

Preemptive domestic violence program goes to the source

by Matthew Hall
Sonoma West Staff Writer

Sonoma West Times & News has been featuring a special series on domestic violence in Sonoma County. This is the final installment of our series leading up to Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

For the past 30 years, a dedicated group of Sonoma County men have been working to end violence one man at a time.

Men Evolving Non-Violently (M.E.N.) is a non-profit made up of a collective of volunteer peer-counselors who help men change violent/abusive behaviors. It is a one-of-a-kind program operating in Sonoma County since 1979 that aims to preempt violent behavior by teaching men skills to help them address their potentially destructive behavior.

Men must voluntarily contact the group and engage in a series of group sessions where they learn to understand their feelings, communicate more clearly and develop positive behaviors that help meet their needs and the needs of their domestic partners.

Organizers said the process gives men the skills they need to improve their lives and does so in a way that hopefully prevents future family violence.

“(Men) know their life isn’t working but they haven’t figured it out and they can come in and we work with them,” said facilitator RobRoy MacLeod.

MacLeod said men are taught to listen and given the ability to formulate their thoughts clearly, state their needs in an acceptable way and learn to compromise. “We give them the ability to admit mistakes without self destructing,” he said.

The program operates on the belief that men in the group are genuinely interested in self-improvement and can want to change. “The men fix themselves, we just give them the tools,” said facilitator Jon Warren.

“We work with men who want to change their abusive behaviors,” said MacLeod “We

interview them to make sure they are personally motivated to change.”

The sessions are designed to be more supportive than psychological and MacLeod said men who show signs of needing professional therapy are referred to trained counselors for one-on-one help.

Facilitator Jon Warren said the goal is to provide help without pointing fingers. “There’s no shame or blame,” he said. “We believe we are good men with bad behavior.”

Warren said the camaraderie of the group sessions is important. “It’s also very empowering. I came from a place of low self-esteem and to have professional adult men who were older than me stop and listen when I was about 34 years old was a very empowering kind of process and very new to me,” he said.

MacLeod said the group’s collaborative approach is designed to give men important skills but also show them how to model those skills to other men. Graduates of the program are encouraged to continue their training and become facilitators but MacLeod said the behavior modeling also occurs during everyday life. “Our belief is that it’s fathers who can model behavior for their sons and that men will also not support their kids in carrying on this violent behavior and are going to help us come to a less violent society,” he said.

The program operates out of a deep respect for women and in full support of women as equal partners in society but it also aims to help men understand what it means to be a man by exploring gender roles and societal expectations.

“We talk about what kind of courage it takes to become vulnerable in a relationship and admit wrongdoing,” said MacLeod. “For men to call the hotline is an example of huge courage for a man.”

Warren said part of the process is helping men understand that their behavior has been influenced by culture and expectation but that they have a choice in how they express themselves. “Once you realize that it’s an indoctrination you can live it or choose to live a different way,” he said. “It’s a conscious moment.”

He said he has seen men use the skills learned from the group in situations outside their relationship and that graduates of the program find themselves better able to handle confrontational situations regardless of the setting.

The group is truly unique not only for its role as a preemptive support service but also in its overall organization. The collective has no central leader and the group operates entirely by consensus with all decisions requiring approval by the entire membership. “It can be awkward and it takes a lot of time but it’s good practice for dealing with our own tempers,” said facilitator RobRoy MacLeod.

Participants pay a per-session fee equal to one hour’s pay to participate in the program.

MacLeod said unemployed men are asked to pay \$10 per session but that no-one has ever been turned away for lack of funds.

Warren said the system can be life changing for participants and that the organization is actively looking for men who want to improve their lives. “If they take the work seriously, it’s a wonderful gift. We’re looking for any man that wants to work on his behavior and want any volunteers that want to work with men.”

For more information visit www.sonomacountymen.org or call 528-2MEN.