

Residents respond to domestic violence



BY RICK MERCIER

SMITHFIELD - People who find themselves in an abusive relationship must summon the courage to take the “first step” to escape their situation, a domestic violence survivor told a gathering of about 100 people who attended a vigil at the Johnston County Courthouse in Smithfield Thursday evening.

“What I would to say people that are in this situation, that are experiencing domestic violence, I would say, ‘Just take the first step.’ You don’t have to think beyond that,” domestic violence survivor Joli Barnette said. “If you can just find the courage to take that first step and reach out to an agency like Harbor, they will hold your hand the rest of the way. Just make it that far, and don’t worry about the rest.”

Barnette, who said she lived with domestic violence for nine years in her previous marriage, believed “the minute I made the first move that I might very well be killed.”

“So it took a long time for me” to get out of the abusive relationship, she said.

The vigil, organized by Harbor, Inc., the county’s only nonprofit agency that assists survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, was a response to the murder of four people this month in domestic violence incidents in the county, including two people in the Clayton area.

Two women were slain while they were in the process of separating from their husbands, investigators say. Devinee House

and her husband, Billy House, had all but signed their divorce agreement when Billy House shot and killed his wife and 14-year-old stepson, Dakoda Johnson. He then turned the gun on himself, investigators say.

The shootings occurred on July 13 at the couple’s home on Castleberry Road. Another woman, Elizabeth Reyes, was allegedly killed by her husband on July 1 in the Brogden community near Smithfield.

In another fatal domestic incident this month in Brogden, 4-year-old Teghan Skiba allegedly was sexually assaulted and tortured to death by a man who was caring for her while her mother was away on military training.

Barnette said the spate of domestic violence the past few weeks had a powerful personal impact on her.

“This really hits home for me because I’m well aware that that could be my picture and my kids’ that we’re looking at tonight,” she said.

Barnette said she had filed for a protective order against her former husband at the Johnston County Courthouse six years ago, but he violated it “dozens and dozens of times” without consequences.

He slipped through the cracks of the legal system and became more emboldened, she said. Last month, he was arrested in another county for strangling his current wife, kidnapping her and threatening to

kill the woman’s daughter, she said.

Chief Deputy Bengie Gaddis, who spoke on behalf of the Johnston County Sheriff’s Office, said law enforcement and local residents and agencies haven’t done enough to confront domestic violence.

“Together as a community,

“Every time we as individuals and we as a society remain silent, when we turn a blind eye to domestic violence we see going on, we are complicit in that domestic violence.”

- Logan Roberts, Staff Attorney,
Legal Aid of NC – Smithfield Office

together as a group of professionals, I do believe that we can do more to combat these senseless acts of domestic violence,” he said, without elaborating.

Keri Christensen, executive director of Harbor, said the burden should not fall exclusively on law enforcement or other agencies.

“Domestic violence is not a problem that law enforcement, Harbor or any other agency can single-handedly end. It’s going to take a community-wide response with agencies, media outlets and community members like yourselves who are here this evening working together to provide education and awareness throughout our community,” she said.

District Attorney Susan Doyle said Harbor must receive adequate financial support from individuals and local governments so it can continue its important work.

She also said people must be vigilant in responding to domestic violence in their midst.

“We can also, as friends, as neighbors, as family members – we can make a promise to do a better job to be aware of circumstances that might be occurring right next door or in our own families and not be afraid to step in and make sure that we have done all that we can to ensure that there are no more victims of domestic violence,” Doyle said.

Logan Roberts, an attorney who works with domestic violence survivors through the **Legal Aid of North Carolina office in Smithfield**, said people who do not speak out against domestic abuse are implicated in the violence.

“Every time we as individuals and we as a society remain silent, when we turn a blind eye to domestic violence we see going on, we are complicit in that domestic violence,” **Roberts** said.

District Court Judge Charles Bullock said domestic violence was one of the most complicated issues that law enforcement and the legal system face.

When law enforcement arrives on the scene of a domestic incident, “the unique thing is that the officer is talking to a victim who has been assaulted or abused by someone they love,” Bullock said.

He also said that merely throwing an offender in jail does not resolve all of the issues involved in domestic cases.

“Is that going to keep the person from reoffending?” Bullock asked.



About 100 people attended a vigil held by Harbor, Inc., on Thursday to remember four people murdered this month in domestic incidents.

-- Photo by Rick Mercier

“Is the victim then going to be able to pay her mortgage? Are they going to be able to support their children?”

Roberts stressed that domestic violence crosses all demographic boundaries.

“Domestic violence is not limited to sex. Domestic violence is not limited to race. It’s not limited to age; it’s not limited to your economic status,” he said. “I’ve had victims who are a few months old. I’ve had victims who are 80 years old.”

He said the recent fatal domestic incidents “are just the cases that make the news.”

“Those of us who deal with domestic violence victims on a day-to-day basis know that this goes on more than most people realize,” Roberts said.

“If nothing is done, domestic violence repeats itself; it escalates,” he said. “And if it is not stopped, it will take us up to its natural conclusion as it has in these three cases that we’ve seen this month.”