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Moving bystanders to action is domestic violence challenge Activists honored

By Linda Bock TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF
lbock@telegram.com

WORCESTER — Most people are not victims or perpetrators of domestic violence, according to Sarah McMahon, a professor at Rutgers University, the keynote speaker at Daybreak's annual domestic violence awareness breakfast yesterday.

Many are bystanders.

Ms. McMahon challenged the community to take a stand against domestic violence by becoming "active" bystanders.

"By definition, a bystander sees an event but doesn't do anything about it," Ms. McMahon said. "We all have to be engaged and active bystanders."

The purpose of the annual Daybreak breakfast, held at the College of the Holy Cross, is to applaud the efforts of those in the community who work to stop domestic violence and to place domestic violence issues in the spotlight this month, Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

Some of the barriers to intervening in a potential domestic violence situation, according to Ms. McMahon, are that people don't notice domestic violence, they don't see the situation as appropriate for intervention, and they think others will step in to intervene or they simply don't know how to intervene.

"There are still too many who see it as a private issue," Ms. McMahon said. She said people can often successfully intervene by distracting a perpetrator, or delegating someone to help in a situation. She presented some modern-day situations.

"What will you do if you see a woman you don't know grabbed by her partner out in public? You see a friend of yours verbally abused by her partner," were some of the questions posed. "What if you hear sexist language or a joke?" Ms. McMahon said. "We can't leave it up to other people. ... We have to be the one to take a stand."

Daybreak, a program of YWCA Central Massachusetts, is the designated battered women's service provider for Greater Worcester. As part of its mission, Daybreak provides a 24-hour hot line, community education, crisis intervention, emergency shelter, outreach, court advocacy and counseling.

Linda Cavaioli, executive director of YWCA Central Massachusetts, welcomed about 300 guests to the

breakfast.

The Great Guys awards this year were presented to the Rev. Thomas McKibbens of the First Baptist Church and Nimish Ganatra, the first director of the Domestic Violence Unit of the Worcester district attorney's office.

Rev. McKibbens was recognized for his work in raising awareness within the faith community. He dedicated Sunday services to educate and inspire parishioners to consider their role and responsibility in changing the culture of domestic violence. Rev. McKibbens is also working to end the silence of the church in addressing domestic violence.

"If I'm a great guy, it's because I'm pastor of a great church," Rev. McKibbens said.

Mr. Ganatra, who returned from Michigan, where he is now an assistant prosecuting attorney in Jackson County, was recognized for his work prosecuting domestic violence cases and implementing a system for collecting statistical data.

"The more we share (data), the stronger our advocates are going to be," Mr. Ganatra said.

Mr. Ganatra accepted the award on behalf of Worcester District Attorney Joseph D. Early Jr. and all the lawyers and advocates for their commitment in taking domestic violence crimes seriously.

The Greater Worcester Community Foundation was also recognized for its contributions to ending domestic violence.

Bob Jennings, Evan and Cindy Graber, Lynn Rocker, John Medbury, Hannah Weinsalt, Danielle St. Armand, Dymani Edmonds, Ryan Flynn and Kyle Tarnowski presented an artistic interpretation of "Finding the Words" to become active bystanders, punctuated by an a cappella rendition of "Lean on Me" by Karen Driscoll.

Jean King Fray, a member of the Daybreak standing committee, summed up the program with two words: Call me. She joined in encouraging the community to change the culture by no longer being bystanders to domestic violence.

"Look at people deep into their eyes and say call me," Ms. King Fray said. "Find the words."

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