

EVERY 12 SECONDS A WOMAN IS BEATEN BY HER BOYFRIEND OR HUSBAND

BY JENNIFER BAUMGARDNER

■ **Carole Kasson, 48, accountant**

When I was 25, I met my husband, Michael, at a friend's dinner party. He was 6'4" and very intense, the kind of person who makes a strong impact on you. He totally swept me off my feet: He cooked for me, brought me flowers and took me to interesting places.

Shortly thereafter, Michael and I moved in together. Initially, our relationship was very romantic. We said "I love you" 10 times a day and showered each other with affection. Within the first year of living together, though, he threw a bowl of lentil salad across the apartment because he got mad at me for something forgettable. I was stunned, but I told myself it was due to all the rage built up in him from his childhood. Michael's parents had

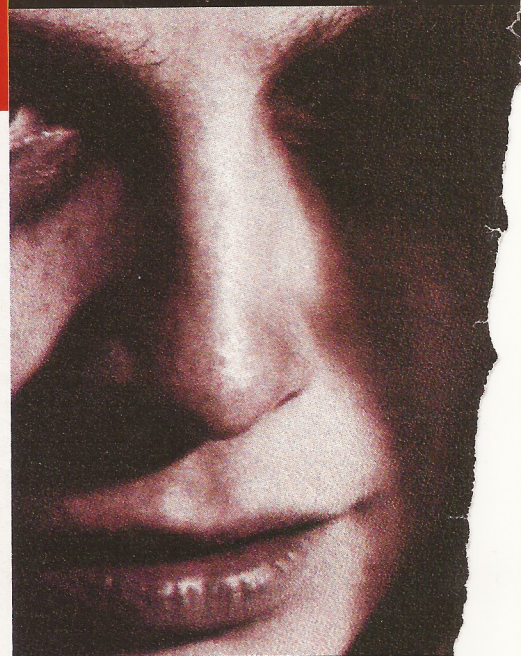
blamed him for the death of his little sister. When she was 4 and he was 10, they were playing in the backyard; she ran into the street and was killed by a car. Consequently, Michael's parents treated him badly throughout his childhood. I'd had a terrible childhood, too: My father was a child psychoanalyst who criticized everything my younger brother and I did. It left me with a serious self-esteem problem.

Not long after the salad incident, Michael slapped me across the face. As far as I remember, I had said something he didn't like. I justified it to myself by saying, He's a very hurt man who's not ▶

Could someone you know be a victim of abuse? Domestic violence affects women of all backgrounds. In fact, nearly half are middle class. This is the story of Carole, an accountant, who for years was hit and humiliated by her attorney husband. And no one knew



▶ 9:36:12 A.M.



▶ 9:37:00 A.M.



▶ 9:37:48 A.M.

▶ **This advertising campaign has appeared on NYC subways. It was sponsored by the Mayor's Office Campaign Against Domestic Violence and created by Young & Rubicam.**

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

Shelters are no longer the only option for victims of abuse

In 1990, Naomi Berman-Potash read an article in a Houston newspaper about overcrowded women's shelters referring abuse victims to airport and hospital waiting rooms for the night. "I was a sales manager for a hotel chain, so I knew that hotel rooms go unoccupied every day. And I thought, Why couldn't we give these women a place to stay?" The next year, Berman-Potash launched Project Debby, her campaign to encourage hotels to donate empty rooms to the overflow from shelters.

Today, Project Debby (named for Berman-Potash's feminist sister, who died 10 years ago of multiple sclerosis) makes 400 hotel rooms available at no cost to abuse victims in 20 cities around the country. Women are referred to the service through social service agencies in an emergency—for example, when their local shelter is full, or if they aren't ready to commit to a shelter, which generally requires them to stay more than one night.

What Berman-Potash didn't know was that Project Debby would reveal an unfulfilled need in the domestic violence system. "About 50 percent of our clients are middle class," says Berman-Potash. "Often, middle-class women are hesitant to go to shelters. They might be embarrassed because their friends volunteer there. Or they might not be accustomed to abiding by regulations," she says, alluding to the fact that shelters often track women's comings and goings. Project Debby gives these women a safe haven where they can figure out their next move. "Abuse victims live in a constant state of threat," Berman-Potash explains. "Being in a tranquil place for a day might help them see that there's a way out."

