

National Bulletin on Domestic Violence Prevention

Legacy Snapshots

Leading advocates reflect or recalled

by Barbara Hart

Toby Myers

Like many of those who became active in what became *The Battered Women's Movement*, Toby Myers is a survivor. The resurgence of the women's movement, simultaneous with freeing herself from abuse, propelled Toby into activism.

In the mid '70s, Toby began to notice items in the press about battered women. She joined with others, survivors and allies, to build a program in Houston to assist battered women. It was her first time working with women taking power to make social justice. The work fascinated her. In her experience, policy, practice, and programs had drifted down from on high and had been primarily the prerogative of men. The *Houston Area Women's Center* opened its shelter on June 1, 1978. The program was an all volunteer operation, from hotline through management and the governing board. Toby was the Tuesday night person and facilitated the women's support group at the shelter. Her two sons were the "children's program coordinators," taking the children to a nearby park during group.

Shortly after opening the shelter, Toby and others formed the *Texas Council on Family Violence*. She was the first board Chair. She collaborated with others in writing state legislation for the first shelter funding. She began a *Battering Intervention Program*, from which she retired after 20 years. She has since stayed active in the precious social movement that grew into a respected service and advocacy field, recognized as an essential part of human services. She is on the board of the *Harris County Domestic Violence Coordinating Council* and serves on the *Domestic Violence Death Review Team*, and is vice-chair of the board of the *National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence*.

Toby now coordinates a teen dating violence prevention project called *Love Shouldn't Hurt*, which is an initiative of *Shalom Bayit: Houston Jewish Network Against Domestic Abuse* a program of Jewish Family Service. She also mentors and supports attorneys representing victims of domestic violence in the legal system.

Reflecting over the years on the lessons learned, Toby offered: "1) Our movement must continue to develop the leadership of all women. Most women know how to work, are good and dedicated workers, but are not skilled in advocating for themselves. Women new to the work should be encouraged, not ostracized because of divergent perspectives or limited skills." On

the Steering Committee of the *National Coalition Against Domestic Violence*, Toby notes that she was regarded as one step to the left of Nancy Reagan, while at home she was regarded as a radical, almost suspect in her perspectives. "Context is critical. The movement must create or revive schools for leadership development." 2) Toby laments that "trashing" has not disappeared from the work. The movement should conspicuously embrace a code of ethics that demands the highest standards of practice. 3) The criminal legal system continues to treat battered women defendants with careless indifference, producing reprehensible injustice. Although Toby and her colleagues have offered extensive training for talented people on serving as expert witnesses in DV cases, battered women are still convicted, losing their children and being deported. Other defense strategies must be implemented, most importantly on the front end—eliminating inappropriate arrests, conducting thorough investigations, and dismissing cases where charging has been faulty or is not in the interest of justice. Toby observes that having served on three grand juries, she has come to the conclusion that juries think if somebody dies, somebody has to pay. Trial juries are predisposed to convict, defense counsel are either indifferent or ignorant about the experience of battered women and the coercive

controls of batterers, and elected judges often look to please their constituents, all of which results in innocent survivors being convicted. The consequences of conviction are often dire for women.

The movement brought rich gifts to Toby. She reflects that the most wonderful benefit of being in the battered women's movement has been working with other activists since the beginning, Toby has participated in, watched, and bore witness to the movement's growth and development. She met some of the most interesting, skilled, and competent women. She oftentimes pinches herself to think she has had even a small role in fashioning the goal of loving relationships that are not only nonviolent, nonabusive, and noncontrolling, but that are also mutually satisfying, mutually respectful, and growth promoting. In having done so, her well-established crow's feet, stretch marks, cellulite, and gray hair have become badges of honor.

We honor Toby for her continuing innovations, fortitude, steadfastness, support of others in the work, bravery in early pursuit of BIP work, solidarity with survivors, and her gentle example of loving relationships with men and women.

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