



# A Shelter from the Storm

By Evelyn Walsh

Since 2003, 835 adults and children in the state of Georgia have been killed in acts of domestic violence. Statistics show that one in four women will be affected by domestic violence during her lifetime, and sexual assault will touch one in six women. Holly Comer, CEO and executive director of the YWCA of Northwest Georgia, says, "With Cobb County's estimated female population, this means that more than 88,000 women are affected ... your mothers, sisters, colleagues and friends."

The numbers tell a grim story, but Comer insists there is hope. "Thank God I live and work in Cobb County," she says. "Even in this economy, people find a way to help." As the lone domestic abuse shelter and sexual assault advocacy center in Cobb County, the YWCA of Northwest Georgia is also the only social services provider to partner with police, the District Attorney's office and the WellStar Health System to assist sexual assault victims over the age of 13. In addition to the shelter, the YWCA runs multiple long-term housing units for women and children making the transition from abusive homes to independence. The YWCA serves citizens of Paulding and Cherokee counties as well as Cobb residents.

### Partnering with Law Enforcement

Major Paula Sparks is in charge of the Crimes Against Persons Unit of the Cobb County Police Department. "We have seven active detectives working hand in hand with the YWCA on sex assault and domestic violence," she says. "The YWCA provides us with advocates. They train domestic violence advocates [who] assist our detectives in walking victims through the entire process—from getting protective orders to what happens after the arrest or the court date. They provide guidance, and direct women to services. We could make an arrest and

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—Terri Buntten-Guthrie

say we are done, but without the YWCA follow up and resources for the victim and her children, you might remove the problem for a time, but you would not prevent the problem from recurring. When we refer women to the Y, they get the support and follow up they need."

### Overcoming Stereotypes

An important part of the YWCA mission is to educate the public about the prevalence of domestic and sexual violence. Comer says that many people don't understand the level on which domestic abuse is "everyone's problem." Citing sobering figures from the National Coalition Against Domestic

Violence, Comer states that the yearly cost of domestic abuse is more than \$5.8 billion, \$4.1 billion of which is attributed to medical and mental health expenses. She says, "Employees miss work, they have to go to court, there are productivity issues. The Y is a resource for employers as well as for individuals." While many big companies do have employee resources in place, Comer believes that smaller businesses need more support. "We hope to offer a seminar for local businesses soon," she adds.

Overcoming stereotypes about the demographics of sexual and domestic abuse is another critical aspect of the YWCA mission. Some misconceptions—for instance, that domestic abuse victims are almost exclusively low income—endure. The YWCA works to dispel these myths. Comer insists that "the police go to East Cobb as much as they go to West Cobb." She adds that higher income women may have more resources and alternatives, but the essential dynamics of abuse—isolation, power, control—are the same.

Terri Buntten-Guthrie, who chairs the YWCA Academy of Women Leaders, believes the YWCA has made real progress in raising public awareness. "Domestic abuse and sexual violence are no longer something you're afraid to talk about. People are more comfortable bringing it out in the open,"

## The 2012 Tribute to Women of Achievement

The 2012 Tribute to Women of Achievement will be held from 5:50 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. on Friday, March 23, 2012, at the Cobb Galleria Centre. A silent auction, "Open Your Purses and Your Hearts," will begin at 5:30 p.m. The Awards Recognition Dinner will take place at 7:00 p.m. For more information, or to purchase tickets or event sponsorship, please contact Kimberly Jorgensen of the YWCA at (770) 423-3582. Tickets and additional information are also available online at [www.ywcanwga.com](http://www.ywcanwga.com).



**2011 Tribute to Women of Achievement Honorees**  
**Front row sitting (left to right):** Faye DiMassimo, Christy Rosell, Penny Warren (2011 Woman of the Year), Donna Krueger, Alisha Thomas Morgan.  
**Back row standing (left to right):** Candice Saunders, Dr. Elizabeth Street, Renee White, Pam Younker, Theresa Milligan, Becky Jinks, Carla Keasler, Denise O'Connell, Helen Hines, Peggy Snider Houghton.



she says. “The awareness that develops over the years provides people with an avenue for understanding how it affects all of us—at home, at the workplace, at church—everywhere.” Buntten-Guthrie, who is also executive vice president and chief lending officer at First Landmark Bank, says that working with the YWCA has helped her appreciate the impact of domestic and sexual assault in the workplace. “It helps me as an employer to understand and recognize the signs.”

### Building Positive Change

To serve more women and children, the YWCA has launched a fundraising campaign to expand and upgrade its facilities. “I’m not a psychologist,” says Buntten-Guthrie, “but it’s important for these women to feel worth as well as safety. Often these women come into the shelter with nothing but the clothes on their back. There is no self-esteem in sharing a bathroom with 20 other women and their children. In the road to healing, they need their own space. They must be able to look around and say, ‘Here is the first day of the rest of my life. I can see it improving.’” Major Sparks agrees. “Part of empowering women,” she says, “is putting them in positive surroundings.”

