

CRIME

The batterers class: Men who hurt women are shown new ways to relate â” but how many will change?



April 15, 2015 â” Nakiesha Smith is a Program Facilitator for the Batterers Intervention Program at Tennessee Correctional Services. (Brandon Dill/Special to The Commercial Appeal)

By Daniel Connolly

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On a recent Wednesday night, Willis Manshell Miller climbed the stairs to the second floor of a Downtown office building and took a seat in the front row of a windowless room for the batterers class.

He had arrived late, and counselor Nakiesha Smith was already asking the men to describe the past week's interactions with wives and girlfriends.

"Being emotionally affirming. Anybody did that or got an example?" asked Smith. She spoke with a strong northeastern accent from her upbringing in New Jersey and two metal points from a piercing flashed from her left eyebrow.

The six men in the class eagerly offered ideas for emotional affirmation. "Tell 'em how you care," one said. "Say, 'What can I do to make you feel better?'" another suggested.

The class conversation shifted to relationships with children. Miller, who stands about five feet, six inches tall and has a beard, mustache and mutton-chop sideburns, spoke up in a gravelly voice. He said his 19-year-old son was already showing violent tendencies toward women. "And now I'm trying to teach him a different way of life. And this is the most hardest aspect, because I already showed him the wrong way."

The students looked like normal, working-class men, but they had been accused of doing things like punching women repeatedly in the face and throwing them to the floor. They're in a six-month, once-a-week course that aims to reshape their thinking about women and relationships. Many have court orders to take the class, and the program serves as an alternative to prison time.

All state-certified batterers programs in Memphis use a teaching template developed in the early 1980s in Duluth, Minnesota.

It's not an anger management program. Rather, it teaches that the driving force behind men's abuse of women is the desire to control them. Through role-playing, class discussion and homework, the Duluth Model aims to teach men to respect women and resolve

disputes through negotiation.

Doubters of the batterers classes point to a lack of solid data on their effectiveness. Proponents argue passionately that batterers deserve a chance to change, and say the class often helps them.

The private company that runs this class, [Tennessee Correctional Services](#), offers several batterers classes each week, including one class for female batterers and one for men who speak Spanish — Smith teaches it with the help of an interpreter. A male colleague, 56-year-old Wilbert Hill, helps her lead the sessions.

The company allowed a Commercial Appeal reporter to attend a recent Wednesday night class for men and talk with those who agreed to interviews. The class offers insight into the thinking behind domestic violence, a common and dangerous crime.

Nearly 11,000 domestic violence simple assault cases were reported to police in Shelby County in 2013, according to Tennessee Bureau of Investigation statistics — that's a rate of 11.6 per 1,000 people, more than double the statewide rate. That same year, authorities recorded an additional 1,400 domestic violence aggravated assaults, which often involve extreme violence, like choking a woman unconscious. The county prosecutor's office says in 2014, six people died here in intimate partner violence, and in 2013, 10 died. In a high-profile case in March, 36-year-old Rodriguez Hunter attacked his 39-year-old estranged wife Chatoya Hunter as she arrived to work the early shift in the meat and seafood department at the Kroger in Whitehaven. He fatally shot her, then later killed himself.

Miller, the man who expressed worry about his son, was accused of coming home drunk to his girlfriend in February 2014, shouting "Where's my money?" and pulling her hair and twisting her wrist

backward. When his teenage daughter tried to break it up, he pushed an open hand into her face, an arrest affidavit said.

Miller pleaded guilty to domestic assault with bodily harm and was sentenced to 11 months, 29 days in jail. The judge suspended the sentence, other than four days served. He was ordered to pay \$225, take random drug screens, attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and go through the batterers' program. Last year, he failed to complete the program — he blamed an injury.

He said his 18-year-old daughter already has a girl of her own, making Miller a grandpa at 38, and that his love for the baby makes him look hard at himself.

“I want to be able to change. And best believe, if you've learned something all the way from birth, it's hard to change. Very hard to change.”

He said he'd grown up in an abusive home and said abuse is almost hereditary, “like cancer.” “It's something that you probably don't even know that's instilled in you.”

Smith challenges such statements. She tells the men that yes, their background influences them, but they have the power to choose peaceful actions.

Communities throughout Tennessee run batterers intervention programs because they want alternatives to jail, said Kathy Walsh, secretary of the Domestic Violence State Coordinating Council, an organization that certifies the programs.

Walsh says batterers classes must demand accountability, but she sees them as a useful tool, especially for men who haven't been in trouble before. “For perpetrators who want to change the behavior, I think they can be very effective.”

