

Haven for immigrants who flee domestic violence

Abusers often tell victims they can't seek help from police

By Felisa Cardona
Denver Post Staff Writer
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Margaret Lee didn't have any bruises, broken bones or black eyes.

The abuse she endured was financial, emotional and mental, and it nearly devastated the Malaysian native and her three children.

Lee, 44, met a man via the Internet in 2000 who persuaded her to marry him and leave Malaysia to live in the United States.

The couple married in February 2001. As the marriage progressed, she realized she was in trouble.

Her husband did not allow her to work and wouldn't give her any money. She often dug in trash bins for food.

"He deprived my son, and he had to beg for lunch money," Lee said. "One daughter had a high fever, and I had to beg and plead with him to get Tylenol. He knew the only way to get through me was to control my kids."

The Denver Center for Crime Victims is taking on domestic-violence cases involving immigrants such as Lee.

The U.S. Board of Immigration Appeals accredited the center in November to provide free or low-cost legal assistance. The federal Violence Against Women Act allows the center to give these victims and their children the help they need to obtain legal status in the United States.

So far, the center has 85 clients, including one male. Most of the clients are women from Mexico, Guatemala, South America, Asia and Russia, said Lorena Reyther Miranda, an immigration specialist for the center.

Lee is working with the center to obtain permanent legal status in the United States for herself and her children.

One of the lowest points toward the end of her marriage in July 2002 was when her husband abandoned her and the kids at a motel, then stopped payment on the room after several days.

"I received a call from the motel manager explaining that his credit card has been blocked," she said. "I did not know what was going to happen to us because we did not know anybody in town."

Lee tried to reconcile with her husband in December 2002 despite the motel incident. He abandoned her again in an apartment, paying only one month's rent. Eventually, Lee and the children were taken in by a safehouse in Fort Collins until she could get on her feet. She now lives in an apartment in LaPorte with her children and has found work as a housekeeper.

"Sometimes they (the victims) don't speak the language, and they are usually in a situation where there is violence in the home and they fear losing their children," said Karlyn Shorb, a volunteer who works with the immigrants at the center. "The abuser tells them that because they have no status, they cannot go to the police because the police will deport them."