

00:00:00:00 - 00:00:08:21

[intro music playing]

00:00:08:21 - 00:00:37:19

Jaelon:

Welcome to Courtyard Conversations! I'm your host, Jalen Jackson, and in today's episode, we are tackling a subject that is both sensitive and critically important. Domestic violence matters at all times, even outside of Domestic Violence Awareness Month, and we* will be shedding light on this important issue that affects countless lives. Joining us is Dr. Rachel Voth Schrag; a dedicated advocate, and researcher in the field of domestic violence awareness.

00:00:37:21 - 00:01:01:10

Jaelon:

How are you today?

Rachel:

I'm good. Thank you for having me.

Jaelon:

Thank you for being here. Can you provide us some background on your work in domestic violence awareness and research?

Rachel:

Absolutely. I started working with survivors of domestic violence when I was a college student. I worked at a shelter. I ran the hotline. I worked as an advocate in the court setting.

00:01:01:10 - 00:01:27:04

Rachel:

So, I helped survivors apply for protective orders. And then as I continued in my social work career, I was in other fields. I worked in child welfare. I worked in child and adolescent mental health. But because of that initial experience, I kept seeing how domestic violence was impacting the kids I was working with and the families that I was working with.

00:01:27:06 - 00:01:57:01

Rachel:

And so after doing my master's degree, I started working at an agency called Redevelopment Opportunities for Women. And at (ROW), we specifically worked with survivors of intimate partner violence and in particular, what we realized and what we really tackled was the economic impact of intimate partner violence. So, we provided individual development accounts which are matched savings where survivors could save for a car purchase or a home purchase or for their education.

00:01:57:03 - 00:02:28:20

Rachel:

We worked on addressing the impact that intimate partner violence has on folk's credit reports or on their housing history. That can really be long term barriers to safety and economic stability. So, I would do things like help people pull their credit reports and review them with

them and come up with a plan for addressing back debt or identifying where maybe some things had been inaccurately labeled on a credit report that was creating barriers.

00:02:28:22 - 00:03:13:23

Rachel:

And I took all of that experience and the stories of all the survivors I got the chance to work with. And those really inspired my career as a researcher. So, I have I started out working and looking at the impact of economic abuse on students, especially community college students. And since then, I've really expanded to a wide range of research that's really all focused on the needs of survivors, survivor driven services, and the way that meeting the needs of survivors, matching what the resources are that they're really looking for with what is available in the community can create a situation where violence ends, where families can be stable, and where sort of a cycle of

00:03:13:23 - 00:03:42:06

Rachel:

violence doesn't have to repeat.

Jaelon:

And you started in college, so what initially got you into this field?

Rachel:

So, I knew that I wanted I was training to be a social worker. I wanted experience working with a lot of different people. And I have a real passion and appreciation for the way that positive family and positive social support can set people up for, for lives of health and well-being.

00:03:42:07 - 00:04:22:14

Rachel:

And so, you know, one of the things that has always been concerning to me is wanting to help create families that are stable and happy and healthy in whatever way is best for that family. And so that's what drew me initially to work with survivors in a shelter setting. And then I was just so inspired by the folks I was working with, the advocates I was working with, and also the survivors and their kids who were living at the shelter and who were doing incredible, you know, making incredible changes in their lives and being creative and resilient and kind and, you know, facing huge hardships, but with just a great deal of tenacity.

00:04:22:14 - 00:04:47:09

Rachel:

And I just so appreciated that, and I wanted to be part of it.

Jaelon:

Oh, that's good. That's actually great. We need more people like you.

Rachel:

And the survivors that we you know that we work with. Survivors are Amazing.

Jaelon:

Yes. Speaking of survivors, you know, a lot of people think that domestic violence is only physical, but it can occur in different types, such as mental and psychological.

00:04:47:11 - 00:05:07:01

Jaelon:

Could you explain those types and help our listeners understand what to look for?

Rachel:

Absolutely. So, when we talk about intimate partner violence or domestic violence, I think one of the key things to look for is that it's a pattern. So, it's something that happens sort of over time, it's repeated and it's a pattern of coercing and controlling behavior.

00:05:07:03 - 00:05:39:06

Rachel:

And that can often include threat of physical violence or actual physical or sexual violence as an aspect or a dimension of that coercion and control. But it also includes things like economic abuse that I was talking about before, where a partner might steal money or withhold money or control finances, minimizing, denying, and blaming the survivor for the experiences that they're having, isolation or the control of children, the use of different kinds of privilege, whether that's heterosexual privilege or male privilege or white privilege.

