

Domestic violence victims advise teens on preventing abuse

By George Raine

It's chilling enough that one in 11 adolescents is a victim of physical dating violence, but it only gets worse: Research shows that one in every four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime. It would make sense, then, to make a case for healthy relationships – and do it early.

A workshop titled "Love Shouldn't Hurt" conducted for eighth graders at Mission Dolores School – now Mission Dolores Academy - in May did just that – not jarringly, but to make the point that if young people are uncomfortable in relationships, fix them, and establish rules of behavior, and offer lessons on how not to be hurtful.

It certainly worked for one eighth-grader, a boy, who in a comment wrote, "I don't personally have experience with domestic violence but I know what I don't want to be when I grow up."

It was the first of what may be a series of workshops presented by Angelina Quintana, 23, and Melissa Suncin, 24, themselves graduates of Mission Dolores, and produced by Ministers of Light, a ministry within the Archdiocese of San Francisco offering domestic violence counseling from a Catholic and faith-based perspective.

The ministry is exploring the possibility of holding the workshop at other schools, as it has become clear that unhealthy relationships often start early and can lead to a lifetime of abuse, and as the archdiocese turns a spotlight on the work of the Ministers of Light at the third annual domestic violence awareness Mass Oct. 15, at 5:30 p.m. at St. Mary's Cathedral.

The Ministers of Light is a survivor-driven, survivor-led ministry that formed at Mission Dolores in 2008. That year, its founder and director, Marisela Sookraj, was preparing to be baptized when, she said, her sponsor and then-boyfriend beat her, fracturing her skull. Her colleagues in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults comforted her, but Sookraj felt a void: There was no faith-based, Catholic domestic violence support group in San Francisco or in the archdiocese. She approached San Francisco Auxiliary Bishop William J. Justice, who, indeed, was supportive, and this year the ministry, now also formed at nine other parishes in the archdiocese and looking to expand, is being folded into the archdiocese's Office of Public Policy & Social Concerns.

"We want to get the word out across the archdiocese
VIOLENCE, page 10

At a glance

- Each year, one in four adolescents reports verbal, physical, emotional or sexual abuse.
- One in five adolescents reports being a victim of emotional abuse.
- Nearly 80 percent of girls who have been victims of physical abuse in their dating relationships continue to date the abuser.

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Elizabeth Ver, 22, and her special "angel" Marilyn Knight share a close moment at Ver's baby shower Sept. 17 at St. Hilary Parish in Tiburon.

PHOTO BY JOSE LUIS AGUIRRE/CATHOLIC SAN FRANCISCO

'Blessing from God'

Parish 'angels' embrace struggling mom-to-be

By Lidia Wasowicz

On a cloudless Saturday afternoon, a host of "angels" at St. Hilary Church in Tiburon flutters around the hall, checking every detail on the balloon-festooned tables laden with savory sandwiches, salads and sweets and piled with festively wrapped baby gifts.

They want to ensure perfection at their first shower for their first "client" since last October's launch of

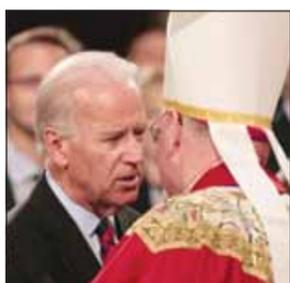
the parish's Gabriel Project, which serves and supports the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of moms-to-be in distress.

When she finally appears, a half-hour late due to heavy East Bay traffic, they hover over her with hugs and hellos.

Overwhelmed by the attention and affection, the attractive and very pregnant young woman has no doubt her newfound mentors are heaven-sent.

BLESSING FROM GOD, page 20

INSIDE THIS WEEK'S EDITION



Dolan: Church-state fight would harm marriage

~ Page 5 ~



Be ready, very ready, for the revised missal

~ Page 7 ~



Catholics decry latest executions

~ Page 13 ~

On the Street	2
Local News	11
George Weigel	17
Father Rolheiser	19
Pope in Germany	21-22
Chesterton book	23
Classified ads	27

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Blessing from God . . .

■ Continued from cover

"I don't like to ask for help, but I didn't even have to ask to get this blessing from God," said a tearful and thankful Elizabeth Ver, 22.

Before her encounter with the "angels," much of her life was hell, she confided after the festivities. Abused and abandoned by her mother at age 10, she shuffled from juvenile hall to a series of group homes. She suffered hunger and homelessness, despair and depression.

