

THE LETTER

Mackenzi Huysler & Maggie Wiles

As she prepared for an afternoon appointment, social worker Carrie Peterson reviewed the limited information she had about her new client, Siu Lee. A County health nurse had called Carrie a couple of times to learn about what services Carrie's agency, My Sister's Place, offered and mentioned she was working with a client who was in need of domestic violence services. During the last call, she asked to schedule an appointment for the client on Tuesday afternoon. Carrie asked her to have the client call, if at all possible. Later that afternoon, Siu Lee called to confirm the Tuesday appointment. The situation seemed similar to other cases Carrie had worked with before, but Carrie was intrigued as to why this particular this client had asked for a faith-based organization.

My Sister's Place

Founded in 1980 by a group of Christian women, My Sister's Place became an important source of shelter and counseling services for many who suffered from domestic violence in the Chicagoland area. My Sister's Place fulfilled a need for faith-based programming, especially for women of faith. For many of them, the agency was more acceptable than secular organizations because it focused on helping women through the lens of faith.

The agency staff included three full-time counselors with masters degrees in

Development of this decision case was supported in part by the University of South Carolina College of Social Work. It was prepared solely to provide material for class discussion and not to suggest either effective or ineffective handling of the situation depicted. While based on field research regarding an actual situation, names and certain facts may have been disguised to protect confidentiality. The authors and editors wish to thank the anonymous case reporter for cooperation in making this account available for the benefit of social work students and practitioners.

counseling, two family service providers with BSWs, and a number of direct care staff who served in the shelter program. The counselors and family service providers were assigned cases through an intake referral for families receiving services in either the shelter or non-shelter programs.

Most of the women who came for services, through either the shelter or other programs, were Christian. The agency, however, had a long history of serving women of other faiths or no faiths as well, and staff members were encouraged to attend trainings on different cultural and religious traditions. Recently, the agency had encouraged their staff members to attend training on the relation between domestic violence and various cultural or religious beliefs. Many staff members had commented that they found the training useful and informative in working with clients from different backgrounds. Overall, the agency was committed to working within a client's frame of reference.

The agency was known in the Christian faith community as a welcoming place. The agency's funding came primarily from individual donors, most of whom were Christian, and secondarily from Christian organizations and churches. The staff of My Sister's Place recognized that Christian donors often struggled to understand and appreciate the balance it sought to achieve between honoring the sacrament of marriage and women's physical and emotional safety.

Carrie Peterson

Carrie had grown up in a Christian home attending church and Sunday school each week before she headed off to college at Trinity Christian College. Carrie believed that God needed to be in the center of human relationships and that it was through the grace of God and the death of his son, Jesus Christ, that her sins were forgiven. She also believed that though she had been redeemed completely through God's grace and power, she still had a part to play in the redemption of the world. Carrie believed that all Christians are called to be a part of bringing about the new creation (because the first creation had fallen to sin) through the way that they live every part of their lives. It was her responsibility and calling to be a co-worker with Christ in working towards transforming the world and everything in it to glorify God. Once at college, however, Carrie encountered different concepts and opinions. She often found herself out of her comfort zone, challenged to think about new ideas and ways of looking at life.

Freshman philosophy courses challenged Carrie to think about her own world-

view and what made her outlook on life different from people who described themselves as humanists or pantheists. She enjoyed thinking about these ideas and engaging in the class debates. Nevertheless, Carrie had limited interaction with people having worldviews different than her own. She often wondered how someone could find strength and hope in these different perspectives when to her they seemed so inadequate.

As Carrie learned more about the social work profession and the opportunities that existed, she knew this was the field she wanted to pursue. She felt the desire to meet and interact with people different than herself. Her friends always said she had a heart to help and Carrie knew this was true. The field of domestic violence was of interest to her and so when the time came to apply for field placements, she put it at the top of her list. Her professor arranged for her to interview at My Sister's Place.

Once in her field placement, however, she felt awkward dealing with issues of faith and domestic violence. She had grown up in a Christian community where no one hung out their dirty laundry and no one discussed violence in the home. Nevertheless, she had a passion and a calling to help and support the women she encountered at My Sister's Place. Carrie's love for them gave her a passion to empower the women so that they might seek better situations for themselves and their families. She believed that women experiencing domestic violence were in need and deserving of God's grace and unconditional love. As the end of her internship neared, Carrie decided she would like to pursue full-time employment at My Sister's Place and asked to be considered for one of their openings.

One day before she completed her internship, Carrie was offered and eagerly accepted the Family Advocate position at My Sister's Place. She began her new position immediately after graduation. Each day, Carrie felt challenged to learn from her clients and empower them to make life-changing decisions.