00:05:39:08 - 00:06:07:01

Rachel:

Those are all aspects of the survivor's experience and how their identity can come to shape their experience of violence.

Jaelon:

Okay. And for those who might be concerned about family or friends, what are some signs that they can watch for to indicate (domestic violence) *?

Rachel:

So first, it's important to know that each survivor has, and each relationship is unique and distinct. So, there's not any one set of experiences or indicators that I can say there it is.

00:06:07:03 - 00:06:44:03

Rachel:

But some of the patterns that we see are things like folks who are experiencing isolation in their relationships. So, a partner might continue to exert more and more control that results in somebody who was previously a really engaged friend or family member to be more remote or to be more isolated from their support system. Because one of the tactics that folks who use violence or control in their relationship might try to do to maintain or increase that control is limit survivors' ability to reach out to and engage with other support people.

00:06:44:05 - 00:07:06:16

Rachel:

Certainly, you know, things like indicators of bruising or physical violence is something that we look to, but also just being really willing and open to listen to people's stories, to notice inconsistencies, and to just share with folks that you're always here for them and that you're available and that you believe that you believe what they're telling you.

Jaelon:

And I feel like that can bring a lot of comfort to people.

00:07:06:17 - 00:07:35:11

Rachel:

Absolutely.

Jaelon:

Um, and there are a lot of resources when it comes to domestic violence.

Rachel:

Absolutely.

Jaelon:

Could you share some of those resources? And the crisis hotline, can you share a little bit about those and how they can access them?

Rachel:

Absolutely. So, in North Texas, we have a good number of really wonderful agencies that specifically work with survivors of intimate partner violence and their families.

00:07:35:13 - 00:07:38:01

Rachel:

In Tarrant County, we have Safe Haven of Tarrant County.

00:07:38:01 - 00:08:09:01

Rachel:

There are also resources in Dallas and Collin County, and all of those are available either on their websites or you can look at the Texas Council on Family Violence website that has information listed out by county for all of these family violence resource centers.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline, the NDVH, is actually run out of Austin, Texas and they provide 24/7/365 access to information, referrals, support.

00:08:09:03 - 00:08:34:17

Rachel:

You can call them; you can text them or you can use their computer chat system. They're available in English and Spanish, they're available in TTY. You can learn more about them at the hotline.com. And they also have a lot of resources for friends and other concerned folks who might want to learn more about how to support a survivor or how to identify the aspects of abuse or the indicators of abuse.

00:08:34:19 - 00:08:55:19

Jaelon:

Yes, ma'am. Mm hmm. And what are some common misconceptions about domestic violence and how do these misconceptions affect survivors?

Rachel:

That's such a great question. There are a lot of myths or just misunderstandings about domestic violence that we talk about in our intimate partner violence class here in the School of Social Work,

00:08:55:19 - 00:09:05:15

Rachel:

One that really began in the foundations of our movement, the anti-violence movement, is the idea of a universal survivor.

00:09:05:17 - 00:09:40:17

Rachel:

The idea that survivors have - that it is true that survivors can be anyone, so anyone can experience intimate partner violence. Anyone can perpetrate intimate partner violence. But in the message that we were trying to send, that this could be anyone, this could be your friend, this could be your daughter, we created an image in society of a survivor who's a white woman who has maybe some resources, who has access to maybe feeling comfortable calling the police.

00:09:40:17 - 00:10:02:12

Rachel:

If that was a resource they needed, who maybe has access to a lawyer to get divorce support. And we created a system that is designed around that image of a survivor. And that's not to suggest that white women with money can't be survivors. They absolutely can. But what we know is that survivors are much more diverse than that.

00:10:02:14 - 00:10:27:06

Rachel:

In the United States our statistics tell us that women of color are at a much higher risk of experiencing lethal violence in particular. We know that survivors who identify as bi[sexual] have much higher rates of domestic violence than survivors who identify as straight. We know that members of the LGBTQ community not only experience intimate partner violence, but experience specific tactics and has specific barriers that they face.

00:10:27:10 - 00:10:54:20

Rachel:

We know that people who identify as men experience intimate partner violence. So, thinking more critically, not just that anyone can be survivors, but that each survivor needs culturally tailored, specific and really understanding resources that meet their needs and understand that maybe accessing the police isn't the right choice for someone because they've experienced police brutality or their partner has, and they don't want to bring that on their family.

00:10:54:22 - 00:11:30:03

Rachel:

Understand saying that going to a shelter if a shelter is only for women doesn't work for someone who identifies as a man or who identifies as non-binary. And so thinking about much more broadly, how do we create an inclusive service response that, you know, part of what our challenge has been in the last several years. One other myth about domestic violence that I really want to elevate and talk about is the sort of the question that we hear a lot, which is why don't they just leave?

