Turning Tragedy Into Triumph

After the fact, the family searched for clues they might have missed. “He was jealous and controlling, but never raised a hand to her,” explained Tommy Tavenner. “The separation papers had just been served and he’d moved out, but we had no inkling, no red flags that he might ever hurt her.”

The “he” is the man who was married to Tommy’s niece, Marijke, a 26-year old mother of twin daughters and a beloved member of this close Montgomery County family. His name is one that Marijke’s family rarely says out loud since the fatal night of October 26, 2007. That was the night “he” picked up the kids, dropped them at his parent’s house and then returned to the home where Marijke lived. No one knows what happened next, but later that evening, a neighbor called 911 to report the house was on fire. When the firefighters got to the scene, they discovered a woman’s body inside. It was Marijke - the cause of death was blunt force trauma to the head and asphyxiation from the smoke and fire. Later they found a second body in the rubble. It was his.

The story could have ended there with a family grieving and a future fueled by bitterness and hate. After all, it was a family where cousins were more like sisters and aunts and uncles were considered second parents. Instead, it’s an inspirational story of how a family came together to turn something ugly into something positive.

“We were all heart broken. A year later, I would be driving in the car and I’d just pull off the road and start weeping,” confided Tavenner. “One evening, my wife and I were sitting in front of the fire and we looked at each other and, at the exact same moment, started crying. That’s when we knew we had to do something.”

The “something” began as a party in Marijke’s honor and grew to become a non-profit called In Honor of Her. Some might find it strange that the first thought was to throw a party, but as Tavenner explains, “If you knew Marijke, she would have wanted us to do something positive. Halloween was her favorite time of year and since October was Domestic Violence month, we thought the timing was perfect.”

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This year will mark the fifth anniversary of the event. Held at a local firehouse, attendance has grown by the hundreds and all the proceeds are donated to domestic violence programs around the state. “Domestic violence is such a big problem, it’s immeasurable. We, personally, might not know how to end it, but we do know how to raise funds for the programs that do.”

This past year, In Honor Of Her, expanded its efforts into the legislative arena, with the counsel and support of Bill and Michele Mitchell, whose daughter was also murdered by an intimate partner, to lobby for mandatory dating violence education in schools. “We’re finally seeing schools take anti-bullying seriously. Well, domestic violence starts with bullying. We want young people to be aware of the signs and we have to end this belief that by not talking about it means it doesn’t exist.” They’re also working with a group called Becky’s Fund to produce a short video – 26 minutes about a 26-year old girl named Marijke who was brutally murdered on the 26th of October.

In Honor Of Her is a true family effort. In addition to Tommy and his wife, Michelle, Marijke’s younger sister (and mother to her two surviving children) sits on the board, with Brooke Phillips now serving as President. In addition, Marijke’s parents, uncles, aunts, cousins and friends are all highly involved in the annual fund raising and outreach programs. I ask if starting the organization has been therapeutic for them. “Yes, it’s a catharsis that’s changed our lives,” says Tavenner. “We’re happy people dealing with a somber event. We were driven to turn something ugly into something good. If you don’t, then the sadness just pulls you into a big, dark hole.”

The House of Ruth Maryland is grateful to Tommy Tavenner and In Honor of Her for their generous funding over the past three years - it’s not often that someone bearing a large check just shows up at our door. Since that first meeting, we’ve had the great pleasure of working with the Tavenner family to change minds in Annapolis and change lives across the state.

Letter from Executive Director

Dear Friends,

A few months back, Baltimore hosted an event called Women of the World. One of the speakers, who had grown up during apartheid in South Africa, was asked – how does one become an activist? Her answer, obviously borne of her own life experience, was that activism doesn’t happen to people who lead comfortable lives. However, one has only to look at the history of the House of Ruth Maryland to realize that is not always true.

The founding mothers of the House of Ruth were all professional women, leading comfortable lives. Yet they were moved to act – not by events in their own lives, but by the plight of others and an injustice they found intolerable. Their original goal was to provide a safe refuge for battered women and get some degree of protection under the law. Without Internet, email, smart phones or Skype, they brought hundreds of people together and, in the process, changed thousands of minds. This year, the House of Ruth Maryland commemorates its 35th anniversary, a benchmark that no one ever imagined at the time.

A grassroots organization created by a group of people leading comfortable lives, the House of Ruth has grown to become a nationally recognized expert in the field of domestic violence and a model for other programs around the country and the world. It is proof that where there is commitment and passion, there is the ability to change the course of people’s lives.