Carrie enjoyed many aspects of her position, from case management and referral for services to advocating for clients and helping them gain access to new programs. But most of all she loved the look of confidence a woman acquired after she was empowered to live a life free of abuse and had started anew.

Tuesday Afternoon—Initial Appointment

Carrie had just finished putting together an information packet for Siu Lee when the receptionist announced that Siu and her children had arrived in the wait-

ing area. Carrie suggested Siu's children could remain in the small supervised play area while she and Siu met. Siu nodded and showed her two young boys to the play area. As they walked together down the hall, Carrie noticed how timid and quiet Siu behaved. *Perhaps she's nervous*, Carrie thought. Carrie offered Siu a seat at the table in her office, and joined her with the referral form and information packet.

"Your health nurse gave me some information about your current situation," Carrie began. "Could you give me some more information about what brings you here today?"

Looking into Carrie's kind face, with little warning, Siu began to cry uncontrollably. Carrie sat, feeling uncomfortable, and looked to Siu for an explanation. Siu continued to cry for several minutes and then, just as abruptly, sat back and stopped crying. She appeared exhausted.

"I tell you my story," Siu began slowly. "My young son, Lanh, he have bad pain in ears and fever. He have this pain many times. My husband send me to nurse for him. He say, 'Take bus and go.' He put children and me on bus and tell driver what stop I get off. I very afraid. I come to nurse only by help from people I meet on bus."

Siu continued, telling of the long process to meet the health nurse who would help her and her son.

"I know not go home without see nurse, or my husband angry," Siu explained. "I tell worker I had much trouble finding building, she not care, so I afraid tell her I not speak good English. We sit in waiting room five hours. When we meet nurse I tell her about pain Lanh has. I tell her he have this pain many times. She write down what his pain mean."

Siu pulled out a note on which the nurse had written that Lanh has chronic ear infections and will need to take antibiotics everyday.

"Nurse give me medicine for Lanh," Siu continued. "She tell me I come back one week to check to see for more medicine."

Carrie nodded attentively, encouraging Siu to continue.

"I meet nurse again and she ask about children and family," Siu paused. "At first I not want to tell her what happen in my house. As wife I must keep these things inside, not bring shame to my family. I have much fear of what happen if I say something. So I tell nurse nothing. Two weeks later my son sick again so my husband send to clinic. When I see nurse again she ask me about children and husband," Siu continued.

“This day I very upset, my husband break dishes and memories from home, so I come and start cry. I tell her my husband cause me trouble, and she say come talk to you. I tell her I do not talk to someone. This dangerous. I tell her bring dishonor to my family to talk,” Siu paused again, apparently thinking hard about what she was going to say next. “Nurse ask me if my kids safe. I not know what to say. That when I decide come talk to you. My husband think I at nurse when I here.”

Carrie looked closely at Siu, surprised by the courage of this woman who appeared so frail just minutes earlier.

“What can you tell me about your relationship with your husband?” Carrie asked.

“We marry in Vietnam,” Siu said, “I very young but he long friend of my family. Shortly after we married, he say his family live in United States and we move, too. We escape bad life in Vietnam after war. My family all stay in Vietnam.”

For the next twenty minutes, Siu described an experience Carrie could have never imagined. Siu told of the journey, ten years before, from Vietnam. She seemed to recall it as if it were yesterday. In 1995 Siu and her husband had been some of the last refugees who traveled by way of a makeshift boat from Vietnam to the Philippines. The boat trip was dangerous and frightening. There was a constant threat of drowning or attack by notorious pirates. She told of being sick to her stomach from the storms, sickness, starvation, and dehydration that she and others had endured, all for eventual refuge in the United States. The boat was cramped and hot. When they arrived in the Philippines after three weeks, they were taken to a refugee camp in Palawan. Life in the camp was not wonderful, they were bored and frightened and always unsure about their future. But unlike Vietnamese refugees in some other countries, they were not beaten or tortured.

A year after Siu and her husband arrived at the camp, most refugees were being forced to return to Vietnam. Her husband was part of a large group that rioted at the airport when Philippine officials tried to force them to return. They feared persecution if they returned to Vietnam. Eventually, this group of refugees was allowed to stay in the Philippines indefinitely. Two years later, the president of the Philippines issued an order allowing Vietnamese asylum-seekers to seek permanent residency in the Philippines. Though many others living in the camp chose to do this, Siu’s husband refused. He had a strong desire to reach the United States. Almost seven and a half years later, in 2005, Siu and her husband were finally processed as refugees by the United States and were resettled into the U.S. near Mr. Lee’s family.

"I thought life would be easier now that I here," Siu said. But the adjustment to the change had been harder than she had anticipated. Her English was poor, and she had few opportunities to learn. She also missed her family and friends in Vietnam.