00:11:30:05 - 00:11:56:00

Rachel:

Or the idea that if somebody is choosing to stay in a relationship or is in a relationship long term, the violence can't be that bad. Why would they stay? What we know is that survivors who are experiencing violence in a relationship are making strategic decisions all the time about what is the safest choice for them and their families.

00:11:56:02 - 00:12:16:02

Rachel:

And that safety isn't just necessarily I'm going to protect myself from the next physical violence altercation, but that safety is also I'm going to make sure I have housing. I'm going to make sure I have access to my children. I'm going to make sure I have the money that I need to provide the medication that my child needs to stay alive.

00:12:16:03 - 00:12:42:16

Rachel:

I'm going to make sure that I have access to my mode of transportation so that I can keep going to work, so that I can keep having resources. I'm going to make sure I have access to co-parenting support. These are all aspects of relationships that make the question, "Why don't you just leave?" much, much more complicated. And in fact, something else that we know is that often that point of separation of leaving is the most dangerous time for survivors.

00:12:42:17 - 00:13:06:23

Rachel:

So, the Texas Council on Family Violence just published their 2022 Honoring Texas Victims Report. And that is a document they put out every year that demonstrates and tells the stories of everyone who lost their lives to intimate partner violence in the previous year in the state of Texas. And this year, a couple of themes were really heartbreaking and strong.

00:13:07:01 - 00:13:31:13

Rachel:

One was that 50% of survivors were at that I'm choosing to leave stage. And so when we say you need to leave, we're saying you need to put yourself in danger potentially. And so we have to ask much more careful questions. We have to think more critically about it than that. The other themes that honoring Texas victims highlighted are that the survivors ranged in age from 13 to upwards of 60 who were who were killed by their partners.

00:13:31:15 - 00:13:53:23

Rachel:

So this is something this is a young person's issue and all the way through the life course. And we saw that the survivors in this year's report were mostly murdered by weapons, by guns. And so that's an issue that we have to keep asking, "how do we address this issue?" Because it's something that's really facing Texas survivors head on right now.

00:13:54:01 - 00:14:15:06

Jaelon:

Yes, ma'am. And every story is different, just like you said. And these stories can raise awareness.

Rachel:

Absolutely.

Jaelon:

Could you share an example of a survivor's story and how it impacted the community's understanding on domestic violence?

Rachel:

Sure. So this is a story that I have permission to share.

00:14:15:06 - 00:14:21:02

Rachel:

From a Survivor I worked with a long time ago when I was an economic advocate.

00:14:21:03 - 00:14:52:21

Rachel:

And she's someone who is incredibly brave. And her story highlights this idea that survivors are always safety planning and that it's our job as advocates not to tell someone how to address their situation, but to point out the amazing things they're already doing and come alongside them and join them in that process. So this survivor had a very coercively controlling partner, especially around things like money and things like keys to the house.

00:14:52:23 - 00:15:15:11

Rachel:

So she would generally be locked out of the house if they were worried if her partner was going to work and she too had a job and she wanted to leave the relationship. But they had kids and those kids have needs and she had needs, and she wanted to make sure that she was making choices that would ensure her safety and her children's safety.

00:15:15:11 - 00:15:37:17

Rachel:

So she didn't want to do anything without planning ahead. And she found out one day that she was going to get a raise at work. And she had the quick thinking and the guts and the foresight to go to H.R., say, hey, here's my situation, which is a very brave thing to do because domestic violence is very stigmatized.

00:15:37:19 - 00:16:01:02

Rachel:

But here's my situation. Could you send a letter to me in my name to my house saying that my health insurance is going to go up by the exact amount each month that my raise was so that I can show my partner so that there are no questions about, you know, what's going on with my money. Hmm. And then can we take this exact amount, and can we put it in a separate fund?

00:16:01:07 - 00:16:26:20

Rachel:

Mm hmm. And so she went through this procedure with her H.R. department, and she started saving money every month so that she would have an emergency fund for when she was ready to leave. She also one of the things she knew about her partner, because as we tell our students in the IPV class, survivors are the experts on their situation, their particular relationship.

00:16:26:22 - 00:16:42:18

Rachel:

She knew her partner was never going to take the trash out and was never going to check the trash cans. Mm hmm. And so the trash cans in this particular place, you put the trash cans by the side of your house and then you take your trash cans out and you put them at the, you know, the street once a week for the trash people to come pick up.

