

'Our life was picture perfect, but, inside those walls, it was a nightmare'

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They painted a rosy picture of family life.

A large home in a good neighbourhood, healthy incomes and two handsome young boys.

"On the surface, our life was picture perfect," Jane said. "But, inside those walls, it was a nightmare."

Jane, not her real name, never bore the physical marks of violence, but she suffered 28 years of abuse at the hands of her husband.

The Niagara woman was a guest speaker at a two-day conference in Niagara Falls to discuss Niagara's response to domestic violence.

Jane married her husband when she was 20 and he was 21 following a brief, long-distance relationship.

"I realized right away I didn't know my husband at all," she said. "The abuse started right away."

He controlled her every move and ruled the household with an iron fist.

She felt like she was walking on egg shells, living in fear of his next outburst.

At the end of every month, her husband would give her money to pay the household bills.

Before she received the cash, however, she had to submit to his demands.

"He would force me on my knees and do terrible things," she said, choking back tears.

"I hated the end of the month. I hated to do what I had to do, but it was only way to get the money."

Over the years, the abuse worsened. He began using drugs and alcohol, which fuelled his rage.

She recalled one frightening incident in which she was driving along a busy Hamilton highway when her drunken husband grabbed the steering wheel.

The car rolled over five times, coming to rest on its roof.

When Jane regained consciousness, the first thing she saw was her husband pointing his finger at her and warning her not to tell the police what happened.

Jane and her son were taken to a Hamilton hospital for treatment. Her husband stayed by her side every day -- not to comfort her, but to remind she'd be killed if she spoke the truth.

Jane remained silent.

"I was charged with careless driving and life went on."

Her husband was arrested for assault five times, but each time, Jane, accompanied by her in-laws, would bail him out of jail.

Two years ago, he was again charged with assault, but this time she did not go back.

The officer who had responded to her 911 call gave Jane a pamphlet on Gillian's Place, a home for abused women and children in St. Catharines.

Jane had never heard of the organization before.

The agency's outreach program helped her navigate the court system during both criminal and family court proceedings. They also provided counselling for her and her youngest son. "They made us understand that none of this was our fault," she said. "They showed us that we could move on."

And she has.

Today, she shares a two-bedroom apartment with her son and has never been happier.

"It's home, it's safe and it's quiet," she told the audience of some 180 people which represented 26 agencies that deal with domestic violence including police and victim services.

The conference, hosted by the Coalition to End Violence Against Women, highlighted the findings of the recently-released domestic violence report card which examines Niagara's response to domestic violence.

The report used information gathered from police, women's shelters and other agencies to analyze the services available to families across Niagara.

Ruthann Brown, chairwoman of CEVAW and executive director of Women's Place of South Niagara, said while the report highlights the effectiveness of some of the systems in place it also highlights gaps in programs and services.

"There's always room for improvements," she said.

Dr. Stephen Hart, a professor of psychology at Simon Fraser University, said Jane's harrowing journey is an excellent example of why a such report was needed.

"Jane's story is a really good reminder that violence has nothing to do with hitting other people. We can't define violence precisely, so if we can't define it, how can we treat it or prevent it?"

The report's 21 recommendations include the development and implementation of a transportation strategy to provide public transportation throughout the region and increasing the number of affordable housing units available within Niagara.