Siu also told Carrie about memories of her life in Vietnam. As a very young child, their home was full of family and friends, good food, and celebration of life. That time, according to her mother and her mother's friends, had been a period of good karma. As a Buddhist, Siu believed in karma, that whatever you do intentionally to others will happen to you in the future. She believed that her hardships were the result of something she had done in the past, and that she was destined to experience this.

"It must be hard for you to be here without your family and friends," Carrie said.

"It hard," Siu agreed. "I only few things to remember."

Siu told Carrie she had taken a few of her mother's things with her, some small jewelry, dishes, and dolls that she was able to keep safe. One small dish, bright yellow, reminded her of her mother's birthday celebration ten years before. These were some of the only mementos she had left of her mother and her past life in Vietnam.

"What else has made it difficult for you living here in the United States?" Carrie questioned.

"My husband change," Siu continued. "He destroy my things I take from Vietnam." Siu paused, overwhelmed with emotion. "He turn crazy."

Siu described the years of isolation and pain caused by her husband. He did not allow her to leave the home alone except for a few rare instances like the appointments with the nurse to pick up medicine for Lanh. He left her alone with the children for long periods of time, not telling her where he was going or when he would return. Under no circumstances was she allowed to answer the telephone or the door. Siu continued with vivid details of the things she had so carefully packed to bring to the United States from Vietnam and how her husband destroyed them for no apparent reason.

When Siu described a time her husband urinated on a pile of her things, Carrie felt sick to her stomach. *The horrible things this woman had to endure*, she thought.

"My husband family here, his parents, brothers, they all here in United States for him," Siu continued. "When we arrive, he join his brothers in make own supermarket. He and brothers always at work, at least six days each week. I see my

husband family for special days; they not care about me, no call or stop by house, only see my husband," Siu paused. "They treat me bad; tell me what do and not let me know anything. Family supposed to help. Family help each other. But me, I no have family like that. As wife, I have bad marriage," Siu said. "My family suffer, my life, I despair. I have shame for this."

Siu went on to explain how her fear of bringing shame upon her family had kept her from speaking out about her husband's abuse.

"In my country," Siu said, "we no talk about thing like this. We believe family higher. Me not hurt the name of family. Family stay together, that what most important. But now, I not know what to do. I no want to bring shame to family but not want live like this."

"I can see that you feel a lot of responsibility for your family," Carrie responded, "but is it right for your husband to be treating you this way? Does he not have some responsibility for honoring you? You should not have to feel scared in your own home. We can help you with these things. I can tell you about the programs we have and you can decide what you would like to do."

Siu nodded, apparently curious to hear what Carrie had to say.

Carrie described the counseling and family services that she and a counselor could provide. She also described the shelter program available for women and their children.

"This program," Carrie said, "might be a good place for you and your children to start. We provide a safe room for you and your children. You get support from case managers and other families living in the shelter."

Carrie noticed that Siu grew tense when she mentioned the shelter program for women and their children, and decided not to pursue it. Instead, she suggested they see each other once every other week with appointments coordinated with the health nurse to discuss how Siu was coping with her situation. Because it had taken Siu many hours to get the medicine the first time, her husband would not question her being gone for a long time. She and her sons would go first to the clinic to get the medicine for Lanh from the nurse and then come to see Carrie at My Sister's Place.

Siu agreed that this was a good plan and they scheduled an appointment for two weeks later.

Once Siu had left, Carrie decided she would look over some notes she had taken at a training a few weeks earlier on domestic violence and its relation to various cultural and religious beliefs. Carrie remembered the training had covered

Southeast Asian cultural and religious beliefs in relation to domestic violence and Carrie thought this would be good information to review before her next meeting with Siu.

The visit with Siu fresh in her mind, Carrie read over her notes with new appreciation. For example, she was reminded that, historically, domestic violence has been accepted and legitimized within Southeast Asian cultures. Southeast Asian communities and families are often patriarchal and conservative in their view of gender roles. This culture highly values honoring one's family. Because women have a large role in determining the reputation of their family, they are taught to honor their family at any cost, even if this includes silently suffering domestic violence. In this culture a woman should be unconditionally devoted to her husband, even if he is abusing her. Buddhism, the most popular religion of Southeast Asians, promotes the idea of karma. Karma is the philosophy that your current actions will determine your fate. However one intentionally treats others will determine how one is treated by others in the future. Hardships, like domestic violence, are often viewed as the result of one's past actions and therefore something deserved.

She also read that intimate partner violence is often prevalent within Southeast Asian communities living abroad. Among these communities, alcohol and drug use, gambling, mental illness, stress and frustration are factors which people use to explain intimate partner violence. Gender, class, age, culture, and immigration status can affect an abused Southeast Asian woman's attitude toward partner violence, her ability to protect herself and her family, and her ability to do anything else about her situation. Frequently, Southeast Asian women in America live in isolation and alienation from the outside world because of language and cultural barriers. These barriers can keep battered women from finding out what their options might be.

