

It Could Happen to You **By Carly Zubrzycki**

It could happen to you

Worldwide, almost a third of women will experience it in their lifetime,

In the US, 35% of women and 28% of men will experience it

Of these, 1/7 women and 1/18 men will be stalked

1/10 women in these scenarios will be sexually assaulted

Less than 49% worldwide will seek help

And 30% will go unreported in the United States.

In Monroe County, there were 4,549 reports ALONE in 2022.

That's 4,549 situations, with 4,549 stories behind them.

So who are these people? What are their stories?

Well, that's not my place to tell.

But what I can say is that all the reports here are reports of domestic violence in Monroe County.

Domestic violence is different in every relationship but is generally defined as repetitive patterns of behavior to maintain power and control over another person.

It can appear in different forms, such as physical, psychological, verbal, financial, or even sexual abuse.

It usually doesn't happen overnight but grows as the relationship develops

That means that these reports are not just moments of rash decisions, but years or decades of tension and hardship

And there are organizations, like the Willow Domestic Violence Center, who can intervene or prevent domestic violence before it escalates.

That's why in my work with Willow, I am working with their Legal Advocacy program to create legal guides for orders of protection and create a pro-bono legal network survivors can use.

Orders of protection are crucial in preventing and intervening in domestic violence because it's the only means where a person is legally required to maintain distance from another person.

With this distance, the survivor can not only be physically safe from their abuser, but away from the psychological harm they cause.

This distance is essential for the survivor to connect with resources and create the support network they need.

By creating legal guides, survivors can be informed of the order of protection process and therefore more likely to create a successful petition.

Similarly, being able to access legal representation, increases the likelihood of their order of protection being approved in the courtroom.

Oftentimes, the everyday person doesn't know how to navigate the hectic court process, so having a lawyer there to advise is crucial for successful outcomes.

In order to do this work, I shadowed at Willow to see how survivors interact with the court system.

They face many barriers, such as victim-blaming, which is when blame is placed on the survivor in experiences of domestic violence. This may look like saying

things such as “why didn’t you just leave?” or “why didn’t you stick up for yourself?”

With this in mind, when establishing a pro-bono network, I created a survey to determine lawyers who are trauma-informed, which in this case means they understand the power dynamics of domestic violence and avoid victim-blaming pitfalls.

Creating a network of lawyers who believe in survivors is crucial for not only legal successes in the courtroom, but for survivors to establish a relationship with resources like Willow that can help them break the cycle.

Domestic violence doesn’t exist in a vacuum, 88% of domestic violence victims have other legal needs such as custody and divorce.

Outside of law, many are low-income. Many struggle with substance abuse. Many have unmet mental and physical health needs.

However, none of these issues can be addressed until a survivor is safe, which is why building Willow’s capacity to legally advocate for survivors through legal guides and a pro-bono network is the first step to breaking the cycle.

4,549 stories that can have a better ending.

Let’s do better