

Break the Silence, Stop the Violence

“Black women are abused at a rate 35 percent higher than that of White women.”

Rihanna and Chris Brown were our reality check. One in three African-American women has experienced domestic violence, and nearly 30 percent of us are likely to be in physically abusive relationships at any given time. A recent survey found that 46 percent of people ages 12 to 29 said that Rihanna had provoked her alleged attack. *Envy* investigates the epidemic of domestic violence in our community and talks to four women who found the courage to walk away.

Stacey Bishop seemed to have it all: an attractive family, an impressive career as a social worker, a home in a posh Maryland suburb, a Mercedes and a Cadillac in the garage. But behind the facade she lived in terror. She says her husband of six years had threatened and shoved her, and had even hit one of her children. She slept in the living room, keeping her distance from her husband and the gun he stored in their bedroom. The next time she sees him will be in court for his trial for alleged assault in June. Stacey was one of the estimated 1.5 million women who are victims of domestic violence each year. Black women experience abuse at a rate 35 percent higher than that of White women,

and women ages 20 to 24 are at greatest risk.

We've all heard the allegations of domestic violence from such celebrities as actress Robin Givens and spiritual leader Janita Hyman. In both those cases the controversy died down. But the police photo of pop princess Rihanna, her once exquisite face rendered bruised and swollen, gave a new sense of urgency to this issue. When her boyfriend, teen heartthrob Chris Brown, pleaded not guilty to assault charges for her beating, we resumed the conversation with our sisterfriends, with women at the beauty parlor, online with strangers. "Why won't she press charges?" Even more disturbing was the question on the lips of many girls: "What did she do to make him do that to her?"

What isn't usually discussed is how widespread domestic violence is in our community. Is it any wonder? As many as half of domestic violence cases are not reported at all. And 90 percent of all family violence defendants are never prosecuted because victims later recant or dispute their initial report to the police. Which leads us back to another of those beauty parlor questions: "Why won't she just leave?" >

BY ROBIN D. STONE



Images from *Living With the Enemy* (Aperture), photographer Diana Ferrate's controversial series of domestic violence stories, including photographs from Atlanta, Georgia, "who called the police when her abuser attacked her baby, Janice," who escaped violence then witnessed the murder of her friend, whose husband killed her; police arrest an abuser who was attacking his wife, Jenny; finds security in a shelter after her husband's threats to kill her, on May 25, 1993, Diana Hawkins, mother of six, and her 13-year-old daughter Katrina at their funeral; Hawkins had been dismembered, her heart cut out, Katrina had been partially decapitated.

"Subjects' names changed."



PHOTOGRAPHS BY DIANA FERRATE/APERTURE, WWW.COM

OUR SECRET PAIN

There are many reasons why a woman stays. By the time a batterer punches, burns, cuts or shoots her, she's probably isolated from friends and family and feels dependent on him for money, validation, even love. She may be too embarrassed or ashamed to ask for help. She may have mistaken an often-quoted Bible passage—"You wives should be subordinate to your husbands..." (1 Peter 3:1)—to mean wives should submit to abuse rather than accept nothing less than mutual reverence and respectful love. Or she may be afraid for her life and that of her children.

The truth is, we've been asking the wrong questions. "The issue is more appropriately framed: Why do men continue to use violence against women?" says Rhia V. Almeida, Ph.D., founder and director of the Institute for Family Services in Somerset, New Jersey. For us, one part of the answer may lie in the fact that Black men are often at the bottom of soci-

ety's pecking order. Black women know the oppression they face, and we may not want them blamed for one more social ill. But we must also understand that nothing a woman does—no disagreement, no argument, no challenge—will ever justify her living in terror of losing her life.

13%
of teen girls
report being
physically
hurt in a
relationship.

It's a lesson that, because of distorted notions of power and manhood in our culture, some men still need to learn. And we need to enlist other men to help do the teaching.

"The majority of men are not violent, but the majority of men are silent about the violence that men perpetrate against women," says Ted Burch, co-founder of A Call to Men, a national organization aimed at ending violence against women. "When a man abuses a woman and gets away with it, other men benefit. It reinforces the entitlement and privilege that men have. >

Twisted Teenage Love

Katena Tate was just 14 when she caught the eye of 18-year-old Barthony Vilsant while walking to school. "He was older," she says. "I thought I was grown." Like many teenagers, she was flattered by his attention. Five years later, she was desperately trying to escape it.

