

Candle light vigils, Commemoration and Solidarity

Opinion piece

May 2018

The Candle light vigils, held across the states and territories of Australia on 2nd May, are a sombre occasion to pay tribute to the people who have lost their lives due to family violence.

For family violence services in Southern Tasmania they mark an occasion for grief, solidarity and a very rare opportunity to publically acknowledge the personal and broader impacts of our work.

While we mourn the loss of 35 women, as a result of family violence over the last 12 months, the story that this tells is really only an afterword to the full picture of family violence in our communities. In 2016-2017 Tasmania Police attended 3093 family violence incidences which is 8 incidences per day for every single day of the year. This does not include the callouts to family arguments which would multiple the figure many times. It does not include the other hundreds of thousands of incidences that go unreported and un-noticed. [It is also important to note that while women can engage abusive behaviour 85% of the perpetrators were male].

The impact of family violence is a much more solemn account than a homicide statistic. Because for many women in Tasmania, family violence is not a reportable event but a series of behaviours that promote intimidation and fear. This state of oppression may be punctuated with outbursts of abuse and violence or it may manifest as an ongoing attempt to control and manipulate the other person. Coercion in relationships can be achieved through subtle and covert tactics that are not immediately recognisable under the expansive term "family violence".

Family violence practitioners in Tasmania talk with hundreds of women every day. The women who come to talk to us are trying to work out what is going wrong in their relationship, how they can keep their children safe, how they can keep everything sailing along smoothly while worrying what might set their partner off or escalate an already tenuous mood. Or they may come to us when they find their world and their well-being in ruins, trying to pick up the pieces of who they are since the relationship has ended.

One SHE client described it like this. "He liked things to be his way, all the time. When things didn't go as he wanted them to, he would take it out on me. It was as if he held me responsible for his happiness. Every day I would think about what I could do to not make things worse. I loved him and I wanted to care for him. I felt like I should have been able to help.... After he strangled me the second time I sought help. I was worried then that if he did it again he might go too far. Up until then I hadn't told anyone. I wanted to stay with him and I knew he already had enough challenges in his life with me causing more trouble for him."

But what of these relationships that do end in murder? It is guaranteed that people who take their partner's (or ex-partner's) life would have engaged a number of abusive tactics, possibly for many years before they finish their partner's life so tragically. Domestic homicide is the end of a life lived in fear.

For family members it can come as a surprise when they understood how bad things have been. For others it is not a surprise and the experience stays with them forever. One woman told us about her experience. "I knew things were bad for mum even though she always did her best to hide it. I guess we never thought he would go that far and actually kill her and even if we had known, I don't

know what we would have done. I would never have called the police because mum was always trying to hide and play it down. Calling the police would have felt like betrayal and I was too young to understand it in any other way.”

While we pay tribute to the lives of women ended too soon and so violently at the hands of their partners we are also compelled to think of the others who are impacted by their death, and by the terror that lead up the loss of life.

From the expertise of family violence service providers we know that getting help is one of the most important safety steps a person who is being abused can take. Accessing a specialist service helps to keep families safe. Services such as SHE play an important role in being a go-to place for support that is very discreet and entirely focused on supporting client’s choices whether it is to stay in the relationship or leave, to proceed to more formal intervention or look at alternative ways to achieve safety.

Alina Thomas is the CEO of Family Violence Service SHE.

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