

# UNANSWERED PRAYERS

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Social worker Stephanie Underwood heard the door close quietly as someone, perhaps another client, entered the office suite.

"Good morning, I'm here for a ten o'clock appointment with Ms. Underwood," Stephanie heard a woman say to the receptionist.

"Welcome to Unity Center, Rebecca, my name is Erica. Please follow me to Stephanie's office," said the receptionist.

Stephanie straightened a pile of papers on her desk as she heard them walking slowly down the short hall. She thought back to the brief telephone conversation they had yesterday. Rebecca had seemed rushed when they were setting the appointment and had to end the conversation before Stephanie had a chance to complete the initial intake form. Stephanie was surprised she had still shown up for the appointment and wondered what brought this client to her office on a warm summer morning.

## **Unity Center**

Located in Apple Valley, a southern suburb of the Twin Cities (MN), the Unity Center was established to provide a safe haven for women surviving in relationships with domestic violence. Established in 1995 as a non-profit organization, the Unity Center was a private Christian organization supported by churches and private foundations, as well as United Way designated funds. Its executive director, with assistance from a board committee, actively solicited these funds to support the agency. A twelve-member board of directors set policy for the Unity Center and hired the executive director. Four board members were official representatives from supporting churches, while others included professionals such as CPAs, attorneys, and community advocates in domestic violence. Board members were selected through open nominations, and participated in an interview process. Board service required a two-year commitment, but could not exceed six years.

The current executive director provided innovative leadership to the agency and had promoted development of additional family support programs. Seven full-time professional staff, with degrees in social work and counseling, provided counseling, family advocacy, and immediate shelter services for more than 100 women and their families each year. Volunteers provided additional services such as cleaning the office, assisting with childcare, and general upkeep of the shelter facilities.

The Unity Center was developed to fill a need for women of faith. For that reason, it maintained a policy of hiring only Christians, and asked job

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applicants to describe their personal journey of faith during the formal hiring process. The Center also required all staff to be female, in accordance with federal law under the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

The Center maintained close relationships with the Christian community through both community education and awareness programs. It also relied on financial support from the Christian community for nearly one-fourth of the annual budget. In particular, ten churches together committed to providing financial support of more than \$30,000 each year. In addition to financial support, churches provided numerous volunteers to assist the agency in meeting its mission.

### **Stephanie Underwood**

After finishing her social work field practicum at a domestic violence agency, Stephanie knew that was the type of work she wanted “to do for the rest of my life.” Something inside had just clicked. She especially loved the clients and the tremendous variety of issues that they brought. She discovered a passion for promoting human dignity and worth, the idea that human life had value and people should be treated with respect, and that violence against women and children was unacceptable. In short, she believed working in the field of domestic violence allowed her to work for social justice. What’s more, she could witness women discovering their potential, developing their gifts, and developing a sense of meaning.

One Saturday morning in May, Stephanie marched down the graduation aisle with her chin held high and shoulders pushed back. Two days later, she began a full time position as “family advocate” for the Unity Center. She was twenty-two years old, newly married to the man she had dated throughout college, and felt ready to face the world.

Two years later, still “loving every minute” of her job, Stephanie began taking on more responsibilities at the agency. In addition to scheduling initial assessments, making referrals, attending meetings with attorneys for civil and criminal cases, and testifying in court, Stephanie assumed responsibility for developing the agency’s community education and awareness programs.

Stephanie believed it was important to educate the community about domestic violence. It was essential to educate people of faith, in churches and schools, that domestic violence did exist, and how to support the women involved.

Stephanie’s husband supported her career. He could see her passion for the work but had difficulty understanding how she could handle the stress. Their relationship was strong, and Stephanie made her feelings known about many issues in their relationship. She was determined to have equality in their relationship, and also had made him well aware of the fact that if he ever threatened her like her clients were threatened, he would be “out the door.” Both of their parents had stayed married through “thick and thin,” and she was determined to have a successful, happy marriage as well.