When Vilsant, a slight, sweet-talking Italian heavy cab driver, scoured her New York City apartment complex looking for her the week after they met in 1992, Katena took that as a compliment. Vilsant became a fixture in the neighborhood. "He bought me things, called me all the time. He was like, 'What you doing? Come outside.' I thought I thought that meant he loved me."

30%
of teens say
they are text-
messed 10
to 30 times
a week by a
partner
asking what
they're doing.

Her mother did not allow her to go with Vilsant, but Katena found ways to be with him, such as pretending to visit friends. In no time, he was telling her that he loved her. Katena recalls early signs of trouble, like when he would show up across town where she happened to be. "I now know that he was following me," she says. They dated for two years, and at 16, she became pregnant. After she moved into a rented room where he lived, Vilsant began to isolate her, cutting off ties to her family and friends. "Early on he insisted I be in me," she says. She had never told



Katena Tate, 21, put her bottom behind bars.

her mother about this side of Vilsant. Except for a girlfriend she sometimes saw, she felt alone. Eventually, he became her lifeline. "Being that I was pregnant, I felt like I started to love him," she says.

Once their daughter was born, Katena says, he tightened his grip on her life—frantically, by not allowing her to hold a job for long; emotionally, by demeaning her to his friends; socially, by eavesdropping on her phone calls; and eventually physically, by hitting her. "At one point, I went to the bathroom, he would pick up my daughter and come in with me," she recalls.

One day when he sent her to the store, she called the police. "They let me pack a few things for me and my daughter," she says. She fled for an order of protection, but before it was served, Vilsant,

concealing two guns, tracked her down at the apartment where her two sisters lived and talked his way in. He fired through the bedroom door where Katena was hiding, grazing her foot. She says he made her lie up her sisters before taking her and the baby. Over the next two days, he dragged her across New York City on a bleeding, bandaged foot as the police closed in and local TV news documented the pursuit. In April 1997, Vilsant was arrested and charged with numerous crimes, including first-degree kidnapping and possession and use of a firearm. Convicted and sentenced to 26 years to life, he is eligible for parole in 2024. We found him on a prisoners' dating Web site, smiling, copping a strongman pose, and seeking "voluptuous women of all races."

Outwardly, Katena says, all that's left of her ordeal is a scar on her right foot, but psychologically and emotionally, she is still healing. She praises her mother and sisters, her best friend and her attorney who supported her through two years of living in a shelter and in shelters until Vilsant was off the streets. "I still have work to do," she says. "But I no longer allow anyone to instill any type of fear in me or make me feel afraid to be myself."

What does she tell young women like her daughter, now 14? "Love is not supposed to hurt," she says. "If he hits you or puts you down, that's not love. You're too precious. Love yourself first. Love yourself more. And be free."

Bruises, Black Eyes and Bullets

When Bessie Love declined her boyfriend's offer to get married because he had beat her once, he beat her again, she says. She married him anyway, in 1976. She stayed 14 years. She had met the ambitious college-educated James Self in Houston, Texas, in 1974, and thought she had found the perfect catch: "He opened doors, pulled out the seat for you—a gentleman. We had a home, cars, we traveled. I didn't want for anything." Eventually, she says, he showed a different side.

Bessie remembers him telling her that nobody else would want her because she couldn't bear children. In her statement to the Montgomery County, Texas, district attorney's office, she says he slid a bullet into his revolver, pointed it at her, and played Russian roulette. She also says he once urged her to kill herself because she was weeping at 508, she stood by her man. "I thought he would eventually realize I was the best thing that happened to him."

Bessie tried to camouflage the bruises and black eyes. Yet it wasn't the beatings that led Bessie to consider leaving for good. It was her husband's words. They were in a honeymoon phase when

they started arguing. "I said, 'I thought we were doing okay,'" Bessie recalls. "He said, 'As we've been doing it [having sex]! That shocked me to my core. I knew he didn't love me.'"

She started sneaking off to counseling sessions through the employee assistance program at her job. She packed an emergency escape bag and wrote letters to friends with messages to open them if something happened to her. The next time he hit her, March 4, 1990, was the last, she says.

Bessie took her escape bag and fled to a brother who agreed to take her in only if she promised to have no further contact with her husband. Bessie said yes and, for the first time in almost two decades, began to live a violence-free life.