In Tennessee, no hard-and-fast rules mandate what crimes qualify a person for a batterers' program and what crimes require a prison term. Nor does the state set rules on accountability, for instance, how many times a batterer can miss class without punishment.

No statewide statistics track the effectiveness of these programs, Walsh said. National studies have shown mixed results.

That mixed data builds doubt. "I believe in the possibility of change," says Olliette Murry-Drobot, executive director of the [Family Safety Center](#), which offers support to domestic violence victims. "I just don't know how often it happens for domestic violence batterers."

Whether the lessons are sinking in for Miller is unclear. The week after the Wednesday night batterers class, he met a reporter again and seemed far less repentant than before.

He said the assault that got him in trouble wasn't as bad as the police report said. And he said domestic violence usually isn't a big deal. "You know, you hear stories about men who beat women or men who shot women, then shot themselves, or whatever. But a lot of the women's stories are far-fetched. And once you get caught up in something like that, then it's about finances. Everybody's after your wallet."

He minimized the seriousness of other incidents on his record. They include a May aggravated assault charge after he allegedly attacked the same girlfriend, slicing her arm, head and shoulder with a box cutter.

He said they'd had an argument, but nothing happened. "The case was dismissed ... She actually talked to the prosecutor herself." He's now dating another woman.

He said he didn't deserve serious punishment, but that it's probably a good thing he ended up in the batterers class. "I think everyone should take it, even if you haven't been in trouble."

Smith, the counselor, says some people question her decision to work with batterers rather than victims. She believes she'll help more women. "If you just work with the victim and not the batterer, you leave that batterer to do that to the next person."

She said most of the men don't know how to have a peaceful relationship until they learn in the class.

Women have come to thank her for the change in their mate, she said. Former students stop her in public to express gratitude, like the man who was selling Girl Scout cookies in the mall with his daughters. She said the girls wanted to hug her. "That's a good feeling ... So ok, maybe there's one or two that ain't gonna get it."

Smith knows the risk of domestic violence. She said she was abused in a past relationship and that one night, the man tried to strangle her to death, which prompted her oldest daughter to try to stab him with a knife. The man got the knife away. "I just told him that he was killing a part of me."

She left, and said today, at 38, she's happily married to a different man.

Above all, she doesn't want anyone to doubt her passion for helping these men. "This means everything," she said.

The men seem to appreciate her. LaBryan Washington, an athletically built 24-year-old, said the class was helping him break habits he learned from seeing violence as a child. "It's cleansing for the soul." He says he wishes teenagers could take the class.

Toward the end of the Wednesday night class, Smith called on Barry Neal, a thin 33-year-old with shiny earrings in both ears. The batterers' class works on a 24-week cycle and men can join and leave at any point. Neal was almost done, but first he had to stand in front of class and answer questions.

Miller, the man who compared abuse to cancer, asked Neal a question about the class. "Did it make you a better person? Or did you just learn it because you had to?"

Neal answered. "It made me a better person. It made me realize what I was doing wrong."

At Smith's prompting, Neal revealed that while taking the class, he'd decided to live apart from his wife and children. He said he didn't want the children to continue to witness a toxic relationship.

Smith suggested that while living apart from his wife, Neal could continue to have a relationship with his children and become a true role model.

The instructors told Neal to leave the room. Hands went up for a vote. It was unanimous — if Neal did an exit interview, he could graduate.

Neal left. And soon Miller and the rest of the men left the building too, changed or unchanged, back to the children and women at home.

HOW TO GET HELP

RESOURCES FOR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIMS

The Family Safety Center assists victims of domestic violence through steps such as legal help and referrals to shelters. 901-222-4400.

The Exchange Club Family Center offers support groups and individual counseling for women and children affected by domestic violence. 901-276-2200.

RESOURCES FOR BATTERERS WHO WANT TO CHANGE

Though most people who go to batterers' intervention programs do so through court order, the programs accept those who voluntarily choose to go.

The Hope Center @ Grace. Contact Rev. Oliver T. Williams at 901-323-3900.

Shelby County Pre-Trial Services. Contact Richard Harrell or Alice Grandberry at 901-222-4000.

Tennessee Correctional Services. Contact Nakiesha Smith. She and her colleague Wilbert Hill are also willing to speak with community groups about domestic violence. 901-526-6111.

The Exchange Club Family Center offers individual counseling and other services to batterers who want to change. 901-276-2200.

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