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**BYLINE:** Cheryl Kravitz, Special to The Washington Post

**BODY:**

The final time my husband beat me was March 10, 1985.

We were living in Tulsa, and it was one of those yellow and gray Oklahoma days that portend a coming storm. Driving home from my office that afternoon I remember thinking what a gift it would be to find out a tornado was headed our way, aimed for my house.

I was working in a fairly high level position with a nonprofit organization then and had just been elected to the school board. I wrote a column periodically for one of the daily newspapers, held officer positions in a few professional organizations and won numerous awards for my work.

I lived in a big house, drove a new car and wore nice clothes.

I was black and blue from the neck down.

Sometimes, late at night after a beating, I would sit in the yard and stare at the Oklahoma sky, imagining how to escape. It was like living inside one of those little mazes -- the kind where you try to drop a silver ball down a hole while keeping away from obstacles blocking the way to freedom.

Battered women have been in the news a lot in recent years. As recently as a decade ago it wasn't something you talked about out loud, even in general terms.

If you were an abused spouse, you lived a secret life and became very adept at maintaining a dual existence.

When the moment came that I realized my actions didn't cause or prevent beatings, I knew I had to develop a pattern of camouflage for the outside world designed to disguise my pain. I concealed my hurt from friends, co-workers and family.

Eventually I even was able to deceive myself.

The problem with living an abused spouse's life is that there comes a time when the meaning of reality is reversed. Is the illusion inside or outside the house?

Much has been written about the cycle of abuse. The tale is an old one: Partner is kind. Tension builds. Partner blows up. Partner is kind. And so forth.

An abused person lives for the kind times. In the beginning there might be gifts, or special dinners or loving words.

Eventually a kind time is when there isn't any battering.

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As I said, I became very adept at hiding my wounds and my psychological pain. However, it was obvious to an observant few that I was no longer inviting people to my house. I was always wearing long sleeves and long pants, even in the heat of a Tulsa summer.

My teenage daughter was spending the night at a friend's house more than was necessary. We both averted questioning eyes.

And then on March 10, 1985, sensing danger, I made a call to my daughter's friend's mother, asking if she could spend the night. That wise woman paused, and then asked the pivotal question: "You're being hurt, aren't you? Can I help you?"

In that moment, I knew I had to let down at least a small piece of my guard. I said I was in a bad situation and it was getting worse. I promised that night I would sleep in my daughter's room, with a portable phone nearby.

When I got home I was, in fact, badly beaten. I remember thinking, please, let there be a physical sign that someone cares about me, forgetting my earlier conversation.

Afterward I made my way into a guest room. The phone was already there, but I was so drained I fell on the floor and slept. My husband had passed out from alcohol in the other room.

A few hours later I heard frantic pounding on the front door. It was my daughter's friend's mother and a police officer. She had tried to call to see how I was, and I didn't hear the phone. She cared. This time, I didn't avert my eyes.

I walked outside. The next day my daughter and I moved into our friend's house for a short time, and then we went out on our own. That was 14 years ago. A lot has happened since then.

My daughter now has her master's degree from the University of Arizona. For 10 years I have been married to a kind, honest, decent man. I have a wonderful job, a supportive family, and a kindergartner we adopted from South America five years ago.

So why am I "coming out?" Because in my travels I run across women who avert their eyes. Because I know that sometimes all it takes to make the difference in an abused person's life is that someone makes the effort not to judge. But to care.

A few years ago I was back in Oklahoma and visited my friend. We talked, laughed, and caught up on stuff about our daughters' lives. As I was leaving, I turned and met her eyes.

"Thanks," I said. "Thanks for saving our lives."

**GRAPHIC:** Illustration, john n. mathias for The Washington Post

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