

Local News |

Unmasking *the* Myth

CHANA commemorates two decades of hope, help and healing for victims of abuse

By Melissa Gerr | Photos by David Stuck

Michelle admits she was “kind of a statistic” in that it took three protective court orders before she finally left her abusive husband. But her experience is not uncommon. A victim averages seven attempts to leave an abuser before he or she is successful, according to the National Domestic Violence Hotline.

The first time Michelle acquiesced, her husband dramatically begged forgiveness and pledged his fiscal and caretaking responsibility to the family, on bended knee, in the courtroom.

“I thought OK, sure, everyone needs a second chance,” she recalled, even though, her 3- and 5-year-old children “didn’t want Daddy back in the home.”

Two more times she found herself in a courtroom requesting protective orders, then finally, after her husband threatened to kill her, she said, “OK, I’m done.”

It was 10 years ago that Michelle — who is now 53 and with a civil divorce but *no get* after waiting four years because her ex-husband refuses to pay for it, along with his refusal to pay child support and alimony even with a court order to do so — sought assistance from CHANA, an organization she calls “a gem that’s hidden until you need it; then when you find it, you’re so thankful for all the people who make it possible.”

For 20 years, the staff, board, volunteers and donors at CHANA have dedicated time and dollars to assist and support their clients — child, adult or senior victims of physical, sexual and emotional abuse — and to disarm the stigma of speaking out about abuse in the community. For a long time, people assumed it didn’t exist.

Brenda Brown Rever was on the board of The House of Ruth, a women’s shelter in Baltimore City, in the 1990s. Jewish women, they found through data, might call The House of Ruth helpline and receive assistance, but they didn’t use the shelter. Some inquiries were occasionally made for kosher shelter facilities, but those didn’t exist.

Rever believed a safe haven was needed for Jewish



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women, though after checking with Jewish Family Services and a handful of rabbis, she was told that from time to time they might receive such a request, but it was rare.

Someone directed her to Rebbetzin Chana Weinberg who told Rever, “Well, let me tell you that every year I have at least nine women I help get to a safe place.” For years Weinberg helped Jewish women escape abusive domestic situations and did so in a safe and discreet manner.

“We do have this problem,” Rever said during a meeting with Darrell Friedman, then president of The Associated: Jewish Federation of Baltimore. “I asked Darrel, ‘If I can raise the money for this, can we start it?’ He said yes.”

Rever, who was also president of the [then] Women’s Department of The Associated, raised \$300,000 from 10 people in about two weeks. “It was the easiest ask of my life,” she said.

CHANA, named for Rever’s dear friend and philanthropic mentor Annette (Netsie) F. Lieberman, began as a partnership drawing resources from The House of Ruth, JFS and The Associated.

With Shelly Hettleman, now a delegate for District 11, as its first director, CHANA began in 1995 equipped with only a phone hot line, a safe house and a group of volunteers, said current executive director Nancy Aiken, adding that Howard Brown from David S. Brown Enterprises has provided a safe house for CHANA free of charge since its beginning. The location of the house regularly changes to maintain protection for clients.

“I feel like the shame has shifted from the victim to the perpetrator. Now people feel safe” coming to us.

— Nancy Aiken, executive director of CHANA

“[The founders] began to take this issue and open the Jewish community’s eyes to something we didn’t want to look at,” said CHANA chair Diane Israel. “Because of that, [we are] finding our voices and ending the silence.”

When Aiken came to CHANA 15 years ago, the organization was a cubicle within The Associated offices, she said. Now it has 11 employees and two office locations in addition to the safe house and countless volunteers. And thanks to a board member, a large luxury hotel chain provides short term emergency lodging when a client must vacate



Nancy Aiken, CHANA’s executive director, is thankful that foundations and individuals have continued to support the organization over the years. She sees that as a reflection of Baltimore’s dedicated community.

his or her premises in a crisis situation.

CHANA’s mission is to provide a Jewish response to trauma and focus its support on Jewish victims of abuse, but anyone can ask for and receive help.

William, 35, found himself in a hospital about three years ago as a result of an emotionally, physically and mentally violent relationship.

“I really didn’t know which way to turn,” he said, and a friend referred him to CHANA, which William felt was “a sanctuary.”

CHANA offered him a safe place to stay and legal representation and educated him on safe behaviors such as changing daily routines and routes to deter stalking and other dangerous situations. He received individual counseling and was accompanied by a staff person when he filed legal paperwork and attended court.