### **Ten O’clock Tuesday Morning**

“Good morning, Rebecca, please come in and have a seat,” Stephanie said as she met Rebecca and the receptionist just outside her office door. “May I offer you any coffee, tea, or water?” Stephanie asked out of habit.

“Coffee would be wonderful, thank you,” Rebecca responded.

Stephanie excused herself and walked down the hall toward the small kitchen donated by Evergreen Christian Church. It was a generous donation

from such a large church but every time Stephanie entered it she thought of the frail woman who came to see her just three months before. A member of Evergreen for more than 15 years, she had suffered in a violent relationship. *Did her church give her as much emotional support dealing with her relationship as they gave Unity Center in financial support?* Stephanie wondered.

Stephanie filled a mug with coffee, and returned down the hall to the office. She set the coffee on the small table in front of her office window and took a seat across from Rebecca.

"Thank you," Rebecca responded, and took a long deep breath.

"I heard about the Unity Center from a friend. I know you provide services to women in domestic violence relationships," Rebecca began. "I need to know my options."

"Can you tell me the history of your situation?" Stephanie questioned.

In response, Rebecca told how she had married at age 22, believing it would last forever. She had grown up in the church and always thought "marriage was a perfect gift from God." She and her husband got pregnant after three years, and nine months later Rebecca gave birth to a perfect baby boy. According to Rebecca's mother, the first grandchild was "a small miracle of life that God brought into our family." Two years later a second boy arrived and their family felt complete.

The early years with the boys were full of fun memories. Rebecca was an accomplished musician, frequently accompanying soloists on the organ and piano. The boys were fond of their mother, watching with amazement as her long fingers moved quickly over the black and white keys each night. Their father would also, on occasion, join in the practice sessions and smile as his wife played through hymns with such grace and poise.

It was he, in fact, who suggested she apply for the open part-time position at church as Assistant Director of Music. The boys were getting older and it would give her something "to do" besides take care of the home and the family. He had always been concerned about the "image" of their family and she was surprised he thought applying for this position was a good idea.

Rebecca reported that she and her husband were long-time members of Faith Presbyterian Church. They faithfully attended services and felt that they "were an important part of the community."

It was a "perfect fit" to join the church staff, Rebecca said, when she was offered the position. Other staff had been "impressed with my vision for the music program." She proudly accepted the position and began the following week.

"I guess that brings us to my current situation with the abuse," Rebecca stated.

"It began about five years ago. One day, out of the blue, my husband came home and told me I needed to save all my receipts so he could file them properly. Within a month he had taken the checkbook and credit cards away from me and when I needed money I had to request it in advance," Rebecca continued, "The next few months he began to get physical. He would push and slap me, and when he was most angry he would cut me off from the outside world."

"One time, it got so bad I tried to call 911, but he threw me against the wall and ripped the phone out of the wall by the cord. When I would come home after a long day at work, he would call me a cheater and liar, because he thought I was having an affair with one of my co-workers," Rebecca paused.

"Have you reported the abuse to anyone?" Stephanie asked.

"The police were called to the property twice when he disassembled my van so I could not leave for work, but they never made a report or arrested him. I did disclose what was happening in my marriage to my co-workers at church," Rebecca stated. "Several people told me to pray harder for my husband and our marriage."

"My pastor says the Lord can change people," Rebecca continued, "and I believe what my pastor says so I continued to pray."

The couple had gone to counseling at the church before, but Rebecca's husband refused to "show up" for scheduled appointments. "I hate to see 'church folks' looking at me like there's something wrong with me. There is no problem," he repeatedly stated to Rebecca, "This is all in your head."

Rebecca wondered how far he took the belief that "there is no problem" because she would often hear of him stopping by the church after she had left for the day, just to "visit" with the staff. She could picture him mocking her and the imaginary problems they were having to the church staff. Although she did not know for a fact he was saying these things, she felt like other staff discounted her reports of abuse in their relationship.