Bessie did not consider legal action against her husband until a month later. In a statement to the district attorney's office, she describes how she and Self met with an accountant that April to resolve an IRS audit. After the meeting, according to the statement, Self claimed his car had been stolen and asked her to take him to file a report. Once in the car, he threatened her with



Bessie Love, 58, is a survivor's advocate and speaker.

a gun. She managed to escape and flag down another driver. Soon after, she filed a police report and got a restraining order. James Self was charged with aggravated assault, which was reduced to a plea bargain to a misdemeanor. He was fined \$1,500 and put on probation for one year. Bessie divorced him the following year and started telling her story. (Attempts to contact James Self for this article were unsuccessful.)

"I realized it was his shame, not my shame," she says. "I use my voice to speak about the more important issue—survival—not the crime."

35%
of female victims said they did not report the abuse to police because it was a private matter.

HOW TO TALK TO OUR TEENS AND GIRLS ABOUT DATING ABUSE AND VIOLENCE

"The very first thing that any mother or caring adult in a girl's life can do is to let her know it is never ever acceptable for someone to abuse you physically, emotionally, mentally," says Joyce Roach, president and CEO of Girls Incorporated, an organization dedicated to empowering girls.

Girls need to know that if a partner hits, cuts, chokes, intimidates or belittles you, or tries to control when and where you come and go and with whom you talk, he is abusing you, and it needs to stop.

Here are a few ways to help teens understand what a healthy dating relationship looks like:

- Make sure she knows that nothing she does or says justifies her being abused. "There is no such thing as causing this to happen," Roach says. "Abuse is never called for in any kind of situation."

- Reinforce that she has the right to refuse sex, affection or attention at any time.
- Advise her to create a "safe space" from technology's reach. Let her know that constant calls, texts and messages are attempts to control her and are not okay.
- Encourage her to talk. "Foster communication beforehand," Roach says. "Talk about situations like Rihanna and Chris Brown. Use it as an opportunity to hear what she's thinking and to teach."
- Help her get assistance if she needs it by reaching out to: LoveIsRespect.org provides such resources as a 24-hour national teen-dating abuse help line; call 866-321-9474.
- [Girls Inc.](http://GirlsInc.org) (GirlsInc.org) is an empowerment organization for girls. Check out its girls' Bill of Rights at girlsinc.org/abouthighlights-of-rights, or call 800-374-4475. —A.S.S.

OUR SECRET PAIN

Battered Black women who reported that they could rely on others for emotional and practical support were less likely to be abused again.

This has been seen as a women's issue and a human rights issue, but if there's anybody who needs to accept responsibility, it's men."

Fraternities can help bring men into this conversation. Churches, too, can offer guidance and support. Unfortunately, because of misinterpretations of the Scriptures, not every house of worship will welcome dialogue that condemns men's domination of women. If that's the

case, says the revered Auba Love, founder of the Black Church and Domestic Violence Institute, seek support elsewhere. "You pray, then you prayerfully proceed in a way that will bring good into your life," she says.

She adds that it's critical that the battered tell their story, which is exactly what survivor Bessie Love chose to do: "Some think when you share something traumatic from your past that you're still holding on to that hurt. But when I use my voice, when I share my story, if I can help one person, then what I lived through for 14 years is not in vain." □

Robin D. Stone is the author of *No Secrets, No Lies: How Black Families Can Heal From Sexual Abuse* (Broadway).

She Grabbed Her Kids and Fleed

For six years, as she endured the temper and fits of her boyfriend, Courtney Sanchez had friends and family standing by to help. But first, she had to help herself.

Courtney, an Austin, Texas, jazz and blues singer, fell hard and fast for Ismael Ramirez in the spring of 1996. By the end of the summer, Courtney says he was beating her. The first time it happened, she says she told him they should take a break. Ramirez apologized, and she reconsidered. "I'd never seen him cry before," she says. "I said, 'Okay, as long as it doesn't happen again.'"

According to her application for a protective order to the district court of Williamson County, Texas, once, when she was five months pregnant, she woke up in the hospital after being beaten unconscious. Doctors told her the baby was

not hurt. Courtney says the police took a report but she did not press charges. "I needed the baby to come into the world with a mother and a father," she says. The baby girl came, followed by a boy a year and a half later. On another trip to the hospital—battered and in pain—Courtney learned she had miscarried. This time she pressed charges. In May 2002, she went to SafePlace, a local women's shelter, with nothing more than her two children and her purse. She finally called her mother. In two weeks, she had legal aid, a restraining order, a petition for child support and a deposit for an apartment. "As soon as I started to help myself, people started to help me," she recalls. Ramirez ultimately pleaded guilty in two assault family-violence cases and was sentenced to two years probation. (Attempts to contact Ramirez were unsuccessful.)