As our world gets more complex and the problems often seem to multiply, it’s human nature to ask, “What can I do, I’m only one person?” Try posing that question to Judge Kathleen O’Ferrall Friedman, Marcella Schuyler, Mary Pat Clarke, or any of the others who were moved to act in 1977 and they’ll tell you – each time one person volunteers, one person donates, or one person speaks out for the thousands who can’t, they are no longer only one; rather, they are critical extensions of the founding mothers’ vision to see an end to domestic violence.

We hope in this, our 35th year, a new generation of activists will step up to take the baton because until all women are safe in their own homes, we can’t afford to ever be complacent.

Sincerely,

Sandi Timmins
Executive Director

Sandi Timmins
They’re Everywhere

Anyone who works at the House of Ruth Maryland will tell you – you never know when or where you might meet a former client. Statistics say one in four women will be a victim of domestic violence, yet to the people who work here, it often feels like the number is much higher. Terri Wurmser, the agency’s Director of Social Enterprises, is no stranger to meeting women who have benefited from House of Ruth services. Although those meetings often reveal themselves when women are shopping at our resale boutique, Ruth’s Closet, this past March she had one she wasn’t expecting.

Invited to the 2012 NAPO Annual Conference (National Association of Professional Organizers) to accept the 2012 Organizing Excellence Award, Terri found herself speaking to an audience of more than 900. At the end of the luncheon, an employee of the hotel where the conference was being held approached her. The woman told Terri she had been a victim of domestic violence and the House of Ruth Maryland saved her life. She went on to explain that in 2010, she had been a resident at the Shelter, but today was safe, living in her own apartment, working two jobs and recently had purchased her first car. Those are the meetings that everyone affiliated with the House of Ruth always hopes for – a survivor who has gained her independence and is now living a life free of fear.

Ruth’s Closet Grows Up

A few months back, Ruth’s Closet celebrated its first official year in business. An idea that had long been talked about came to fruition in January 2011 with the help of a handful of founding sponsors - Gail Kandel of Vasarri, Debbie and Richard Swartz of Mano Swartz and Renee Wilson of Bijoux. The idea was to create a social enterprise that could help fund domestic violence services while providing customers with high-end clothing and accessories at “what a deal” prices.

Since the day it opened, it’s been embraced by donors and shoppers alike. Certainly, the quality of the merchandise has a lot to do with it, but so does the experience itself. “Ruth’s Closet has a vibe that sets it apart,” says Terri Wurmser, House of Ruth’s Director of Social Enterprises. “We have customers who come every week, sometimes twice a week.” Staffed primarily by volunteers, the atmosphere is informal and heavily oriented toward service. “The first thing we do is ask people if they’re looking for something in particular,” explained Wurmser. “If so, we write down contact info and contact them when it comes in.” That “something” can run the gamut from a Chanel bag to the perfect pair of jeans – and the only thing better than the price tag is the fact that by supporting Ruth’s Closet, you’re changing women’s and children’s lives.

Legislation Identifying Chronic Abusers Passes In Annapolis

This one is a definite win for victims. The new law states that if it’s proven that a defendant and victim have a “domestically related relationship,” then at the time of criminal sentencing, the judge is required to note that in the Criminal Justice Information System. As a result, judges, law enforcement, court commissioners, state’s attorneys, probation officers and others will be able to quickly and easily identify chronic abusers. This information will not only create a new level of accountability, it will also provide for the first time ever, a more accurate picture of just how prevalent domestic violence is in Maryland.

The House of Ruth Maryland thanks the Marjorie Cook Foundation, Delegate Kathleen Dumais, Delegate Luiz Simmons, Senator Victor Ramirez, Kristen Mahoney, Executive Director of the Governor’s Office of Crime Control and Prevention, and Sean Malone of Harris Jones and Malone for their time, efforts and help in getting this legislation passed.
Then And Now:
Recollections Of The Early Days

Although she immediately says, call me Katy – there’s something about the strength of her presence that makes it difficult to call her anything but Judge Kathleen O’Ferrall Friedman. With three large boxes of documents and a memory like a steel trap, we recently sat down one day to talk about how the domestic violence movement in Maryland and the House of Ruth first began.

As the House of Ruth commemorates its 35th year, it’s common knowledge that its creation was a volunteer effort but that’s an over simplification on par with saying America got its start because of a couple of patriots. The real story has many more twists and turns, not to mention participants, but for Judge O’Ferrall Friedman, her awakening began while working at Baltimore City Legal Aid as a young attorney in 1971. “I was transferred to the domestic unit and became shocked at the number of women who were coming in for divorces who were obviously battered,” she told me.

