January is National Stalking Awareness Month

By Peter J. Koutoujian & Laura R. Van Zandt

Fourteen years ago this month, an explosion rocked an Everett apartment killing a woman and changing forever the way we look at the issue of stalking in Massachusetts.

In 2000, Sandra Berfield – a resident of Everett who worked as a waitress in Medford – was murdered by a customer who had stalked her for over two years. During the month of January, designated as National Stalking Awareness Month, we remember Sandra as well as the 6.6 million victims of stalking throughout the United States.

In her case, Sandra recognized she was being stalked and took active steps to protect herself by alerting local law enforcement. Unlike the majority of female stalking victims, Sandra had no personal relationship with her stalker, making it impossible for her to obtain a criminally enforceable restraining order at the time.

Sandra knew she was in grave danger and told people she feared what her stalker would do. She went so far as to set up cameras at her home and at one point her stalker served a six-month prison sentence for damaging her car, but in the end, Sandra was right – and despite her efforts to ensure her safety, she was killed.

After Sandra’s death, her sister Cheryl Darisse began a 10 year crusade to change Massachusetts law in an effort to protect people in similar situations. In 2010, the Legislature passed and Governor Patrick signed a law that allows those in Sandra’s position to obtain criminally enforceable restraining orders in cases where the victim and the perpetrator have never had an intimate family or dating relationship.

As we mark the 10th anniversary of the first National Stalking Awareness Month, it is incumbent upon all of us to better understand the warning signs and educate ourselves about this complex and devastating crime.

Stalking remains one of the most misunderstood and as a result, underreported crimes. Unlike other crimes that are defined by a single incident, stalking is a series of acts or conduct that – in isolation – might otherwise seem benign or noncriminal. It is why education, awareness and recognition of the signs of stalking are critical.
It is important that victims trust their instincts and ignore pressure to downplay stalking behavior. If you are unsure about whether the behavior of a family member, work colleague, neighbor, or stranger crosses the line by making you feel uneasy or in fear for your personal safety, please contact one of the many victims’ rights organizations in our area to speak with a victim advocate to talk through your concerns and options.

After 10 years of fighting for increased rights for stalking victims on Beacon Hill, Sandra’s sister Cheryl was successful in giving them more of the protections they deserve. Now it’s our turn. Together, we can help to protect victims and ensure offenders are held accountable.

Below are some resources for stalking victims:
REACH Beyond Domestic Violence – www.reachma.org
Feel Safe Again – www.feelsafeagain.org
National Center for Victims of Crime – www.victimsofcrime.org

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