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Domestic Abuse and the Importance of Education

The date was July 27, 2020. It probably seemed like a normal Monday at the Bensalem Acme supermarket. Scarlet apples reflected the fluorescent lights of the produce section, and the creak of automatic doors echoed as customers bustled in and out of the store. The shrill beeping of cash registers and the repeated buzz of cashiers greeting customers with a classic, “Hi, how’s it going?” interrupted the low-volume pop songs playing on speakers hidden throughout the store. It probably seemed like a normal Monday at the Bensalem Acme supermarket, until cashier Kirstyn Kinniry, in the middle of an eight hour shift, received a life-changing phone call from her mother. Kirstyn answered the phone to learn that one of her best friends, eighteen-year-old Morgan McCaffrey, was murdered by her ex-boyfriend in a train station parking lot in Abington, Pennsylvania. Early that morning, Morgan’s body was found next to her “still idling blue SUV” with over thirty stab wounds¹.

Kirstyn was devastated to hear her mother reveal the news that was quickly dominating local headlines. “I was in shock,” she began. “I ran to my car and rushed home, [and] as soon as I got home, I began to scream and cry. I threw things in my room and felt numb. I felt like the world was ending. I just could not process that one of my best friends was taken away from me forever, and I would never be able to see her again.”

¹ See “Gilbert Newton III Found Guilty of Murder of Ex-Girlfriend Morgan McCaffrey.” CBS Philadelphia.

Morgan McCaffrey's closest friends tell me she was "the light of every room she walked into," "the most caring person [they] ever knew," and "a ray of sunshine and happiness." Morgan had a bright future ahead of her: a recent graduate of Nazareth Academy High School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, she planned to attend Manor College to study dentistry. But before even experiencing her first year of college, Morgan fell fatal victim to an abusive relationship.

Too many individuals experience much of their lives before learning about domestic violence. When asked if they were ever taught about it, Morgan's friends' responses were all along the lines of: "I have never learned about domestic violence," or "I have never had any education regarding abusive behaviors in relationships." One friend, Larissa McGovern, even admitted, "I didn't even know what it was until this happened to me." Based on these statements and the fact that Morgan attended the same high school as these girls, it is likely that she also lacked an education regarding the issue. Domestic abuse is a serious and prevalent crime and does not receive the level of comprehensive education it should.

Take a moment to consider a few statistics according to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence:

- a) "On average, nearly 20 people per minute are physically abused by an intimate partner in the United States. During one year, this equates to more than 10 million women and men."
- b) "1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men have experienced some form of physical violence (slapping, shoving, pushing) by an intimate partner. 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men have been victims of *severe* physical violence (beating, burning, strangling) by an intimate partner."
- c) "1 in 7 women and 1 in 18 men have been stalked by an intimate partner during their lifetime to the point in which they felt very fearful or believed that they or someone close to them would be harmed or killed."

These statistics are alarming, and more so when considering that they are *statistics* – the facts presented study a sample size, a fraction of the population, including only those willing to disclose their experiences. Therefore, the true number of women and men suffering from

these experiences is likely higher. These numbers – statistically and in reality – could decrease if individuals were educated about and understood the signs of an abusive relationship.

Abuse education begins with understanding that most physically abusive relationships do not begin with physically violent behaviors. Rather, there is a process – a build-up, so to speak – to a physically abusive relationship that can be difficult for a victim to notice. At times, others can see this process: a victim may begin to withdraw from friends and family, certain aspects of their personality may change (for example, they may become more introverted), or they may spend a majority, if not all, of their time with their abuser. These behaviors are early signs of abuse, and are usually accompanied by or the result of emotional abuse, manipulation, or gaslighting – all of which are less obvious to a victim and/or outsider.

In 1984, employees of the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (DAIP) of Duluth, Minnesota surveyed female victims to learn what behaviors accompany physical violence in heterosexual abusive relationships. With the collected qualitative data, the DAIP was able to draft an abuse-education tool called the Power and Control Wheel. The wheel demonstrates that physical and sexual abuse do not stand alone, and that abusers are able to gain and hold power over victims through various methods of verbal abuse. The following is the original DAIP Power and Control Wheel:



The bolded words “Power and Control” at the center of the wheel show that the surrounding behaviors are those used to obtain the central goal: gaining power and control over a victim. Abuse persists in relationships once an abuser achieves this goal. A victim – conditioned to believe they are of no value, blamed for issues in the relationship, or made to believe they are crazy – finds it difficult to believe happiness or safety lies outside of their relationship. Because these behaviors often occur behind closed doors, others cannot see the mental struggle a victim faces. Misunderstandings about the power an abuser can have over their victim pushes outsiders to ask questions such as, “Why didn’t she leave him?” or “Why does she stay with him if he treats her like that?” If you were conditioned to believe your financial stability, your entire self-worth, or your children’s safety depended on keeping your abuser happy, would you not consider staying with them too?