“One day, I asked a colleague if he was seeing the same thing and he said yes. We were seeing it every day and yet nobody talked about it.” For many, it may be surprising to learn that in addition to no help being available for battered women, in 1971 life was such that a divorced woman was not allowed to revert to her maiden name, get credit or obtain insurance - inequalities that didn’t sit well with the woman now sitting across from me.

At about the same time, Judge O’Ferrall Friedman was having her own eyes opened; a police woman at Northern District alerted a local community group to the number of battered women they were seeing. Within a short time the different groups joined forces to start a Batterers Program to advocate within the Baltimore City courts. Realizing the parallel need to create greater awareness around the issue, Judge Friedman asked the University of Maryland for a student intern from the School of Social Work – someone to help gather information from around the country and develop a plan for moving forward.

What’s interesting to note is that without Internet, email or any of the technologies that foster communications today, somehow the group was able to link up with like-minded people across the country and as far away as England. Researchers came on board to provide statistics and revealed new findings on the health issues related to Domestic Violence. Elected officials stepped forward to sponsor new legislation and a Baltimore City Task Force on Battered Women was ultimately created. Obviously, this is the greatly abbreviated story on what was a very long and involved process, but Judge Friedman credits the Women’s Crisis Shelter Conference of 1977 with being the powder that lit the keg – within seven months, the House of Ruth opened its doors on North Calvert Street.

Judge Kathleen O’Ferrall Friedman is one of approximately a dozen women who were not only instrumental in getting the House of Ruth and the movement off the ground, but also stayed with it almost every step of the way. In Judge Friedman’s case, there was a 17-year hiatus during her tenure on the Baltimore City Circuit Court so I asked if it had been tough to keep quiet while on the bench. “It was very hard not to speak out,” she said, “I thought I’d get used to it, but instead my frustration compounded.” Somehow, in between accomplishing all of the above, Judge Friedman also helped found the Women’s Law Center which this year is celebrating its 40th anniversary. Having accomplished so much, I couldn’t help but wonder if Judge Friedman could tackle one issue today, what would it be? “That’s easy,” she said, “I’d write the history of the House of Ruth because it’s really the story of how the domestic violence movement developed in this country.”

By the early 1970s, America’s women had moved beyond bra burning to storming the corporate bastions. Yet, for all the strides that women had made, safety was not one of them.
White House Politics Over Lunch

For the 11th year, nearly 700 people turned out to attend the House of Ruth Maryland’s Annual Spring Luncheon. They heard the eloquent words of U.S Senator Ben Cardin and were inspired by a young woman named Christina Laumann who credits House of Ruth Maryland with not only saving, but turning her life around.

What followed was unlike any luncheon program the House of Ruth had ever presented before. Instead of one featured speaker, two men took the stage – both revered heavyweights in the world of political reporting. For close to an hour, David Sanger, *New York Times* correspondent and two-time Pulitzer Prize winner and Michael Beschloss, the nation’s leading Presidential historian, regaled the audience with stories and insights of Presidential campaigns and the men behind them. It’s safe to say this year’s luncheon not only raised consciousness and funds, but also illuminated what promises to be a fascinating year.

UPCOMING EVENTS

**July 12** - 10th Annual Crabaret held at Gertrude’s at the BMA

**July 28** - Fashion Splash! A specialty event for sizes 14 and up, sponsored by Ulla Popken at Ruth’s Closet

**September 5** - ClearingHouse Sidewalk Sale

Special Thanks To:

- National Association of Professional Organizers for selecting the House of Ruth Maryland for the NAPO Organizing Excellence Award
- The Perry Hall Step Squad at Perry Hall High School for hosting an event to collect wish list items on our behalf
- Pendleton, About Faces, Brighton and Italian Gardens at the Shops at Kenilworth for hosting a Charity Fashion Show for House of Ruth
- GreenSpring Station for hosting STYLE at the Station and collecting donations for Ruth’s Closet
- Michael Plaisted and Maggie Webbert for donating seasons Orioles tickets and Aquarium tickets for our clients and their children
- The Shimmy Mob for donating event proceeds to our programs and services
- Watson’s Garden Center for donating 7 flats of market pack annual flowers for our booth at Flowermart
- Cupcake, Chick Beer and Quarry Wine and Spirits’ Open Door Wine Cellars for donating goods for our Pretty for Preakness Young Professionals event
Join us for Baltimore’s best Santiago sunset.

10th Annual Crabaret
Presented by CareFirst

Thursday, July 12, 2012 • 6:30pm – 10pm
Gertrude’s at the BMA
Co-Chairs: Bonnie Serpick and Kenneth Petty
$90 before July 1, 2012 • $125 after July 1, 2012 (if tickets are still available)
For tickets, call 410-554-8448 or visit www.hruth.org

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