The campaign’s goal is to expand the facility from 32 to 44 beds and upgrade conditions throughout the property. The cost of renovation is \$129 per square foot, so the Square Foot Club has been established to kick off the campaign. A donation of \$129 will secure Square Foot Club membership; more importantly, it will help make the renovation a reality. Donors, whether individuals or organizations, will be recognized with a certificate and a plaque displayed at the YWCA.

### The Academy of Women Leaders

One of the most visible YWCA programs is the Academy of Women Leaders. Established 26 years ago, the Academy consists of approximately 350 local women who have shown remarkable leadership in their personal and professional lives. Corporate executives, public servants, doctors, social workers, lawyers, educators, accountants, small business owners, community activists and volunteers—virtually every profession imaginable has been represented within Academy membership since its founding.



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As a group, the Academy shares the YWCA’s goal of empowering women. Members mentor and support each other and future leaders to further this goal. The Academy serves as a powerful collective voice for the YWCA. Events scheduled throughout the year allow Academy members to stay in touch with each other. These events—from workshops to

Academy-sponsored outings for shelter women and their children—provide a way for Academy members to network and share resources.

### Tribute to Women of Achievement

The YWCA Tribute to Women of Achievement is the Academy’s most high-profile event. Every year, dozens of local women are nominated for the Woman of the Year Award. Nominations can be made by anyone in the community. From this pool, 15 women are chosen as final nominees. All 15 become members of the Academy, but one nominee is declared the Woman of the Year. The winner is announced at the Tribute to Women of Achievement, an annual event that draws hundreds of attendees from all over Cobb County to celebrate the accomplishments of these extraordinary women. Event sponsors include AT&T, WellStar and the Cobb Chamber of Commerce.

The Tribute, says Comer, serves three major goals. “The Tribute raises awareness about the organization, it recognizes women and their accomplishments, and

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it raises much needed, unrestricted revenue for the YWCA,” she explains. The Tribute is one of the most effective venues in Cobb County for raising awareness about the YWCA mission, but it also serves as a major networking opportunity for women throughout the community. Money is raised through ticket sales and also through the silent auction. “The event is very cost-effective. People donate purses and other items—airline tickets, spa packages—for the silent auction,” says Bunten-Guthrie. “There are plenty of affordable items. It’s not elite, and it raises a lot of money for YWCA programming.”

## The Power of Networking

Over the past 26 years, the Tribute has become a highly visible and well-loved tradition that raises significant funds for the YWCA. Bunten-Guthrie emphasizes that the Academy strives to support the YWCA 365 days a year. She describes the Academy as similar to “an alumnae association for the honorees. Our focus is to provide education, mentoring and networking opportunities for the women of Cobb County. The YWCA encourages women to take their lives into their own hands, so we strive to create opportunities for women to network and uplift each other.”

Penny Warren, the 2011 Woman of the Year, agrees. “What they’re trying to do is bond the women in the community. When you are nominated, you are mentored by another woman leader. You connect with more and more people, and it grows and grows. You work together for all kinds of causes, from domestic abuse to breast cancer,” she says. Warren, a social worker for Cobb County schools, was recognized as Woman of the Year for her decades of work supporting local children. She says that the issues central to the YWCA mission are also at the heart of her work. “There are all kinds of situations that prevent kids from learning,” Warren says. “Divorce, rape, death, domestic abuse—these things affect them, keep them from coming into school.”

Major Sparks agrees that the value of networking should not be underestimated. “Going to Academy events puts me in touch with individuals and services I might not encounter otherwise. For instance, I’ve been able to discuss legislation with lobby-



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Woman of the Year

ists ... what kinds of laws need to get passed so we can better protect abuse victims,” she says.

## “Without us, where will these women go?”

The bottom line, says Comer, is that as Cobb County’s only facility for women fleeing domestic abuse, the YWCA must have enough beds to accommodate vic-

tims seeking safe haven. “Without us, where will these women go?” she asks. “Once women have the courage to leave, they need to be safe.” Bunten-Guthrie agrees. “In terms of the number of beds, nothing is more devastating than somebody getting ready to leave an abuse situation and there is no place for her at the shelter. I think it would take a very strong person to try leaving again.” ■

## THE COBB LIBRARY FOUNDATION ANNOUNCES NEW BOARD MEMBERS

The Cobb Library Foundation (CLF) congratulates the two newest members of the CLF board: Raymond Burick and Greg Harris.

Burick is vice president of P-3 Programs and Greenville Operations at Lockheed Martin Aeronautics Company, where he is responsible for the development, manufacture and sustainment of the Orion. He is a recipient of the National Management Association’s Silver Knight of Leadership award, and he also serves on the board of directors for the non-profit TWS Foundation.

Harris is the vice president for university advancement at Life University. He manages the departments of alumni relations, development, postgraduate education and the for-profit business incubator, LSA Ventures. Prior to moving to Atlanta in 2008, he worked for the Detroit Zoological Society as a chief advancement and administrative officer.

The newly elected board members will begin their terms immediately.