

Immigrant women find shelter from spousal rage

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Body

There are echoes of classical tragedy in the International Women's House, a shelter for battered immigrants and their kids. It's midday and very quiet in this half-industrial corner of DeKalb County. The children are at school or asleep upstairs.

Several women gather in the small living room, their hands in the laps, pulling at their fingers, smiling or staring gloomily. The house looks rather neat for such a crowded place. But it must be hard to stop the kids from using their crayons on the walls.

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A woman tells how she got there --- a tale of tragedy offstage. A knifing, perhaps. Or maybe a husband smashed a child's head against the wall.

Now the women are safe, though. So are the children. And the staff here speaks each woman's language, Spanish or Arabic or Hindi or whatever. Soon the other young women add their bits, speaking the simple sorrows that choruses are meant to speak.

But when the children --- English being their lingua franca --- return from school, hours later, and go out to play in the back yard, with the yellow sun slanting through the pines and over their towering playhouse, you can almost imagine all these people living normally again someday.

The homeless fill niches (if the right niche exists), and immigrant women and their kids have been coming to this ordinary-looking house for the past five years, ever since the Junior League of DeKalb County got the place going.

What most of the women have in common, in addition to language barriers, is that they've been abused. They've fled, they have no money, there are kids in tow. Sometimes they're pregnant. They may be illegal aliens.

Yet their plights are often so heartbreaking that even the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service will give them a break. (The INS, in fact, recently asked the shelter to house one of its own illegal aliens, a government witness in an international sex ring case.)

There are now 12 women in residence, plus 15 children, ages 4 months to 14 years. One woman just left to move into an apartment. Another woman (no: a 14-year-old girl, raped by her mother's partner) just moved in.

There are only 12 beds stuffed into four bedrooms. And two bathrooms.

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Safety, that's the main draw. And there's more. A bed, food, medical care. Legal help with divorces and the feds. Help getting jobs, apartments, furniture. Fewer than one in five of the women ends up going back to their batterers.

"One guy tried to drown his wife by pushing her head into the washing machine, down into the water, into the blades," says Anna Blau, the director.

Blau, a longtime social worker, came to America in 1949 as a baby with her parents, who were Holocaust survivors.

"Some of the abuses can make your hair turn blue," she says. Arms broken. Flesh burned. Kids used as hostages. And, of course, some men simply keep their women from learning English, driving, getting jobs, associating with strangers.

So Blau and her caseworkers (a Mexican, a Latvian, a Greek-Colombian, etc.) try to help on a budget of \$450,000 a year. They try, in particular, to motivate bureaucracies.

"When a kid comes in here with broken teeth," Blau says, "and he gets teased at school, and it's going to take six months to fix his teeth, that's just not good enough."

Almira, 26, is one of the women in the living room. She's a refugee from Bosnia and she communicates in French through a Moroccan staff member. She's nearly eight months pregnant. She recently fled to St. Louis to escape her husband, but he tracked her down. She came back and found International Women's House.

Petra, 30, is a Mexican, married 15 years, three of them in Atlanta. She got hurt at home. "I went to the hospital," she says. Her family has been caring for her son.

Ema, 28, from Afghanistan has lived in the United States 13 years. She recently learned that her husband had divorced her, evidently claiming she'd abandoned him. There were also other problems, "and I called the police and left the house."

Now her son visits her; he still lives with his father. She bursts into tears and says her plan is to move, get a job and get her son back.

Hours later, a Syrian and an Indian were fixing dinner in the kitchen. They didn't want to talk, but the kids were home from school, and the Indian's bright-eyed 7-year-old daughter says in perfect American English that she was a "star" at school. The girl laughs and runs outside to play around the tall playhouse, insisting that it needed a new slide.

"When they first come here, they're scared," Blau said of the children. "Now they're just kids."

But the house is too small. Blau and her colleagues say they need more bedrooms, more bathrooms, more space for the kids to study. Really, they need a new house.

So contact Blau if you'd like to help. Her e-mail address is iwh@bellsouth.net.

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