

Domestic Violence: It's everyone's problem...

BY KATEY BREEN
For the Record

Micah's Place, Inc., a private not-for-profit agency, provides services to adults and their children in Nassau County who are dealing with the effects of domestic violence. The mission of Micah's Place is "Crisis to confidence... more than a shelter."

The organization's purpose is to provide intervention and prevention programs to assist the victims of domestic violence regardless of race, religion, color, national origin, gender, age, mental or physical disability, sexual orientation, citizenship, immigration status, marital status or language spoken, and to educate the community regarding domestic and sexual violence.

In December 1999, a group of concerned Nassau County citizens realized the great need for a place of safety for the victims of domestic violence. The shelter has experienced significant growth since its incorporation in October 2000.

With the support provided by an incredible volunteer base of over 300, Micah's Place has launched a number of new programs. In June 2003, Micah's Place began offering information, referral and outreach services via a 24-hour toll-free hotline. In December 2003, the organization opened a 16-bed emergency shelter for victims of domestic violence. In addition, an in-shelter youth program, outreach advocacy and crisis counseling, court advocacy, and outreach support groups for adults and children were established.

Micah's Place is presently staffed by 14 individuals — eight full-time and six part-time.

Program descriptions

- **Emergency shelter:** Temporary emergency, confidential shelter to domestic and sexual violence victims and their dependents. The 16-bed facility is staffed 24 hours per day, seven days a week by Micah's Place staff and trained volunteers.

- **24-hour hotline:** The hotline provides counseling, information and referrals by telephone, available 24 hours a day. There is a local number, as well as the statewide 800 number, which is advertised for anyone wishing information or assistance with the effects of domestic violence.

- **Volunteer program:** A part-time staff member coordinates the volunteer program, which recruits, trains, and provides in-service training to members of the community who wish to volunteer to assist with client services. Additional volunteers help with administrative tasks. Training classes are scheduled throughout the year. There are literally hundreds of volunteers who staff the hotline, make community presentations and assist with fund raising and special events. In addition, the board of directors and an advisory board are composed of volunteers.

- **Outreach services:** To better provide services to victims in the rural areas, Micah's Place maintains three outreach offices, in Fernandina Beach, Yulee and Callahan. The Callahan office is staffed with a full-time rural outreach advocate and is located in the Nassau County Sheriff's substation. Outreach staff members receive referrals from law enforcement, the Department of Children and Families, and other agencies. They discuss options with all potential participants and encourage them to use the shelter when appropriate, attend support group meetings, or schedule one-on-one sessions when needed. Safety planning is also a top priority. They provide assistance with court appointments, with filling out restraining orders, or with other situations as required. In addition, they arrange for transportation for participants to and/or from the shelter.

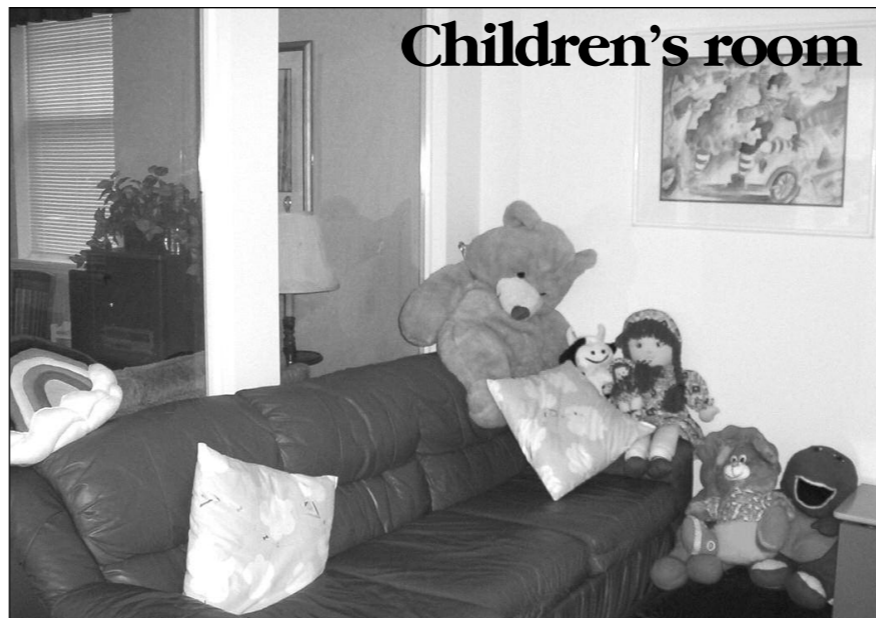
- **Support groups:** Active support groups are now offered in Yulee and Callahan as well as in-shelter support groups. Training and groups are offered in a variety of areas, as well as assistance with practical issues.

- **Community education:** Trained staff and volunteers present community education to the public.

- **Professional training:** Trained staff provides professional training to law enforcement, judicial agencies, mental health professionals and other professionals and paraprofessionals throughout the community.

- **Counseling:** Staff provides information on the dynamics of domestic violence and engages in supportive activities. Counseling is provided by telephone and in person.