00:16:42:20 - 00:17:11:23

Rachel:

She started saving documents, spare sets of keys to the house, clothes for the kids, medicine, anything she was going to need. Slowly collecting them as she could get them safely and putting them not in the trash can, I mean, in the trash can. But there's like the liner and then underneath the liner between the bottom of the trashcan and the liner, she put another bag and she kept collecting things there so that when she was ready to leave, she had the materials she needed, she had the money saved, and she could do it all at once in a way that was safe for her.

00:17:12:01 - 00:17:42:13

Rachel:

I think that really illustrates the way that survivors are always safety planning and that we as advocates, number one job is to support and come alongside that kind of amazing work that survivors are already doing.

Jaelon:

And that's honestly amazing how you gather up so much knowledge about your situation and you can be able to defend yourself and just know what to do in certain situations.

00:17:42:14 - 00:18:04:20

Jaelon:

I know a lot of people will listen to these stories and, you know, want to get involved. How can you know, students get involved, especially with just being on a college campus, not even just students, anybody? How can students get involved here and how can anybody get involved just as a whole?

Rachel:

That's wonderful. There are a lot of opportunities.

00:18:04:20 - 00:18:31:03

Rachel:

So programs in your communities often put out wish lists for materials that they need to support survivors coming into shelter or into transitional housing for things to, you know, for kids who are staying in shelter. We're coming up to the holiday season. There are often toy drives for kids who are going to be spending the holidays in shelters that they have new toys and a great holiday season.

00:18:31:05 - 00:19:05:07

Rachel:

Those are all wonderful ways to get involved. On our campus, we have the Relationship Violence and Sexual Assault Prevention program that have opportunities to get support. If students need support free and confidentially, that have opportunities to participate in things like arts and discussion groups and support groups. And we also, in our school of social work have a new IPV interest group, a student organization that we're launching, working on, launching, and will be even more launched in the spring.

00:19:05:13 - 00:19:38:09

Rachel:

And we also have our Survivor Link AmeriCorps cohort, which is a group of students in the School of Social work who receive stipends as part of their practicum experiences to do additional education and training the community about intimate partner violence. And students are welcome to reach out to me with questions about that. I'm the faculty coordinator. And so each year we have a new group of about six students who get stipends and also get additional training and who share what they're learning back with the community so that we can continue to do this awareness raising work.

00:19:38:10 - 00:20:00:03

Jaelon:

Okay. And you said you all are starting up a group?

Rachel:

We're starting a new student group. Well, it was started in the spring, last spring of about intimate partner violence. And we're continuing to work on getting it launched and identifying, you know, putting together a charter and all that kind of thing. But that will really be about building awareness here within the school of Social Work and across the campus at UTA.

00:20:00:05 - 00:20:46:23

Jaelon:

That sounds good. What are some of the key takeaways or messages you hope listeners will take away from our discussion about domestic violence awareness?

Rachel:

First, thank you for listening and for caring. I think it's really important. First, always try to just listen, validate, believe what people are telling you. When I teach the IPV class, you know, if my students walk away with three pieces of knowledge, one of the ones that I want them to think about and focus on is the idea that when a survivor discloses their experience to you, your number one goal and walking away from that interaction is that they feel comfortable continuing to walk on this journey with you.

00:20:47:00 - 00:21:10:07

Rachel:

So that means believing them, being open, expressing empathy and being willing to say, I don't know if I don't know, know that you have resources available to you. So even if you're not sure what to do, say, can we call the hotline together? Or can we chat into a chat or text hotline together? I'll be here with you.

00:21:10:09 - 00:21:37:10

Rachel:

I'm going to walk it alongside you. And then finally learn about the resources in your community so you know where to go when you know, if you're training to be a social worker, you're going to come across this whether you're going into child welfare or health or aging, social work or social policy, you're going to be interacting with people who have experience, intimate partner violence, that it's going to be a factor in the social issues that you care about.

00:21:37:12 - 00:21:46:12

Rachel:

And so know who the experts are, know who the specialty community agencies are in your community, and know that you can reach out to them for support when you need it.

00:21:46:12 - 00:22:08:04

Jaelon:

If you want to learn more about social work and what we do, please visit our website, or you can follow our social medias. And if you or anyone you know is experiencing domestic violence, there are resources you can utilize, such as the Domestic Violence hotline, which you can call at 800.799.7233. And they're available 24/7, like Dr. Voth Schrag said.

00:22:08:06 - 00:22:23:20

Jaelon:

Or if you are on campus, we have the RVSP and you can reach them at 817.272.3947 or go to their website. I'm your host Jalen Jackson and this has been called our conversations with Dr. Voth Schrag.

00:22:23:20 - 00:22:31:00

00:22:31:09 - 00:22:34:04