In Morgan's case, many outsiders were blind to the situation. Her closest friends anticipated her ex-boyfriend, Gilbert Newton III, did not treat her well, but never believed he would be capable of so heinous a crime. Lindsay Strain, a close friend of Morgan's since the fifth grade, said, "I had seen some bruises on her body but she told me she had fallen or banged into something. She didn't tell me he hit her until after they broke up for good." Another close friend, Cassie Zamora, noted, "I could see signs [of abuse], but anytime we brought it up to [Morgan], she would shut us out." Kirstyn, more aware of the severity of Morgan's situation, admitted, "I could see bruises, full red handprints, and bite marks on her body. One time...she jumped on my mother's lap crying and hyperventilating saying that he was making her feel crazy...saying 'He is making me feel like something is wrong with me.' Even though he did abuse her physically, emotionally, mentally, and socially, I never thought he would be capable of this crime."

Before her death, Morgan was lucky to recognize the signs and escape the relationship; however, the abuse did not cease at this point. If a victim escapes an abusive relationship, the anger the abuser feels at losing power can lead them to take further – and at times, more heinous – action. According to a Domestic Abuse Shelter list of statistics, "Of...total domestic violence homicides, about 75% of the victims were killed as they attempted to leave the relationship or after the relationship had ended." And in many of these cases, the crimes were preventable. In Morgan's case, according to CBS Philadelphia News, Newton's recent trial revealed he texted his mother weeks before the crime: "I'm really going to kill her. I'm going to stab her in the neck 57 times." In addition, though claiming under oath he had no recollection of the murder, his text messages stated, "I killed Morgan about an hour ago. There was no stopping me." Newton's intentions were clear. The signs were there. Yet the crime was unprevented, believed to be an incapable action of a young man who claimed to love her.

As heartbreaking as Morgan's death is, stories like hers serve as prime examples of the importance of abuse education. Suppose Morgan was taught to call an emergency hotline, or to inform her friends and family of the severity of the situation. What are the chances that any of her loved ones would have allowed her to meet her abuser at an empty train station that fatal Monday morning? What is the likelihood she may have anticipated the true danger lying

ahead of her? Unfortunately, we will never know the answers to these questions; however, we can use these tragic “What-ifs” to educate others.

According to an October 2020 Immediate Release statement from the San Diego, CA, City Attorney’s Office, the office partnered with local organizations to provide online workshops in response to alarming abuse statistics. Because of the COVID pandemic, these workshops took place over Zoom, thus allowing the information to expand nationally rather than locally. In the statement, City Attorney Mara Elliot notes, “Protecting teens from dangerous behaviors today is a proven way to prevent them from being the victims of domestic violence, or abusers themselves, once they are adults. Through education and support, we can break the cycle, stop intimate partner violence before it begins, and teach our children how to have healthy and respectful relationships.”

Other solutions have been implemented across the country. For example, Rhode Island passed the Lindsay Ann Burke Act, which requires all middle and high schools to educate students about dating violence and have policies implemented to respond to abuse cases. In addition, about a decade ago, the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence released a pamphlet explaining how adults can teach teens about abuse. Titled “Real Talk – A Resource Guide for Educating Teens on Healthy Relationships,” the forty-six-page publication covers just about everything one might need to know: (a) statistics regarding abuse and the likelihood of abuse for different demographics, (b) activities to encourage awareness and discussions in schools, and (c) guides on how to teach about teen dating violence and what healthy relationships look like.

When asked about her feelings regarding the importance of domestic violence education, Lindsay said, “I blame myself for what happened to Morgan because I wasn’t properly educated on what domestic violence was. I feel so guilty for not doing something sooner. I blame myself every day for what happened to her because I knew how he was, and I had text messages of him telling her he was going to kill her, and I did nothing.” Lindsay now lives each day in guilt believing she could have helped prevent Morgan’s death. What she fails to see in hurt blindness is that her guilt comes not from personal fault, but rather a systemic flaw in which teens on a national level lack proper education.

Since Morgan's death, her family and friends have founded an organization called Morgan's Light, with the goal of "shining a light on toxic relationships." The organization's website lists the mission and goals of the organization, a few facts and statistics regarding abusive relationships, where and how you can find help, and a page explaining the Power and Control Wheel and its relevance. It is a sad fact that events like Morgan's death shine light on such important issues; however, when these tragic events do occur, it is essential that the stories and lives of those harmed are shared through their memory and through education.

Just within the last few weeks, Morgan's killer was finally sentenced to life in prison, granting some justice to her family and story. But this does not mean her fight is over; her legacy must be continued by sharing her story and what we can learn from the tragedy. Education is not only helpful for an issue this serious, it is essential. It can quite literally be life-saving.

I asked Morgan's friends what they would say if they could speak to her now, one last time.

"I would just tell her that I love her and wish I could hug her."

"I love you and I am sorry."

"I would tell her that I love and miss her more than anything in this world."

"That we are never going to let her story go unnoticed, and that we will shine her light on the world forever."

Kirstyn Kinniry: "I would tell her that I love her more than she can ever imagine, miss her, and I am so proud of her for being so strong."

Sources, in Order of Use

CBS Philly News Story: [Gilbert Newton III Found Guilty Of Murder Of Ex-Girlfriend Morgan McCaffery – CBS Philly \(cbslocal.com\)](#)

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