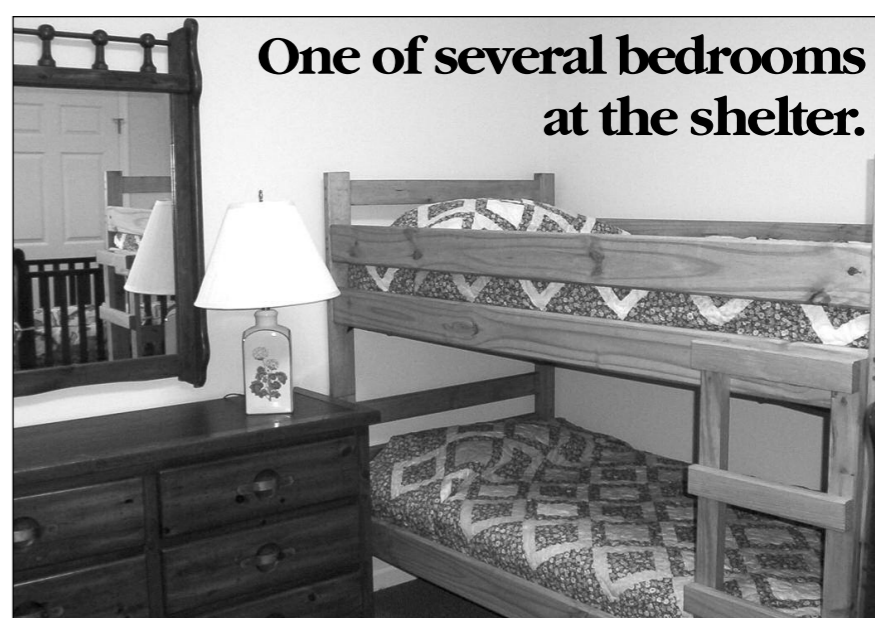
- **Service management:** Service management is provided by Micah's Place staff and provides each participant a needs assessment, the development of a service and safety plan and the coordination of appropriate services and follow-up.



Children's room



Living room



One of several bedrooms at the shelter.



Kitchen

- **Transportation:** Travel for residents to or from the shelter, to community providers or to conduct any business necessary, is provided.

- **Cell phone distribution:** Used cell phones are distributed to victims to be used in case of emergency.

In the past 11 months, Micah's Place has provided 1,689 persons with telephone counseling to victims of domestic violence; 2,669 days of shelter to victims; 2,418 hours of counseling; 856 safety plans by phone; and answered 925 crisis hotline calls.

Children's and youth services

The full-time youth program manager and part-time youth program advocate provide youth in shelter with case management and safety planning, and assist them with daily activities. Each child in shelter learns about protecting themselves from domestic violence and child abuse along with conflict resolution skills to be used on a peer level. Fostering the family bond between the non-offending parent and child is our ultimate goal. This is achieved through parent support groups and one-on-one sessions with the parent. The manager designs, provides and ensures that parenting skills are modeled for parents.

It is also the responsibility of the manager to plan activities for the children while their parent(s) attends support group. This support group includes such topics as safety planning, domestic violence/child abuse, and conflict resolution. This group is also intended to give positive role-model reinforcement to children who have been victims of domestic violence.

The manager provides children in the shelter with child assessments, case management, assists them with daily activities and provides the child and/or parent with appropriate referrals. This service also includes screening for child abuse, neglect and risk.

Micah's Place has implemented a dating violence education program in Nassau County. This program is offered in all Nassau County high schools and educates young people about the dangers of dating violence, teaches the skills necessary to avoid becoming either victims or offenders and provides resources and referrals to help.

Each year, the youth program offers a two-day dating violence awareness program to all of the life management skills classes at each of our high schools. The purpose is to teach the dangers of dating violence to ninth graders in Nassau County. We are confident that by educating students about these matters, they will be empowered to make better decisions in selecting dating partners and help their friends who may be in need.

There is a focus on defining dating violence, early warning signs and the characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships. Other issues included are personal safety, helping friends in dating violence situations, and potential reasons why people often stay in unhealthy relationships. The students are encouraged to be actively involved with activities and to ask questions.

At the end of the presentation, students are asked to write down any further questions they may have about dating violence or, if they have no questions, to write any question, such as "what is your favorite football team?" This has been a very effective method to answer questions some may feel uncomfortable asking. Sadly, this also has helped to expose how often our students find themselves or somebody close to them in an unhealthy relationship.

In April, Superintendent of Schools Dr. John Ruis approved the newly created Micah's Place middle school curriculum. Micah's Place Youth Program Manager Amanda Rolf will partner with Andreu Powell, director of intervention and prevention for the Nassau County School Board, to implement this program in the schools.

"While presenting our dating violence awareness curriculum to freshman students throughout Nassau County, I realized that the program was serving as an intervention effort rather than the originally intended prevention curriculum," Rolf said. "So we targeted sixth graders with a middle school program to prepare them for the DVAC by the time they are freshmen."

