

Using Her Passion and Expertise to Create Awareness of Domestic Abuse

By Catherine Lee



A longtime advocate for the most vulnerable members of society, **Laura Yeomans** started working about 10 years ago with Msgr. John J. Enzler — then president and CEO of Catholic Charities — on a program for parishioners who are suffering from domestic violence.

By the time she retired from her full-time job with Catholic Charities in February 2022, Yeomans was managing the agency's Parish Partners program, which assists families seeking help not only with domestic violence, but also homelessness and mental health crises, among other issues.

Yeomans didn't want to give up her work on behalf of domestic abuse victims, so she now serves as the volunteer coordinator of the agency's domestic violence outreach team.

"I want to demonstrate in my life that we can make a difference in the lives of women and children who are abused," she says. "I want parishioners to know that help is available, that the church is a place where you can talk about difficulties at home."

She finds inspiration in the writing of the late Victor Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist, who notes in "Man's Search for Meaning" that "... life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems ...". Her passion stems from her Quaker faith and years of working with domestic violence victims, both at Catholic Charities and other organizations.

She cites grim statistics that speak to the severity of "the epidemic of domestic violence" in the United States and around the world — 1 out of 4 women and 1 out of 7 men have experienced severe physical violence in an intimate relationship. Yeomans and her volunteers have helped victims who have been kicked, beaten, choked, burned, threatened with death or hurt by a weapon.

42

families received **assistance and referrals**.

25

Catholic parishes hosted **educational and outreach activities** by Family Peace volunteers.

400

high school students **attended presentations about healthy teen relationships**.

She tries to dispel the belief – held by some Catholics – that acting to end an abusive relationship violates the marriage promise. She notes that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has affirmed that domestic violence is never justified. “No one is expected to stay in an abusive relationship,” she says.

Yeomans juggles a busy schedule that includes domestic violence awareness training for pastors and lay leaders and healthy relationship training for teens and young adults. She and her volunteers meet with individuals who have been abused and let them know about support services in their area for domestic violence victims. In recent years, she has provided training for Catholic Charities case managers working with migrant families who are living temporarily in D.C. area hotels.

A Catholic Charities Hope Corps lead volunteer, Yeomans is also a fellow with Catholics for Family Peace, which promotes peace within families and encourages compassion for domestic abuse victims.

Prior to joining Catholic Charities, she worked as a community organizer, directed a shelter for abused women in Appalachian Ohio and served as a family advocate at an emergency shelter in the D.C. area. She has served as a panelist and a workshop leader at events on domestic violence hosted by the USCCB.

Working with the Catholic Charities Priest Domestic Violence Advisory Committee, Yeomans created a booklet for pastors that includes resources for parishioners who are being abused. Titled “Listen with Love: A Guide for Parishes on Domestic Violence Outreach,” the packet includes tips for homilies, parish bulletin inserts, restroom fliers in English and Spanish with tear-off tabs, and prayers of the faithful for those suffering abuse.

The booklet also includes lists of agencies providing support services for domestic violence victims in D.C. and five counties that fall within the archdiocese.

Yeomans notes that volunteers are trained to listen with compassion and help individuals develop safety plans if they want to leave their abusive partners. Catholic Charities can provide assistance that includes Metro cards, food, diapers and emergency funds to cover rent.

Joan Fowler Brown, chief of staff for Catholic Charities, says Yeomans' work “has created a ripple effect, touching the lives of hundreds of people. It's impossible to put a price on the service she provides for Catholic Charities. We're blessed every year that we have her.”

Laura Yeomans

