes as an amazing combination of resources, both professional and compassionate. The organization boasts a sophisticated crisis intervention program where WEAVE advocates respond to every rape call in Sacramento County, along with law enforcement, and to every abused victim at a hospital. Additionally, WEAVE's services include counseling, a crisis line that takes more than 20,000 calls per year, a safe house that serves between 700-900 women and children annually with a mere 35 beds, and two retail stores, WEAVE Works in Sacramento and WEAVE Thrift in Carmichael.

Whether it was through coddling, encouragement or a swift kick in the pants, Tonelli says the WEAVE staff, especially Jacqueline Haynes-McClain, who was WEAVE's safe house manager at the time, always knew what she needed. "Jackie made me accountable," Tonelli says. "She called it how she saw it when she saw that nothing else was working. I owe them my life."

That was in 1991. Since then, both Tonelli and WEAVE have undergone some significant changes. This past October, Tonelli had the unique privilege of being invited by WEAVE to speak at the state Capitol for a Domestic Violence Awareness Month rally. This past September, Beth Hassett stepped in to the position of executive director after 12 years working with the organization as a volunteer, on staff and as a board member.

As WEAVE continues to lead the greater Sacramento community in combating the problems of domestic violence and sexual assault, Hassett confirms that they are actively seeking a second safe house location. "We need more beds," she says. With between 60-80 legitimate beds available, there will be less risk of turning people away, allowing the staff to address more complex needs including mental health issues, drug abuse and other disabilities.

Hassett would also like to see WEAVE serve men equitably – currently, the organization houses men in area hotels when necessary. Although it's generally accepted that domestic violence and sexual assault crimes are more prevalent against women, the WEAVE campaign asserts that violence doesn't discriminate. In that vein, the organization offers services not only to battered men, but also to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender survivors.

With growth also comes a greater need, and there is always a need for volunteers. "We could not run our crisis line without volunteers," says Hassett, "and keeping enough people in the hopper is an ongoing challenge." After her own stint as a volunteer working the crisis line, taking calls and

hearing the fears of those asking for help, Hassett is all too familiar with the commonalities that victims of abuse share. "I hear the fears," she says, "that they will be blamed." Hassett says that it's "because of the difference we make in the community and not only the opportunity to be good role models to girls and women, but also to change the perception (of domestic violence and sexual assault)" that keeps her going in spite of the daily tragedies and challenges that she faces.

Changing the perception, though, is no easy task. Hassett says that although "most will agree that it's no longer just a women's issue, too many don't see that it's *their* issue. People don't know that they know someone who has been abused or assaulted." In an effort to change this kind of thinking, Hassett's vision for WEAVE is to take a lead in prevention work. "Not everyone is engaged in stopping it," she says, "especially men and boys who have the power."

One of the most effective ways to implement prevention starts with education. In a partnership with several schools throughout Sacramento County, WEAVE's community educators are able to teach approximately 8,000 elementary, junior high and high school-aged students annually about appropriate behavior in relationships of any kind. The challenge for Hassett and WEAVE then becomes two fold: the fact that there are not enough educators, and the questions of, "who do we target?" (not the usual suspects) and "how do we reach them?"

Communicating the message that love shouldn't hurt continues to be the focus of WEAVE's efforts, and Hassett is committed to finding new ways to reach more people. Meanwhile, Tonelli continues to do her part by telling her story. "It's an honor to give back," she says. "Countless living angels have touched my life, if I can do a fraction of what these people have done for me and my children, I am more than willing to do anything I can to help." ●

**Janna Marlies Santoro**



## RESOURCES

### **WEAVE, Inc.**

Business line: 916-448-2321  
Crisis line: 916-920-2952  
[www.weaveinc.org](http://www.weaveinc.org)

### **WEAVE Works**

919 20th Street, Sacramento  
916-554-2412

### **WEAVE Thrift**

6634 Fair Oaks Blvd., Carmichael  
916-481-6376