Although, the middle school and high school curriculum objectives and themes are very similar, they do not duplicate each other. The middle school curriculum will cover two class periods and examine the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships, bullying, ways to identify unhealthy relationships, effects of an unhealthy relationship, safety and consequences to abusive behavior. Relationships discussed will include friends, family members or boyfriends or girlfriends.

The curriculum is as interactive as possible with many different types of media and activities to capture and hold students' attention. Students will participate in a skit which outlines a story involving different aspects of unhealthy relationships.

Legal advocacy

During the fiscal year, Micah's Place assists women with filing injunctions for protection. Staff members provided legal advocacy for women in the following areas: filling out applications for injunctions for protection; filing the applications; accompanying women to court to obtain permanent injunctions; aiding women in filling out victim compensation forms for financial restitution; acting as liaisons between state attorneys' offices, legal aid or private attorneys; and accompanying participants to hearing for civil/criminal matters connected to the domestic violence incident.

Micah's Place staff has been tenacious and persistent in advocating for the clients in order to ensure they receive the best legal representation available. To help the staff accomplish the goal of good legal representation and to further help accommodate our participants' legal needs, we were able, through an interagency agreement, to continue getting legal help for our participants for injunctions and civil actions with

Jacksonville area legal aid.

Underserved populations

The underserved populations being targeted for services include elderly, physically challenged, mentally challenged, Latino/Hispanic, rural, persons of color, the lesbian/gay/bisexual/transsexual/transgender population and Asian/Pacific Islander.

Micah's Place has made special efforts to reach out to the rural community. We have a full-time rural outreach advocate who specifically serves this population through an office in Callahan, which lies in the heart of rural Nassau County. Micah's Place has a core of volunteers who are recruited from various ethnic groups, such as African-American, Latino/Hispanic, and Asian who are available to speak with residents as needed.

The shelter has compiled a list of volunteers in the community who are fluent in different languages and may be called upon as interpreters if necessary. In addition, staff members have attended several workshops where cultural diversity issues have been presented. The Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence also have interpretative services available via the telephone, to cover any language we may be unprepared to support, and Micah's Place has representatives who collaborate with the Women of Color Caucus, and the

Hispanic Caucus supported by the FCADV.

Funding

As a non-profit, Micah's Place is financially supported by the individuals and businesses in the community, through grants and events. Micah's Place also has a cell phone fund raising project.

We have the cooperation of individuals and businesses throughout the community who collect old cell phones for us.

We give some to victims for use in an emergency, and the others are sent to a recycling company that sends us a monetary return.

Micah's Place Auxiliary is a volunteer auxiliary that was formed to assist in fundraising and community education efforts throughout our community. Micah's Place Auxiliary raises money through several efforts. Their annual Amelia Island Home and Garden Tour is growing on a yearly basis and is making itself known throughout the state and region as a spectacular event.

October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month and Micah's Place has scheduled two events. October 5 will be the annual Peace Breakfast at the Golf Club of Amelia Island, and October 13, the annual Super Wal-Mart Steakout.

The First Presbyterian Church will host a prayer vigil during the month.

Where To Get Help...

- 24 Hour Crisis Hotline: 1-800-500-1119 or 225-9979
- Go online for more information: Micah's Place at www.micahsplace.org; National Coalition Against Domestic Violence at www.ncadv.org; and Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence at www.fcadv.org.

Warning Signs For Potentially Abusive Relationships

- Abuse siblings, other family members, children or pets.
- Put down people, including your family and friends, or call them names excessively.
- Are always angry at someone or something.
- Try to isolate you and control who you see or where you go.
- Nag you or force you to be sexual when you don't want to.
- Cheat on you or have lots of partners.
- Are physically rough with you (push, shove, pull, yank, squeeze, restrain).
- Take your money or take advantage of you in other ways.
- Accuse you of flirting or "coming on" to others or accuse you of cheating on them.
- Don't listen to you or show interest in your opinions or feelings.
- Ignore you, give you the silent treatment or hang up on you.
- Lie to you, don't show up for dates, maybe even disappear for days.
- "Check out" or make lewd comments about others in your presence.
- Blame all arguments and problems on you.
- Tell you how to dress or act.
- Threaten suicide if you break up with them, or tell you that they cannot live without you.
- Experience extreme mood swings.
- Tell you to shut up or tell you you're dumb, stupid, fat or call you some other name.
- Compare you to former partners or excessively bad mouth former partners.
- Abuse alcohol or other drugs.
- Have a history of trouble with the law, get into fights, or break and destroy property.
- Don't work or go to school.
- You feel afraid to break up with them.
- You feel tied down, feel like you have to check-in.
- You feel afraid to make decisions or bring up certain subjects; the other person might get mad.
- You tell yourself that if you just try harder and love your partner enough, everything will be fine.
- You find yourself crying a lot, being depressed or unhappy.
- You find yourself worrying and obsessing about how to please your partner and keep them happy.
- You find the physical or emotional abuse getting worse over time.

The Nassau County Record, the Nassau County Domestic Violence Task Force and Micah's Place have partnered together to bring information and resources to local residents about domestic violence and where to go for help. For information on Micah's Place and its services, call 491-6364. The task force meets on the fourth Monday of each month at the Callahan Lions Club at 6 p.m.