“I felt very held and very safe and provided for with them,” he said. “They were like Hercules. I didn’t know up from down, and it was a huge exercise for me to trust someone who was actually helping me and not harassing me or abusing me. It’s

a huge part in the healing process to trust someone. It’s indicative of the heart and commitment of the organization and their programs.”

Over the years, said Aiken, CHANA and all the services it provides could have collapsed — such as the demise of other desperately needed social service programs — from lack of funding or volunteer support, so she feels fortunate they are still strong and sees that as a reflection of Baltimore’s dedicated community.

“We have a beginning that was so filled with passion and compassion, it started as a unique program that didn’t just treat people but advocated for a cause,” said Aiken. “That’s why it’s remained such a beloved program in the community.”

Aiken said she’s proud of the fact that several foundations as well as individuals fund CHANA year after year because they “believe in our cause but also believe in our vision” even after 20 years. Aiken noted another hallmark of success, though she admitted it may come off as a peculiar one. Many potential clients now call the office directly rather than use the anonymous helpline.

“Now people call up and give their names, so we’ve made it OK for us to talk about this,” she said. “That’s very different from 20 years ago,” when clients were concerned that their calls were being traced and refused to give their names and were reticent to discuss their situation out of distrust and fear.

“I feel like the shame has shifted from the victim to the perpetrator,” said Aiken. “Now people feel safe” coming to us.

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Shmuel Fischler, director of outreach and advocacy

Another part of CHANA's evolution is it can provide a comprehensive approach to a client's situation in addition to physical safety. There are legal advocates, counselors and attorneys on staff, and instead of waiting for a client to contact them, CHANA also works with police to identify abuse victims and proactively offer assistance, whether from CHANA or other safety organizations.

"As we expand our definition of what abuse is, we have to expand our response," said Aiken. "We came to find that emotional and verbal abuse in our clients' worlds can be much more harmful and painful than the physical abuse," she said. Both require a different type of intervention. "Sheltering

is not the first thing that comes to mind, we've had to think of other responses so we've expanded" the types of support we offer.

One emphasis has been on evidence-based art therapy, and client-created art will be featured at the Oct. 29 gala to commemorate CHANA's 20 years of success and hard work. As part of the evening a silent auction, including masks — some whimsical and some powerfully raw — created by clients in the theme "Unmasking the Myth," will be displayed.

The idea is to combat myths such as abuse doesn't happen to the wealthy or to professionals or in the Orthodox community, said Naomi Taffett, LCSW-C, director of service coordination at CHANA for nine years. She also spoke of the profound power of the activity.

"When you give somebody a crayon they immediately become a kid," she said. "There's so many things, especially when it comes to trauma, when words don't come out, when one can't articulate. So when you give [a client] an opportunity for another form of expression, we see it — a lot comes out; they're able to connect on a different level."

"And through creative expression they can share their journey, and that was our vision for this project," added her colleague, Cynthia Ohana, legal advocate at CHANA.

Taffett, who is the first point of contact when a client calls, said staff also reaches out to hospitalized clients who have received physical injury. But 90 to 95 percent don't experience actual physical abuse, she said, contrary to what people imagine when they think of domestic violence.

It's not uncommon for abusers to charge at, chase, threaten or scream right into the face of their victims — anything short of physical contact to avoid being accused of assault. A type of non-physical abuse is also what Elaine experienced.

Elaine's husband never hit her, but the last 10 years of her marriage "were horrendous," she said. About two years ago she finally went to CHANA and met with Taffett.

"She said something I will never forget," said Elaine. "Emotional abuse is just as bad as physical abuse because if you cut [yourself] open, there would be bruises on the inside. That was the most powerful thing anyone said to me, and I said 'Wow, this is real.'" Elaine admitted at times she hoped her husband would hit her "so I could say, See? He hit me" and take legal action.

Elaine finally "got up enough courage" to contact CHANA, but it was a couple of years before she and her children finally left their abusive situation. She never felt pressured, only supported in her decisions and planning unlike what might happen with a family member or friend who could beleaguer her once she declared her situation unlivable.

"[CHANA] didn't say, 'He's doing this to you so you have to leave,'" said Elaine, who has received a *get* but is still awaiting a final civil divorce. "I had to do it on my own terms. I didn't feel like I'd let them down if I didn't leave."

She felt that whether she was ready — or not — she received the support and resources she needed. "It was important ... I needed it to be my decision, and that's how they made me feel."



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Hope Toward the Future

In looking toward the next decades, Aiken has two overarching goals for the organization.