To find out if Project Debby operates in your city, call its Florida headquarters at 262-240-0400.

channeling his anger properly; I was determined to overwhelm him with my love. Plus, he was constantly professing *his* love for me.

Michael didn't fit the image of the stereotypical wife beater. It was only one or two hits at a time, well-placed so as not to leave marks. Looking back, I realized that much of his abuse was psychological: It had to do with his tremendous need to control me and it crept into our relationship until he was insulting or humiliating me almost daily. For example, we would go to parties, and he would choose where he was going to sit. When he got up to get a drink, he would signal me over and I had to hold his spot. If the hostess didn't have what Michael liked to drink on hand, he would become enraged with me. During the car ride home, he'd scream at me or smack me. At first, he didn't hit me often—maybe once a month or so. But after a while, it was happening on a weekly basis.

I didn't confide in anyone for years. Only after I left Michael did friends tell me that they'd noticed he didn't treat me well. But I did not view a lot of his behavior as truly abusive. I'd think: Yes, he yells or hits me occasionally, but I'd never use the word "abuse"—I don't think I could admit it to myself. At first I would fight back—slap him or shoot him a snappy response—but I learned quickly that this only made things worse. He had this "10 times" rule: Anything I did, I'd get back tenfold. So if I slapped him back, he'd hit me repeatedly.

My brother recently told me that he thought I had made a deliberate choice to live the way I did with Michael. I went ballistic. He didn't understand: If I told Michael I was going to leave, he would do things like threaten to kill my parents.

But I did leave once, a few years after we moved in together. He had called me at work and said that he was going to kill me when I got home because I had scratched the top of our new Honda Accord while removing the roof rack. Though I didn't take him literally, I was afraid he was really going to hurt me, so that night, I slept on a friend's sofa. Then, of course, a few people knew what was going on and they helped

me hatch a plan to leave him, which I did. But I was back within the week, because Michael suggested we see his therapist together. We only went once, though; I didn't feel like the therapist had my interests in mind, since Michael was her patient first.

When I began showing up at social events with Michael again, the friends I had told about the abuse wouldn't talk to him. Meanwhile, I was embarrassed about going

back to him, and soon we just stopped going out with friends.

I was already isolated from my family, because my father had tangled with Michael. And we had no relationship with his parents, whom he never forgave for his awful childhood.

After 10 years together, we mutually decided to get married. We both had good jobs—he was a lawyer, I was an accountant—we were about to buy a duplex, and it just felt like we were headed toward some sort of stability.

Besides, I was always looking for things to get better. All along, I had desperately wanted to have children. In fact, as soon as we started living together, I got pregnant, but Michael convinced me to get an abortion. Finally, a couple of years after we got married, Michael decided we could have kids. I felt like it was my only chance to have a baby.

After two miscarriages in a row, I was devastated. Michael didn't come to the hospital to see me after I lost the babies. Instead, he said, "You dropped the ball." Finally, when I was 41, I gave birth to Ben. He was born on a Sunday night; Michael didn't come to the hospital until Tuesday. But when Michael finally arrived, there was a visible change on his face when he saw his son. He was so touched that I thought our family might actually work.

But it didn't. Michael was an attentive, loving father, but he continued to take out his aggression on me. A month after we found out I was pregnant, Michael lost his job. Then, after Ben was born, Michael was diagnosed with diabetes. That's when he became really crazy. He stayed up until 4 a.m. every night, watching TV and scrawling lists of what I had to do. The list would start ▷

Carole Kasson in the kitchen of her Philadelphia home.



"OUR SON WAS BORN ON SUNDAY; MICHAEL DIDN'T SEE HIM UNTIL TUESDAY."

HOW TO GET OUT

Advice from an expert

No matter what their socioeconomic background, most battered women stay with their abusers out of fear, according to Betsy Shally-Jensen, associate programs director of *Necesities/Necesidades*, a women's organization in Northampton, Massachusetts. "Batterers use the very strategies a torturer or a prison warden uses," she says. What's more, a majority of women who are killed by their abusers die trying to leave. Which begs the question: How does a woman get out safely? According to Shally-Jensen, she should:

