

Holly Chavez Shelter Director

Keeping programs in step with reality is a minute-to-minute job. Most of a victim's thoughts become very distorted. They're so focused on trying to be safe, they have to be reminded daily that there is hope and they are safe and they need to take it one day at a time and there are people who can help them.

It is very hard for them to let people help them, they're so used to going it alone. That's a big step, to be able to have them open up and say, "OK, I need this." Once they do that, we can help.

When clients first get here, they're in total denial. They might have two black eyes and a fat lip and a broken arm, but they're in denial. "He didn't mean it, he's a good guy. I love him."

I've had clients sit while I interview them and they're crying. I ask what the tears are about. And here she is with two broken arms, the black eyes. And what they say is "I'm really upset because my boyfriend's in custody and he's going to prison and it's all because of me." Their thoughts are distorted, they don't think much about themselves. If they have an identity, they don't think very highly of themselves. Most of the time, they don't even have an identity, they're so confused and they've been so controlled.

You can't change over night. That's why it takes a lot of support and feedback from others who have been through it, and it takes education.

After they get through the denial, they get a sense of hope. When they start understanding what they're learning, they feel better about themselves and they give feedback, such as "I can't believe I stayed that long," or "I can't believe I didn't realize that by not letting me out of the house for two years he was controlling me."

Once they start feeling good about themselves, their whole affect changes and they have hope. It's a wrap-around effect. They start feeling better and they start dealing with their children better and the children are getting healthier, they're no longer throwing tantrums. The whole family dynamics are changing.

So then they start feeling really good about themselves. And THEN we go to, "I'm not good enough to feel this good about myself." So they start backsliding and they may start sabotaging themselves. They don't know it. We have to point this out. They are doing so well and getting so much positive feedback, they're uncomfortable with it. So they start doing stuff around here to take the focus off of what they're doing. They might get in an argument with another client or they might say to the shelter director, "You don't know what you're doing. This place is horrible, I hate it here, I should never have come here."

That's very typical. So when we see those signs, we know they're sabotaging, let's get this out in the open and confront it. It takes them a while to understand that concept. If they get through that OK, then they might be ready for the next level, which would be venturing out into the world.

When the children first come in, they exhibit a tremendous amount of anger. They may have been neglected to the point of not having food, not having a bed to sleep in, not receiving any empathy, any compassion. All they're used to is loud fighting and living in really horrible conditions and feeling very unsafe.

When they get here and walk through those doors, they are angry and scared. They're so fearful. That equals acting out. So they're usually screaming a lot, throwing tantrums, they don't sleep, eat. Mom just doesn't know what to do with them, and that's for several reasons. Mom hasn't dealt with them in six months, seven months because she has been so focused on trying



to protect herself and protect them that all that there is no parenting.

After a while when they begin to feel a little more comfortable and know that they might be a little safer than they were, then they're eating and they have a bed, their anger starts to decrease a little bit. That's when we can start to work with them.

The development center does wonderful things with them in groups, in expressing their feelings, if they feel safe, what's going on. They begin to open up a little bit and they begin to smile and actually enjoy being a child. At the same time that they're learning, mom's learning. They're doing it at different levels, but at the same time.

I saw a 7-year-old hit his mom like daddy used to hit mom. And, of course, where did he learn that. I have seen 7-year-olds direct their moms like their abusers used to direct them. So immediately that has to be pointed out to Mom, because Mom needs to wake up. So we do a lot of reflection of behavior and model what they need to do. That's tough, because these kids are in control of Mom. In terms of the cycle of violence, it is very evident that it is affecting the children. That's why we have to start when they're young and educate.

We do a lot of art therapy. When the children are able to release a lot of their anger and feelings in a safe way, it kind of cleans their soul. They don't act out as much. They can talk to Mom and have a conversation. The change in their relationship is phenomenal.

The day-to-day living here at Casa de Paz is very structured. They have a schedule. They have to be up by 7 and in bed by 11. And in between those times, they have to cook the three meals, they have to make sure their rooms are clean. They all have different chores around the shelter, plus they have to go to groups, go to the doctor, go to the training center, go to the child development center. So their time is very, very structured. And in between that, they see their therapist, their case managers and hopefully all that means moving on and getting healthy.

This is a beautiful place. The staff takes pride in working here and the clients should take pride in staying here. We don't ask the clients to do anything we wouldn't do. We're all professionals and we all clean the toilets here. Its teamwork. It's not us against them. We're all here to help each other. We try to make it as real as possible.

To me personally, I'm really glad that I have the chance to help facilitate a positive outcome for someone. To me, that means a positive outcome for the community. I think a healthy community is the main goal for all of us.