

# ***WOMEN'S ENEWS***

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## **Welfare Series: Belva Elliott, Mother of Five, Speaks**

By Belva Elliott

*In this Our Daily Lives, which is accompanied by a photo essay (<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/1976/context/ourdailylives>) Belva Elliott chronicles her experiences as a married victim of domestic violence who seeks safety and turns to welfare for assistance.*

(WOMENSENEWS) – When I met my husband over 20 years ago, I never imagined it would lead to a life of constant struggles. Now I am a single mother with five children, living in Staten Island's city housing.

Ten weeks ago I was forced to apply for welfare for the first time when I realized my child support had stopped. Though I've finally received cash benefits, we went over a month without income. My family is running out of the strength to continue fighting these battles, first with my husband and now with the city.

It wasn't always this way. My husband initially swept me off my feet; he was the most romantic person I'd ever met. When we married in 1983, I took my marriage vows very seriously – under no circumstances would I divorce him. But he changed after our children were born and began blaming me for not spending enough time with him.

One day, three years into our marriage, he took me by the hair and pulled me down the street. I screamed for help. Many saw and heard me, but no one stopped.

A woman is battered every 15 seconds and four women die every day in the United States because of domestic violence. I can't tell you these women's stories, but I can share my story of suffering emotional, financial and physical abuse at the hands of a man who said he loved me.

### **Abuse More Frequent as Years Passed**

The physical abuse became more frequent as the years passed. As the violence intensified, so did the threats. My husband told me, "If you ever leave me I will find you and kill you! I'll cut your body into pieces and distribute it all over the state of New York." These words were spoken often and echoed in my mind every waking moment.

I had five children and eight miscarriages during our marriage. I know people think I am stupid. It wasn't that I didn't know how to prevent these pregnancies. My first two children, we were using condoms and sponges – and they didn't work. I had bad reactions to most other birth control so they did not work either.

Meanwhile my husband constantly reminded me of his ability to pop my neck in a matter of seconds. He was a black belt in karate and so he knew which pressure points caused unbearable pain. His drinking only made things worse.

I didn't leave because I had no place to go, but my husband left us in 2001 saying he was tired of everything and there was too much responsibility. He eventually sold the last of our five homes, unknown to me, forcing me and the children into a one-bedroom apartment with over 20 housing code violations. Two months later he moved into the neighborhood to keep an eye on us.

He then filed for divorce the next year and I filed for custody and child support. Fearing his threats of violence, the children and I went into a shelter for domestic violence. They were immediately put into new schools, forced to abandon their old friends and community.

After several months in Safe Horizon's shelter in 2003, we were told without warning that our time had expired. Despite the promises of helping us with housing we were sent to the New York City Department of Homeless Services Emergency Assistance Unit in the Bronx that September. We sat on the floor, joining hundreds of others, watching roaches bigger than my thumbs and mice running from corner to corner.

We spent seven days in the emergency unit. Each day the children were sent back to their old school in Staten Island, carrying their personal belongings with their school supplies. The food there was moldy, spoiled and tasteless. My 12-year-old son caught ringworm and my 6-year-old daughter got pinkeye and ringworm.

Finally, we were loaded into a van and sent to Brooklyn, only a few blocks from where my husband lived. No one seemed to care when I told them I was a victim of domestic violence and that my abuser lived nearby. After a week, we were sent to a different location, a 4th floor walk-up in the Bronx. My daughter, who was 15, was five months pregnant. Her doctor wrote several letters requesting she not use the stairs since she'd gone into premature labor five times and was a high-risk pregnancy. There was no elevator in the building, but they didn't seem to care.

### **Leaving the Shelter**

We spent a year in homeless shelters, moving five times. During this time my daughter had her baby. The Administration for Children's Services informed me that she must attend school and I was responsible for providing a babysitter, since she was a minor. If I didn't comply, I could be charged with educational neglect and all my children could be placed in foster care. I was forced to quit my job to care for the baby.

While in shelters, I was denied federally subsidized housing and waited for city housing. I applied for a special opportunity for homeless families immediately when an apartment opened up and a month later the agency still hadn't processed my paperwork. The apartment was given to someone else. A month later another apartment opened up in Staten Island and this time I got it. Despite my husband's inconsistency in paying child support, city housing based my rent on what the courts had ordered him to pay. We moved into our place in December of 2003.

A few months later, my husband took a leave of absence from his job without pay and discontinued child support. I was forced to apply for welfare since I had no income. The welfare department will pursue my husband court for child support. If the child support checks start arriving, the city will take them to pay back the welfare I received for the children.

The welfare system also forced me into a job training program and community service, but without issuing me cash benefits. I've completed the training and got a job at Old Navy, working around 25 hours a week. My three older kids watch the three youngest children when I'm at work. Though I now get income from welfare, the cash benefits will stop once I get my first paycheck.

If welfare is going to be paid back this money, how come I have to work for it?

I struggle constantly with my husband and all these court issues. I have been to court 76 times in the last three years. My husband continues to get adjournment after adjournment.

The city shouldn't be making my life anymore difficult than it already is, things must change to stop other families from suffering like we are.

Right now any woman who suffers from domestic violence isn't safe when she turns to the city of New York; she will only be changing her abuser from a husband or lover to the city.

*Belva Elliott is a welfare mother living in Staten Island.*

**For more information:**

Voices of Women Organizing Project Battered Women's Resource Center:

<http://www.vowbwrc.org/>

Women's Law Initiative: <http://www.womenslaw.org/>

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