She met the father of her child, a handsome, unemployed musician 16 years her senior, while at her uncle's house for a Labor Day barbecue. He was watching his son play

Her introduction to the life-affirming Gabriel Project in March was made by St. Vincent de Paul volunteers, who came bearing food vouchers and, noting Ver's condition, recommended the program.

with a friend at a neighboring apartment, but kept his eye on her.

They've named the baby, due Oct. 3, Anastasia Elizabeth.

"My blessing from God is this baby," Ver asserted, recalling how her mother "told me she would have aborted me if not for my father."

Her introduction to the life-affirming Gabriel Project in March was made by St. Vincent de Paul volunteers, who came bearing food vouchers and, noting Ver's condition, recommended the program.

"They've made a humongous difference," Ver said. "I'd be lost without them."

She had instant rapport with her personal "angel," Marilyn Knight of Tiburon, a Dame of Malta committed to serving the sick and poor.

"Marilyn brought me groceries and prenatal vitamins and baby books and stuff I never even thought of," Ver related.

Noticing Ver was job hunting but had no telephone, Knight purchased a cell phone for her the next day.

As the due date approached, Knight took Ver shopping for a stroller, infant seat, blankets and other essentials. On Labor Day weekend, she displayed the selected items after Mass, giving St. Hilary parishioners a chance to contribute.

The donations that single weekend totaled \$800.

At a glance

– St. Hilary is one of 13 parishes in the San Francisco archdiocese, and one of four in Marin County, participating in the national Gabriel Project.

– Elizabeth Ver is the parish project's first "client" since the effort was launched last October.

– The national project was born of a similar program started by a Houston priest in the wake of the 1973 Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion.

– The Gabriel Project is named after the angel who in Scripture delivers the good news of Christ's birth to Mary and calms her fears.



PHOTOS BY JOSE LUIS AGUIRRE/CATHOLIC SAN FRANCISCO



Elizabeth Ver, 22, opens gifts at the baby shower the Gabriel Project "angels" at St. Hilary Parish in Tiburon threw in her honor Sept. 17. Parishioners donated \$800 for a stroller, swing, infant seat, diapers and other infant essentials. Left, Ver is encircled, from left, by Ingrid Gallagher, Gabriel Project coordinator at St. Hilary; Fredi D'Alessio, program coordinator for the Gabriel Project in the San Francisco archdiocese; Edna Griffith, board member of the Gabriel Project at St. Hilary; and Marilyn Knight, Elizabeth's "angel."

"I was so pleased at such a generous, enthusiastic response," said Ingrid Gallagher of Tiburon, Gabriel Project coordinator at St. Hilary. "Normally, people shell out single dollar bills or just walk by, but the way Marilyn had the items all laid out on the table for people to see what they were paying for and eliminating the need to buy a gift themselves really made a difference."

Custom-tailoring their services, the "angels" do not plan to throw baby showers for every mom-to-be they take under their wing.

"What we want to give to all our struggling young mothers is hope," Gallagher said.

That desire echoes the mission statement of the Gabriel Project, named after the angel who in Scripture delivers the good news of Christ's birth to Mary and calms her fears. "The Gabriel Project announces the same comforting message to frightened pregnant mothers," the statement proclaims.

The "angels" spread this message by offering and/or facilitating services varying from child care and counseling to education and employment throughout the pregnancy and for the first few weeks after birth, although when special bonds develop, the relationship may endure.

St. Hilary is one of 13 parishes in the San Francisco archdiocese, and one of



It's a girl: A shower gift to the prospective mom

four in Marin County, participating in the nationwide Gabriel Project, born of a similar program started by a Houston priest in the wake of the 1973 Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion.

"The key challenge is to increase the number of parishes involved and the

lic's awareness of our services," said Fredi D'Alessio of Sausalito, who was named the archdiocese's head of the program two years ago when not a single parish was participating.

The project has made inroads toward both goals since its entry into the Web. Learning of the program online, one woman has moved from Alabama to the Bay Area to be near the Catholic family who will be adopting her child.

Providing solutions may sway women from considering a termination of their pregnancy, D'Alessio said.

"If you're 14 and pregnant but have seen the whole parish pool together their support, your first thought won't be of abortion, it'll be, 'The parish can help me.'"

"Our aim," he added, "is to help pregnant moms, whether they are considering abortion or not."

On that score, the St. Hilary "angels" hit the ball out of the park, said Edward Dacanay of Oakland, Ver's uncle with whom she currently resides.

"I'm overwhelmed by what Marilyn and the others have done for her," he said.

Knight considers it nothing extraordinary. "This is what Christ wants us to do – to not just throw money at people but build relationships with them," she said.