"[Addressing] elder abuse has been on my mind for years. When dealing with possible domestic abuse at age 42, a push is a push, but at age 76, it's life threatening," she said, citing The Associated's 2010 study that 21 percent of Baltimore's Jewish community is older than 65 and that the percentage will continue to grow.

She predicts supporting and preventing elder abuse is going to be a larger part of CHANA's work, and dealing with the perpetrators of seniors provides new challenges. When both parents are in their 80s and the children are in their 50s and 60s, there is a different family dynamic that happens, she said.

"Children say, 'I don't know what to do. I have to care for my 80-year-old father, but I know he's likely to kill my 80-year-old mother,'" said Aiken.

Compassion isn't typically the response used toward perpetrators in domestic abuse situations, she said, "But in older adults we need that. It's going to be a challenge, and I look forward to it."

In 2013, CHANA initiated SAFE: Stop Abuse of Elders, in conjunction with Levindale Hebrew Geriatric Home and Hospital and Jewish Community Services, to provide safe accommodations if a senior client requires emergency shelter within a facility. The organization also is building a senior-friendly safe house set to open in 2016.

Another hope of Aiken's is to cultivate more consultation and collaboration with institutions, such as working to draft real policies and procedures around abuse so there is a structure in place if something should happen. Creating such frameworks stems from open conversations and



CHANA staff, from left: Dayna Leder, administrative services manager; Barbi Hyman, prevention educator; Nancy Aiken, executive director; Cynthia Ohana, legal advocate; Shmuel Fischler, director of outreach and advocacy; Lauren Shaivitz, director of programs. Not pictured: Naomi Taffett, director of service coordination; Ellen Fox, office and volunteer coordinator; Jacke Schroeder, director of SAFE; Margalit Jacobs, project coordinator and Laura Greer, clinical coordinator.

education, which is the focus of Shmuel Fischler, LCSW-C, director of outreach and advocacy who joined CHANA just over a year ago, moving here from Brooklyn, N.Y.

Fischler has been focused on building relationships and working to implement educational programs within the Orthodox community. He engages students, staff, administrators and parents to help prevent abusive situations.

"The Safety Kid Program is really a big one for me," said Fischler. "It's going to take a tremendous amount of teamwork" — school volunteers, teachers, parents — "because we are doing this as a community."

Debbie Fox, LCSW, who is Orthodox and spent about a year developing the Safety Kid program with an eye to the cultural sensitivities of the Orthodox community, based it on the National Department of Missing and Exploited Children's program.

The success of the program is all about relationships, said Fischler, with clergy, schools and lay leaders, and all of the schools contacted are on board.

"I can't do it by myself so I need people to be supporters and be a part of it, and thankfully they are. Hopefully, it will be implemented this year," Fischler said. "Once the community owns the program we want it to be ongoing."

Fischler, who maintains a private clinical practice, also works on the continuing Boy to Mentsch program for teens that is in partnership with Jewish Women International and also trains CHANA's network of pro-bono clinicians and legal counsel,

providing workshops to learn how to work with victims of trauma as well as adhere to the unique cultural requirements of the community, which is the kind of help Michelle needed.

"I was going for help within the Jewish community because I'm Jewish and I felt [most comfortable] reaching out to my own community" instead of a county- or city-based resource, said Michelle, who is now a pediatric massage therapist and aromatherapist, specializing in treating patients with trauma.

She compares CHANA to that of one big "collective Jewish mother. They sit with you, help to validate your feelings and give you safe ground," she said.

Michelle is on stable footing now, although 10 years later she still experiences abusive behavior from her ex-husband. Now, however, she has the tools to deal with it and stay safe, and she shares that knowledge with others.

"It's very powerful when you come from a powerless state to [finally] find a voice to speak up for yourself and your kids," Michelle said. "You're able to speak up for others — like you were when you didn't have the language. Then you have a stronger sense of self, and you regain your identity as a strong Jewish woman."

Michelle's story, like countless others, fuels the work of Aiken and her volunteers, staff and donors.

"Dealing with abuse, 20 years into it is not just about keeping people from dying," said Aiken, "but healing them so they can be whole again and be active, productive members of our community." Jr mgerr@midatlanticmedia.com

CHANA's 20th Anniversary
 Finding Our Voices, Silence No More

Oct. 29, 6 p.m.
 The Suburban Club
 7600 Park Heights Ave., Baltimore

The event features cocktails, hors d'oeuvres, a silent auction and speaker Joshua Safran, the attorney/advocate prominent in the award-winning film "Crime After Crime."

To reach CHANA helpline, call 410-234-0023.