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The Intelligencer

Domestic violence victims deserve higher profile

By Stephen Petrick

Every time a soldier, police officer or firefighter dies, parades are held and media storms ensue.

But why, asks renowned journalist Brian Vallee, do victims of domestic violence not draw the same attention?

Consider that from 2000 to 2006, 4,588 front line law enforcers or military workers were killed on the job in the United States. But over the same time period more than 8,000 American women were shot, stabbed or strangled to death by the men in their lives.

Canadian statistics are just as puzzling. Over the same period there were 101 law enforcement or military deaths, yet more than 500 women were killed by their partners.

"You wonder, after all these years, why nothing has changed," Vallee told a group of health care and social workers at The Banquet Centre Wednesday.

The veteran Canadian journalist was invited to a luncheon hosted by Quinte Heath Care's domestic violence sexual assault response program to speak about his latest book, *The War on Women*.

During the speech he outlined several ways society can better address a subject with which few Canadians are familiar and the media too often ignores.

"We have to have education programs for all levels of the judicial system," he said. "Judges, lawyers, police officers - and not just weekend seminars."

Vallee became an expert on the subject more than 20 years ago after learning the story about Jane Hurshman, a Nova Scotia woman who killed her husband, fearing he would one day take her life.

After following Hurshman's trial and eventual manslaughter conviction for the CBC show *The Fifth Estate*, Vallee wrote *Living With Billy*, a book detailing the horrific abuse Hurshman suffered at the hands of her spouse.

Following the release of the book in 1986, Vallee was contacted by several women who said they suffered from similar experiences.

He learned that many women are afraid to leave their abusive partners fearing they'll be killed, left without money or forced to deal with a judicial system that doesn't understand their plight.

He said few police officers have any training on identifying the patterns of abuse when they arrive at their first domestic dispute. Too often, both the man and the woman are arrested.

"That's why you're getting more and more cases when a woman who has been battered ends up in a court room getting cross examined by the guy who beat her. She may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. She may look like the less responsible party, but she probably isn't."

Vallee said the first thing society must do to eliminate the problem of domestic violence is recognize the "red herrings."

By that he means focus groups that try to downplay growing evidence that domestic violence is a serious problem. Groups protesting tougher laws on gun ownership are an example, he argued.

"Eighty per cent of Canadian women killed by their partners were killed by men with guns who owned them legally," he said.

But most of all, he said, Canada needs to change its judicial system, so more emphasis is placed on protecting women and more emphasis is placed on punishing abusive men.

Questioning why women and children are forced to flee to shelters, he suggested new laws be made so that men with histories of abuse be forced to wear electronic ankle bracelets so police can monitor their location.

That way women and children can stay in their homes. Then if the man comes close to the woman's home, an alarm is set off, police can scoop him up and "put him in jail, where he belongs," Vallee said, triggering applause.

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