Finally, in reviewing the materials, Carrie remembered that if and when South Asian women seek support for their struggles with domestic violence, it is often informal support from friends and family. The women are often wary of and uncomfortable with formal, outside support from agencies. Among Southeast Asian communities, attitudes exist against calling the police or separating from one's abusive partner. Carrie learned that when helping women from this culture, a central concept should be that every woman has the right to assume control over her own life and the philosophy should be one of empowerment.

Tuesday Afternoon—Two Weeks Later

When Carrie walked down the hall to meet Siu for their third appointment, she noticed a small change in the woman's demeanor. Siu instructed her boys to head to the play area and "play nice," and turned and followed Carrie into her office.

"I tired," Siu began, "tired of him breaking my things, and yelling at me. I know you tell me of this shelter many times, but I afraid to go."

"The people who work there are wonderful and you will be safe from your husband," Carrie spoke.

"I cannot go," Siu countered, shaking her head, "I not refugee anymore, I lose everything if I go."

"I understand that those times were very hard for you," Carrie said.

"Yes," Siu replied, "I not have that pain again."

"What could I do to show you that it would not be like that again?" Carrie asked.

"No, no," Siu replied. "I not live like refugee again!"

Carrie suspected it would be impossible to convince Siu to stay in the shelter program because of her past experience and the horror this caused. She thought of the other housing programs in the city and what other options might be a good fit for Siu.

"There is a program we have not discussed," Carrie continued. "This program is called transitional housing. It's a two-year program provided by the federal government. It provides you and your boys a home, and education classes so you can learn things like paying your bills, getting a job, getting your driver's license, and enrolling your children in school. The workers help you for two years and then you are ready to live on your own."

"Do we have own place?" Siu asked.

"Yes, the program will give you your own home for two years," Carrie answered. "Sometimes it takes a long time to get into the program, but we could fill out the forms now and see what happens."

"Yes, I think good," Siu agreed. "I come meet you until move?" Siu questioned.

"Yes, I think we can still work together to make sure your family is safe until you move," Carrie agreed.

Tuesday Afternoon—Two Months Later

“Good news, Siu,” Carrie said excitedly, as she and Siu sat down for their bi-weekly session, “You were accepted into the transitional housing program. We just need to wait until the next apartment opens up and you and your children will be able to move in and start the program.”

“That great news,” Siu beamed.

Carrie thought back to the day when she had first told Siu about the program. She was in so much pain, but was never able to commit to leaving until she knew she would have a safe place to live with her children. When problems got worse at home, Carrie sometimes reminded her of the shelter program that was available for her and her children. Nevertheless, Siu refused to go. She told Carrie the pictures of this place brought back the nightmares of her refugee experience coming to the United States. She could not, and would not put herself or her children into a place like this again. It had been horrible.

“This program, good choice for me and my children,” Siu said, “we safe here not afraid.”

Carrie nodded, thinking of how much this transitional housing program and potential opportunity had changed Siu’s perspective toward life. She thought back to their bi-weekly sessions, and the stories Siu told of what went on in her home. Her husband refused to let her leave the house except for her appointments with the nurse. One evening, for no apparent reason, he broke her mother’s jewelry into tiny pieces with a hammer. Carrie knew these things, mementos of the past, held so much value to Siu, and that Siu’s heart was broken over and over again as he destroyed them.

“How long until go?” Siu asked.

“The program director, Ms. Carter, said it could be just one or two more weeks,” Carrie replied.

Wednesday Afternoon

The next day, when Carrie checked her voicemail messages after lunch, she was surprised to hear a message from the transitional housing program director, Samantha Carter. Carrie called back immediately.

“We have a spot open immediately for Siu Lee,” Samantha explained. “We just need a letter from your agency indicating her homeless status. That’s a requirement for federal funding. But then she can move in.”

“That’s wonderful news, but,” Carrie paused, “I need to talk to you about the homeless status letter. Siu is still living in her home, and has never stayed in a domestic violence shelter. She was a refugee from Vietnam and because of this has some serious issues with moving into a shelter.”

“We have very strict guidelines for federal funding,” Samantha replied, “and we must have a letter indicating the clients we accept into the program are currently in shelter programs and have homeless status. It doesn’t matter how many nights she is in the shelter and I don’t care how you get the letter. I just need to have a letter from your agency stating Siu has homeless status, and then she can move in.”

As Carrie hung up the telephone, one question kept running through her mind: *Shall I write that letter? And what happens to Siu if I don’t?*

DO NOT SHARE OR COPY