- 1 Call a local battered women's program.** They will help you figure out your legal and housing options, while providing long-term counseling. To find the program nearest you, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline: 800-799-SAFE.
- 2 Get a domestic violence lawyer** to help you understand your rights and navigate the confusing legal system. Many abusers continue their abuse and coercion via the courts—fighting for custody and draining the victim financially with protracted legal battles.
- 3 Do safety planning.** If you work outside the home, tell a trusted co-worker about your situation and give photos of the batterer to security guards with instructions to bar his entrance. Make copies of all important documents in case you have to leave in a hurry. If you have a cellphone, program it to dial 911; if you don't, shelters or police departments sometimes provide them to abuse victims, or they might provide a pendant with a panic button.
- 4 Rehearse an escape alibi** with a friend or shelter counselor. Imagine what you might say and how your abuser might respond. Then, rehearse leaving—perhaps go to your mother's house for the evening—so that it feels more comfortable when you decide to leave for good.

out with what flavor and how many scoops of coffee he wanted me to grind that morning. He wanted me to straighten the fringe strings on the Persian rugs, and to put the cream in the front of the refrigerator so that when he opened the door, it was right there—small, weird stuff.

I was so busy rushing around doing errands for Michael, that I had five small car accidents in one year. During the week, I'd race home from work at noon and prepare Michael's lunch. If I made a mistake—used the wrong kind of bread or overcooked the bacon—I would have to redo the meal. If Michael didn't like the food I made, he would throw it at me or dump it into the trash. Then I would have to go and get takeout. I remember driving to Chinatown one night and thinking: I could just put my foot to the floor and sail right into the Schuylkill River . . . The only reason I didn't is Ben.

Around this time, Michael became more violent as well. He was hitting me more frequently, and a couple of times, he even put a knife to my throat. I knew I had to get out—I was going to change my identity. As I was contemplating my escape to a new life, my one confidante at work brought in a *Wall Street Journal* article that said it was virtually impossible to hide, because as soon as you use your social security number (to set up your phone or get a credit card), your abuser can find you.

I think of this next episode as a turning point: One day, when Ben was 3, he got hurt at school and they thought that he needed stitches. Because Michael had the car, he had to pick Ben up. When I got home that night, Michael was furious that I hadn't taken Ben to the hospital so that he didn't have to. Ben listened to his father tear into me, and then watched Michael throw me across the room. As I went flying, my knee hit Ben in the head and knocked him to the floor. That night, when I was putting him to bed, Ben said for the first time that he wouldn't mind leaving Daddy.

Up until that point, I had pleaded with Michael a number of times to go to marriage counseling, but he'd say, "Nothing's wrong with me. It's you!" After the night that Ben got hurt, I made an appointment with a therapist. I never thought of myself as a victim of abuse until my therapist told

me I was. It was a relief to get confirmation that I was, indeed, going through hell.

The weekend after my first therapy appointment, I called my therapist from a pay phone and said, "I'm going to leave him." I went to work that Monday and told everyone, and they were all supportive. A week later, my father showed up with a U-Haul and we began loading it while Michael was sleeping in the bedroom. None of the local shelters had room, so Ben and I went to my parents' house. I assumed Michael knew I was there. He had always threatened that if

I ever left, he would kill me and my parents. I never got an order of protection because, as Michael always said, a piece of paper can't stop a bullet, but my dad called the police to alert them anyway. Michael called incessantly for days afterward, but he never did show up at my parents' house.

A month later, Ben and I had dinner at a restaurant with Michael, at his request, and he was quite calm. Then we went Christmas shopping for Ben one night a few weeks later, and Michael was so sweet, so tender, I lay in bed wondering if we could work things out. But the next morning, I realized what a crazy thought it had been. Seven months after I left Michael, the daycare center called to say that he had not picked up Ben.

After leaving several messages on Michael's answering machine, I drove to his house at midnight.

I banged on the door to no answer, and when I tried it, I found it open. Michael was sitting upright in a chair with his eyes wide open, dead from a bullet to the head.

Michael knew that by not picking Ben up, I'd find him. My therapist sees this as his last act of violence against me; I look at it as his only gift to me. Ben and I have a chance at a good life now. I have my friends and family back. And I've been able to speak out on what I went through. I testified at the State Attorney General's office, recommending businesses take security measures on behalf of victims, and I work with Philadelphia's Physicians for Social Responsibility, helping them understand why, even when confronted by a doctor, victims often don't admit to abuse. My life is not a secret anymore. It's such a relief to be able to tell the truth. □

"I DIDN'T REALIZE I WAS A VICTIM OF ABUSE UNTIL MY THERAPIST TOLD ME I WAS."



Carole with her 6-year-old son, Ben.