

## UNANSWERED PRAYERS

*Mackenzi Huyser*

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,” the receptionist responded.

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 experiencing domestic violence. Established in 1995 as a non-profit organization, the Unity Center was

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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 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 she wanted to do that type of work “for the rest of my life.” Something inside had just clicked. She especially loved the clients and the tremendous variety of issues 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 for opposing violence against women and children. 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 2000, 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 a "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, even in Christian homes, 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 had also made him well aware 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.

### **Tuesday Morning, 10:00 am**

"Good morning, Rebecca," Stephanie said as she met the receptionist and Rebecca just outside her office door. "Please come in and have a seat. 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 the large congregation 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 violent relationships. 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, Steve, got pregnant after three years, and nine months later gave birth to a perfect baby boy. 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 evening. Steve would also, on occasion, join in the practice sessions and smile as his wife played through hymns with such grace and poise.

It was Steve, in fact, who suggested she apply for the open part-time position at church as Assistant Director of Music. Rebecca and Steve were long-time members of Faith Presbyterian Church, a congregation of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). They faithfully attended services and felt deeply connected to the community. Because the boys were six and eight years of age, Steve thought it would give her “something to do” besides take care of the home and the family. This had surprised Rebecca because he always seemed to like having her at home to care for the family. He appreciated that she was always available if he needed her to do something during the day. He always wanted the dinner on the table when he arrived home and loved having the house neat and tidy. But he had insisted that she apply for the position, so she did.

When she was offered the position, Rebecca decided it was a perfect fit to join the church staff. Other staff had been impressed with her vision for the music program. She proudly accepted the position and began the following week. But six months after she began the job, Rebecca noticed life at home began to change.

Her husband had become more irritable and short with her when he came home after work.

“One day, out of the blue,” Rebecca said, “Steve 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.”

“Then a few months after that he started to get a little physical. He would push me and sometimes slap me,” Rebecca continued, “sometimes 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. “Other days it was like he was so happy to see me and couldn’t wait to tell me about his day.”

“Have you reported the abuse to anyone?” Stephanie asked.

“I did disclose what was happening in my marriage to my co-workers at the church,” Rebecca stated. “Several people told me to pray harder for Steve and our marriage.”

“I also told my pastor and he said the Lord can change people,” Rebecca continued, “and I believed what my pastor says so I continued to pray.”

Stephanie nodded.

“He also said as Christians we are called to work for reconciliation and forgive each other for our wrongdoings,” Rebecca said.

“Have you and Steve tried to work toward reconciliation and address these issues?” Stephanie asked.

Rebecca explained that she had made an appointment for counseling at the church, but Steve refused to “show up” for scheduled appointments.

“He would say, ‘I hate to see church folks looking at me like there’s something wrong with me. There’s no problem. If there’s a problem, it’s all in your head.’”

Despite these denials, Rebecca wondered whether Steve believed there was no problem because she often heard 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 what, if anything, he said about their relationship, she thought co-workers discounted her reports of abuse in their relationship.

“I continue to pray,” Rebecca stated, “but it’s been going on over a year and I don’t want to continue to live like this. It feels like my life is so up and down. One week he is full of anger, the next week he tells me how much he loves me. I can’t deal with this.”

Stephanie shared with Rebecca 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 is very conservative and believes divorce is not part of God's plan for our lives. I made a commitment to stay with him through good times and bad. God forgives us. Shouldn't I do that for Steve?" Rebecca asked.

"I think that's a decision you need to make for yourself," Stephanie said.

Rebecca nodded hesitantly.

"You can explore these questions in the individual counseling and group sessions if you like," Stephanie suggested.

"Oh, I think that sounds good," Rebecca replied.

"Okay," Stephanie encouraged, "let's get some sessions set up for you first thing next week. Does that sound like it will work?"

"That sounds great."

Stephanie offered some appointment times, and Rebecca selected an individual counseling session for the following Tuesday.

"If you have any emergencies before your appointment," Stephanie explained, "you can call the agency pager and someone will return your call right away."

As she watched Rebecca walk out the door and down the hall, Stephanie felt uneasy wondering how frightening it must be to have the one you love and live with be so volatile.

### **Tuesday Evening, 6:27 pm**

That evening, Stephanie's pager went off in the middle of dinner with her husband. At the moment, they were disagreeing about whether to 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 panicked voice on the other line questioned.

"This is Stephanie," she confirmed.

"This is Rebecca. We met this morning in your office. I'm sorry to call you now, the boys are with me and I am driving. He is really starting to scare me. He said he was planning to use his guns soon. I can't stay there."

When the call began to break up, Stephanie asked, "Are you there, Rebecca?"

"Yes," Rebecca answered. "I'm leaving. I can't take this."

"I can get you into our shelter program tonight. That will be a safe place for you to stay until we can file the paperwork for a Petition for Relief. A petition will ensure he is put out of the home."

"I'm on my way to my sister's house. We'll be safe there tonight," Rebecca stated. "Can we meet first thing in the morning to file for a Petition?"

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

### **Wednesday Morning**

The next morning, 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.

"Last night I went out to the garage to call my husband for dinner," Rebecca began. "He was bent over his workbench and when I walked in he looked up at me with this frightening look in his eyes."

Rebecca began to shake as she described "the look."

"He was cleaning his handguns," Rebecca paused.

Stephanie nodded, urging Rebecca to continue.

"When I saw that, I panicked," Rebecca said, "just grabbed the boys and left for my sister's house."

Stephanie nodded again.

"I called you from the road," Rebecca said, looking down at the floor and pausing. "I knew," Rebecca started and then took a deep breath, "I knew, at that moment our relationship was over, that it had to end. It had just reached a new level."

Stephanie shook her head, indicating she understood. She went on to explain 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 and her workplace. But Rebecca did not seem satisfied.

Stephanie paused, wondering whether she should recommend Rebecca also file for divorce. It certainly seemed that Rebecca wanted to take this to the next

level, but Stephanie always felt some pain in suggesting it. Hesitantly, she continued, "We could also file a Marriage Dissolution Petition. You will have six months before the divorce is finalized so you can still work toward reconciliation."

"I think we should file for both," Rebecca responded without hesitating.

As the women worked to complete the two petitions, Stephanie asked, "In the meantime, how will you stay safe?"

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

"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 something we need to work out together through the church and that divorce is not part of God's plan for our lives. They said they should be the ones to 'help make those decisions' and they want to help us get back together. I told them I had prayed about this 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. I 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 help with her situation.