

Dawn Golik: Marjaree Mason Center renews a legacy of triumph against domestic violence

By Dawn
Golik

In pictures released to the media after the murder 37 years ago, her incandescent smile broke hearts. Everyone said she did the right thing when her boyfriend assaulted and abused her: she left him. And she chillingly predicted how it would all end when she talked with law enforcement after he beat her, recalling that she asked him, "Are you going to kill me, then kill yourself in one of those lover suicide things?"

In November of 1978, beautiful, brilliant Fresno State student Marjaree Mason was shot three times in the head by a man who then turned the gun on himself. Her death stunned this city, and started a communitywide dialogue about ending domestic violence. People committed to making something good come out of her brutal murder, and established the Marjaree Mason Center in her honor.

For nearly four decades, it has given men, women, and children the help they need to triumph over abuse. But this problem has not disappeared from our community.

Last month, the killing of another woman by a man who then took his own life gives us a reason to renew Marjaree Mason's legacy. Since her death 37 years ago, the center named after her has had to expand from one location to two. They now operate three facilities in Reedley, Clovis, and Fresno.

Last year, 5,188 clients spent 43,602 nights in these shelters, and they brought their little ones. More than 600 children also stayed in a shelter: 52% of them were infants to 5-year-olds. They are the smallest and most vulnerable victims, and the impacts of domestic violence are particularly devastating on them.

Without help, they are the next generation to be abused, or become abusers. The Marjaree Mason Center runs a Children's Enrichment facility where they can safely express the terrible things they have seen by playing with dolls, drawing pictures, and writing their stories in crayon. They receive counseling. The center teaches kNOw MORE, a workshop for teenagers about relationship abuse and how to avoid it.

The agency educates victims about their legal options, helps them obtain restraining orders and shows them how to develop a plan to safely leave their abusers, because, like Marjaree, this is when victims are most in danger. Staff handle crisis calls at all hours.

And not only women and children are helped here. There are also counseling programs for batterers where men work hard to learn how to end violence in their relationships, and take responsibility for the damage they have done. Families are mended. And for the thousands of clients they have served, triumph is found here.

The center named for her is headquartered on a quiet street in downtown Fresno. It operates out of a stately old house, designed by Julia Morgan, the architect who dreamed up Hearst Castle. This year, Marjaree Mason should be 73. She should be a grandma, enjoying retirement and her family. Instead she is frozen in time, forever young. That smile radiates from the photo of her in the lobby of the center. It's the same photo released to the media after her murder.

Even 37 years after her death, this agency continues educating, empowering and transforming lives in Mason's honor. The cost of providing these services to thousands of people each year is significant. The shelters require maintenance. Children living in them need diapers. There are salaries to pay, copy paper to buy, an endless list of expenses large and small.

Valley women are still dying from domestic violence. And there is an opportunity for all of us to renew Mason's legacy through contributions to the center named after her. With community support, it is creating a better future for children living in homes where domestic violence is what they see. And abuse is what they know. Because unless this cycle is broken, they, too, will have a legacy: growing up to become our next generation of abusers. And victims.

Dawn Golik lives in Fresno with her husband and their two young daughters. Her email is dawn.golik@gmail.com. To learn more about the Marjaree Mason Center, visit www.mmcenter.org. Comment by going to fresnobee.com/opinion and clicking on the Valley Voices.