

A fresh approach to ending family violence

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An out-of-the-box conference on domestic violence prevention couldn't have come at a better time. Or a worse time.

As mental health and social services leaders joined lawmakers and public safety experts for an all-day conference April 8, Yolanda L. Smith was in critical condition at Hennepin County Medical Center, shot by her boyfriend early that morning, police said.

A few hours later, a Dakota County jury convicted Brent P. Selge of last July's assault on his estranged wife, resulting in a traumatic brain injury.

The day ended with Aaron L. Parson, 23, fatally shooting his former girlfriend, Abigail

M. Fedeli, 20, and her new boyfriend, Michael Habte, 21, at Festival Foods in Brooklyn Park. He then killed himself.

Despite decades of work devoted to ending domestic violence, the deaths and injuries keep mounting. Last Friday's "Transforming Families" conference at Mount Zion Temple in St. Paul brought renewed hope to the cause.

"What we did last week has never happened before, where all of these people came together," said Donald Gault, a manager for the St. Paul-Ramsey County Public Health Department, a conference sponsor with Jewish Family and Children's Service of Minneapolis (JFCS). "We're all trying to figure out what to do here to get past the not-listening part."

Panelists included Ramsey County Attorney John Choi; Carol Arthur, executive director of the Domestic Abuse Project; Judge Pamela Alexander, president of the Council on Crime & Justice; Victoria Reinhardt, chairwoman of the Ramsey County Board of

Commissioners; Megan Vertin, director of St. Paul's Vertin Youth and Family Services, and Dave Ellis, community impact manager of the Greater Twin Cities United Way.

But most intriguing were Minnesota Rep. Michael Paymar, co-founder of the Duluth Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, and Linda Mills, author of "Violent Partners" and executive director of New York University's Center on Violence and Recovery. Their presence, not just in the same room but together onstage, was something many of the 250 in attendance never thought they'd see. "These two camps," Gault said, "do not generally converse."

The domestic violence field has been sharply divided for decades. The "Duluth Model," developed 30 years ago by Paymar and Ellen Pence, focuses on intervention to end relationships "built on dominance and oppression," partly through increasingly harsh penalties for repeat offenders.

"Safety for victims," Paymar said, "is paramount to everything

we do."

Mills' camp proposes that domestic violence is more complex than men's attitudes, that perpetrators often act out of a feeling of powerlessness, but they can change. Mills, once a domestic abuse victim herself, says that many couples in violent relationships want to stay together. A "transformative" approach, focused on growth and healing, is best, she said.

"The hair-raising part is that many couples do stay together," Mills said. "We can will it to be different, but I'm a realist."

On this day, nobody needed to win. "It was so much less about fighting ideologically," said participant Yael Shy, an attorney who works with Mills. "People get tired of working in their little corners. The conference underlined that nobody has all the answers."

The roots of the conference go back to 2009 when Gault and JFCS' Betsy Sitkoff traveled to New York to learn more about Mills' work. From those conversations, and decades of

research from the Duluth Model, they developed "The Family Transformation Model."

"We now have shelters, huge intervention systems in place, and police and prosecutors who take this issue very seriously," Gault said. The Transformation Model is about taking the next step, he said, allowing people to face their flaws and change.

"The greatest level of accountability," Gault said, "is to yourself."

We're not singing kumbaya yet. Paymar maintains "pretty fundamental disagreements" with Mills.

"Men who batter must give up their sense of entitlement if they ever want a healthy and egalitarian relationship with a woman," he said. "I'll still challenge her assumptions, such as that victims share responsibility for the violence, but I think we can find places where we agree."

Mills said that, "Michael's voice keeps all of us honest. He reminds us of the significant difficulties presented to

us, particularly the dangers [to victims]." Mostly, Mills is grateful to Minnesota, with its "long history of innovation" in the field. "You're the place of many firsts."

Another first occurred last week. An essential conversation began between two sides wanting the same goal. In our continuing quest to keep families safe, let's keep the dialogue open.

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