After Rebecca finished her story, Stephanie discussed the services available at Unity Center. Rebecca expressed interest in individual counseling and group sessions, but refused to discuss the possibility of a divorce, stating, "My church does not believe divorce is ever an option."

"If you have any emergencies," Stephanie explained as their session drew to a close, "you can call the agency pager and someone will return your call as soon as possible."

As she watched Rebecca walk out the door and into the parking lot, Stephanie wondered how difficult it must be to watch the one you love change so quickly.

### **Tuesday Evening**

That evening, Stephanie's pager went off in the middle of dinner with her husband. At the moment, they were disagreeing about whether they should spend summer vacations with their families. Though disagreements were usually "short and sweet" during their first years of marriage, Stephanie was relieved to have an excuse to leave the table. She didn't recognize the number displayed on the pager but called immediately.

"Stephanie?" the voice on the other line questioned.

"This is Stephanie," she answered.

"This is Rebecca; we met this morning in your office. He was cleaning his handguns this afternoon and told me he was planning to use them soon. I need him out of here," Rebecca stated flatly.

Immediately switching into professional mode, Stephanie said, "I can get you into our shelter program tonight; this will be a safe place for you to stay until we can file the paperwork for a Petition for Relief. This order will ensure he is put out of the home."

"He went out somewhere; the boys and I are leaving right now for my sister's house. We will be safe there for the night," Rebecca stated. "Can we meet right away in the morning to file for a Petition?"

"OK, let's meet at the office at eight o'clock," Stephanie suggested. "Do be careful."

### **Wednesday Morning**

The next day, as Rebecca made her way down the hall to Stephanie's

office, she appeared fatigued, even discouraged. Stephanie commented gently, "You look pretty tired."

"I had trouble sleeping last night," Rebecca explained, "but I know I need to take these steps to make myself and my boys safe."

Stephanie asked Rebecca to describe what had happened since their previous conversation. Rebecca began shaking as she told the story of her husband pulling out the guns and cleaning them with an eerie look in his eyes. She described how, in a moment, she knew their relationship was over.

Stephanie explained that, depending on what the court decided, the Petition for Relief could restrain her husband from committing acts of domestic violence by keeping him from their home and from an appropriate area surrounding their home. But Rebecca did not seem satisfied.

Stephanie offered, "We can also file a marriage dissolution petition. You will have six months before the divorce is finalized so you can still work toward reconciliation."

"Let's file for both," Rebecca decided.

"I have the paperwork right here. While we fill it out we can make a plan for your continued safety," Stephanie said.

As the women worked to complete the two petitions, Stephanie asked, "How will you stay safe during this time?"

"I am going to stay at my sister's house through next week until I can figure out what this all means. My boys and I feel safe there, and my sister can help me think through this mess," Rebecca stated.

"Can we meet again next Wednesday to see where you are with things?" Stephanie questioned.

"Yes, I think that will work out fine," Rebecca said.

"If you need anything, anything at all, call me," Stephanie said as she walked Rebecca to the door, "Take care and I will see you next week," Stephanie concluded.

### **Monday Afternoon**

Five days later, when Stephanie returned from lunch, Erica informed her Rebecca had called and left a message on her voicemail. Stephanie listened to the message immediately.

"Stephanie, this is Rebecca," her voice shaking with apparent anger. "My husband told our pastor I filed for divorce and the elders called me in and told me to drop the divorce because it is against God's will. They said they should be the ones to 'help make those decisions.' I told them I had prayed about this for years and nothing had changed. I finally decided I needed to file this paperwork with you for my own safety and the safety of my children and that I refused to withdraw it. They said my 'lack of cooperation' required church discipline and suspended my membership status. Because I am no longer a member, I was fired from my job. I am on my way to see you. We need to talk about this situation."

As Stephanie replayed the message a second time, she looked toward the parking lot. Rebecca was pulling into an open spot right outside the main door. In a matter of minutes she would be in Stephanie's office looking for answers to deal with the situation. ❖