

Dr. Maurice Sherman, a Vista physician, fixes a woman's nose. Sherman says the surgery helps women overcome the stigma of abuse.



Staff Photo / Dan Rios

Vista doctor puts smiles on faces of abuse victims

By E' Louise Ondash
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Even as the nation listened earlier this year to the impassioned, fearful pleas for help by Nicole Brown Simpson on the now-famous 911 tapes, Annie continued to believe she deserved her boyfriend's beatings.

"I was confused," said the 22-year-old East County woman, who asked for anonymity. "How could somebody who loves me hurt me? I thought it was my fault."

That was in February. In late May, Annie joined the ranks of the more than 1 million women in the United States who annually require medical treatment because of battering.

Her boyfriend smashed her in the face, breaking her nose and slicing her lip. Fortunately, someone in a nearby apartment complex called 911, and she was taken to an emergency room.

Doctors did what they could to put her face back together, but Annie was left with blocked nasal passages, sinus problems, headaches and a crooked nose.

"It's been difficult to cope," she said. "Every day I had to wake up and put my makeup on and look in the mirror and it's a constant reminder of what he did."

Thanks to a program that helps battered women with facial injuries, she won't have that reminder anymore. Through the District Attorney's Office, which sent her boyfriend back to jail for at least eight years (he had been on parole), Annie learned about the National Domestic Violence Project of the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery.

The program was founded last year by doctors who want to help women who need surgery to eradicate the scars of mistreatment but can't afford it.

Participating physicians agree to provide their services for free.

"Annie is the first person I've referred," said Monica Lehman, one of a half-dozen specialists county-wide with the Victims and Witnesses Assistance Program. "I can only imagine that this will make a world of difference to her self-esteem and her ability to go on."

Annie was sent to Dr. Maurice Sherman of Vista, who performed the surgery at the North Coast Surgery Center in Oceanside, which also donated its facility and materials.

"We did two things for Annie," Sherman explained. "We did a septoplasty, which means we straightened the cartilage inside her nose to help her breathe, and a rhinoplasty to straighten the outside of her nose."

The surgery "was hard, emotionally and physically," Annie said. "It brought back nightmares, but as I keep getting better, I won't have so many bad memories."

That's one of the main goals of the program, Sherman said.

"It always feels good to give something back to society, and the patients are very thankful because it lets them put aside their stigma. They don't have to be constantly reminded of their bad relationship."

It didn't take long for Annie's relationship to get abusive. It was only a month after meeting this "very handsome" man that he began battering her regularly.

"He shoved my head through a window and socked me in the stomach and ribs," Annie said. "He threw me into walls. Once it took three friends to pull him off me. I'd be afraid for my life, then he'd apologize."

In fits of rage, he also destroyed many of her possessions, sold her jewelry, "probably for drug money," and threatened to kill her family if she left. Annie eventually quit her job because of the stress, and because her boyfriend remained jobless, they became homeless.

"I couldn't see a way out," Annie said. "Even though my parents made it clear that their door was always open, I didn't want to go home. I come from a middle-class family and I let him drag me down."

Annie is home again, has a new job, and is receiving counseling paid for by the state's Victims of Crime Program. It is funded by court-ordered fines levied on convicted criminals and pays victims' expenses, such as medical and psychological services and lost wages.

"It helps the victims get their lives together after tragedies," Lehman said.

Annie believes the victims fund and the facial surgery program have helped her begin anew.

"It's still difficult for me to talk about (the battering), but from the counseling I think now I can recognize people like my boyfriend and get away," she said.

"I used to think I could help people like that, but now I know to put myself first. I'm really thankful to Dr. Sherman, too. I hope other women learn about these programs."

Domestic violence has grim statistics

Here are the unpleasant facts about domestic violence, according to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence:

- More than 5 million women are affected by domestic violence annually; more than 1 million require medical treatment.

- Nearly one-third of the women murdered in 1990 were killed by husbands or boyfriends.

- One in five of all female trauma cases are victims of intentional injury by an acquaintance or husband.

- Three out of four women who are involved in an abusive relationship receive battering to their face and head area.

- Women who leave their abusive mates have a 75 percent greater risk of being killed by their batterers than those who stay.

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