

The Denver Post

Resurrecting Victims' Hope

Denver organization helps rebuild lives after crime tears them apart

December 21, 2003

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Jim Spencer Denver Post Metro Columnist

SEASON TO SHARE

Caption: PHOTO: The Denver Post/Andy Cross

Maria Mejia and her children, Ramon Ramos, 8, and Alba Ramos, 14, say the Denver Center for Crime Victims has given them support to build the confidence needed to move beyond an abusive relationship. Contributors to the campaign, 8E

After suffering through a quarter-century of domestic violence, Maria Mejia wanted out. But walking away from her abusive husband took more than a survival instinct. It took a support network.

Mejia's first step was to go to court, where a judge issued a restraining order against the man who battered her. Her second step was the Denver Center for Crime Victims.

"I had been there (in the abusive relationship) 25 years," Mejia said. "And I always wanted to leave. If I hadn't gone to court, I wouldn't have left."

And if she hadn't shown up at the center for crime victims, she would have had a much harder time staying away from her abuser. She came to the agency, known as DCCV, to get help in having the locks changed on her house.

"I found out there was more than a change of locks," Mejia said. "I received help and support."

In Mary Ann Mosquera, a DCCV bilingual counselor fluent in Spanish, Mejia developed a confidant who spoke her native tongue. In DCCV group therapy sessions, Mejia discovered friendships. She also realized just how desperately misery loves company.

Mejia arrived at DCCV afraid and ashamed of the abuse she had endured.

"I thought I was the only person having these problems," Mejia said, using Mosquera to translate. "That's why I would be quiet."

Now she's opened up enough to talk publicly about the need for places such as the Denver Center for Crime Victims.

The center offers services for victims of many types of crime, not just domestic abuse. DCCV offers a 24-hour hotline in English, Spanish and a Teletype for the hearing impaired. It offers an emergency fund to pay for economic crises that stem directly from victimization. The program, entering its 16th year, has designated services for the elderly, the disabled and kids.

DCCV is an applicant for support from Season to Share, a holiday collection effort that solicits donations partly matched by funds from the Robert R. McCormick Tribune Foundation.

Mejia finds it a worthy cause.

"I want to tell others to find a place like this for help," Mejia said. "For me, it's important."

For the son and daughter squeezed onto the wicker sofa with her at DCCV's 16th Avenue headquarters, it could be the difference between mental health and the perpetuation of emotional disease.

"It makes us see we're not the only ones who have problems like this," said Alba Ramos, Mejia's 14-year-old daughter. "And it makes us feel good about ourselves."

Alba attends DCCV's Girls' Group on Wednesdays.

"We talk about problems and how we feel," she said, adding that she feels better because her dad is gone.

So does her 8-year-old brother, Ramon.

"I feel less nervous because I get help here," said Ramon, who participates in a DCCV program called Brothers Reaching Out Toward Healing, Exploration and Respect of Self. "I go outside and play with my friends. I didn't do that when my dad was here."

This journey from fear and pain is typical for victims of domestic violence, Mosquera said. Domestic abuse is ultimately about power and control, she said. Breaking that grip is a shared effort.

Mejia said she discovered as much in her group therapy sessions, where she has grown close to her five counterparts, and finally let go of some ugly secrets. She speaks in an atmosphere where she knows she won't be judged.

"They're connecting," Mosquera said, "giving each other phone numbers and job leads. Maria brought in a leather jacket and gave it to another woman who needed a coat."

Mejia is by no means well-to-do. Most of DCCV's clients aren't. Nearly four in 10 have incomes of less than \$6,000 a year. More than half make less than \$16,000 a year.

Mejia has worked for 15 years in housekeeping. But the sense of shared suffering - and hope - moves her to do what she can for other crime victims working two and three jobs to get by economically.

She hasn't seen or heard from her husband for three months. She said she hopes it stays that way.

Mejia cried quietly when asked about what will happen when DCCV's eight-week counseling program ends.

"I feel a lot of support, and I'm confident I'll be OK," she said. "I've lost fear."

What she retains is perspective.

Mejia said she doesn't know where she and her kids will be in a year, but she's pretty sure where they'd be without the Denver Center for Crime Victims:

Still stuck in a living hell.