Courtney later left Ramirez and married opera singer Paul Sanchez, who is adopting her children. They founded Jonah Ministry (jonahministry.org), a faith-based charity to aid victims of violence. Their first project: securing a donation of five computers so clients can search for jobs and plan for the future.

Half of the homeless women and children in the U.S. are fleeing domestic violence.



Courtney Sanchez, 35, cofounded a charity to aid victims.



Stacey Bishop, 32, is a clinical social worker with her husband, Michael Gooding.

Sleeping With the Enemy

By day, Stacey Bishop helped others as a clinical social worker. By night, she was overwhelmed and depressed as she struggled to keep the laundry fresh, the children fed and every crumb off the floor in her suburban Maryland home, as she said her husband, Michael Gooding, demanded.

"Being in my profession makes my going through this seem crazy," Stacey says. "Before him, I had my own house, my own car. I wasn't looking for somebody to take care of me. I went to private schools. I'm working on my Ph.D. You'd think I'd be okay. The proof that this can happen to anybody. He made me think it was something less than myself."

Stacey had already escaped an abusive relationship and thought she knew the signs. But the mother of three was charmed by Gooding, a soft-spoken electrician at the hospital where she worked, who invited her to his church for their first date. "It seemed as if he had a relationship with God," she says. "I thought, What a wonderful man."

A few months later, Gooding proposed. They married August 24, 2002, blending their families. On their honeymoon cruise, she saw the signs. "It started verbally," Stacey

says. "He would say stuff like, 'You're so fat, you need to exercise.' Everything I did displeased him."

Like many women in abusive relationships, she says she weathered a storm of degrading words and escalating violence, and she believed Gooding each time he apologized or gave her gifts to make up. "In spite of my accomplishments, I felt as if this man could validate who I was," she says. "He would say things like 'Nobody's going to want you with all these kids.' I had made a vow before God. I had already divorced, and I worried about what people would think."

She convinced him to turn to their pastor for support. "In the church, the thing you hear is you get married for better or for worse," she says. An e-mail from a friend confirmed that sentiment. It told her to be a good Christian wife, pray and trust that the Lord would take care of her. Feeling as if she had little support from her church family, Stacey found outside counseling and went on her own.

As she described in her petition for a protective order in the district court of Maryland for Anne Arundel County, even when he hit one of her children in July 2007, Stacey says she did not call for help. "I did not want to see my children's father taken away in handcuffs." But she did get a protective order to force him out of the house soon after. Gooding left but violated the order not to contact her, she says, sometimes leaving as many as 30

voice messages a day.

Stacey divorced him in August 2008, six years and a set of tears after their marriage. She remarried in October 2008, to a widower who she says adores her.

But the court ordered visitation for her two youngest children, whom she shared with Gooding. The boys had grown afraid of their father, and often begged not to go. During a custody exchange in the parking lot of a Maryland shopping mall on January 10, 2009, an Anne Arundel County police reporter states, Gooding attacked Stacey when she tried to stop him from forcing their daughter into his car. The children were witnesses. "He choked Mommy," the girl told officers. Stacey suffered a strained neck.

Gooding, charged with second-degree assault, denied all allegations of abuse when contacted by *Esquire*. He is set to stand trial in June.

Stacey and the children are in counseling now. Looking back, she can see how far she's come. "Nobody should have to suffer in silence, to live in torment," she says. "There are ways out. Maybe if I had gone to a shelter... if I had not worried about what people thought, I could have avoided what I experienced. My kids could be seeing their mother at a cemetery. At least I'm here to tell about it."

Boys who witness domestic violence are twice as likely to abuse their own partners and children when they become adults.

Divorced and separated people experienced violence at three times the rate of never-married people.

WHERE TO GET HELP

If you are being abused or you have a loved one who is being abused, contact the following organizations:

- National Domestic Violence Hotline
800-799-SAFE (7233); ndvh.org
- National Coalition Against Domestic Violence; ncadv.org
- ThatsNotCool.com

- Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community
877-643-8222; idvaaa.org
- The Black Church and Domestic Violence Institute
770-909-0715; bdvi.org

- A Call to Men
(817) 822-6738; acallformen.org
- Men Stopping Violence
866-717-6317; menstoppingviolence.org

—A.S.S.