

16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence

Speaking out for change

WHEN SERVITUDE TURNED INTO VIOLENCE, A SHEPPARTON WOMAN KNEW SHE HAD TO ACT

By Charmayne Allison

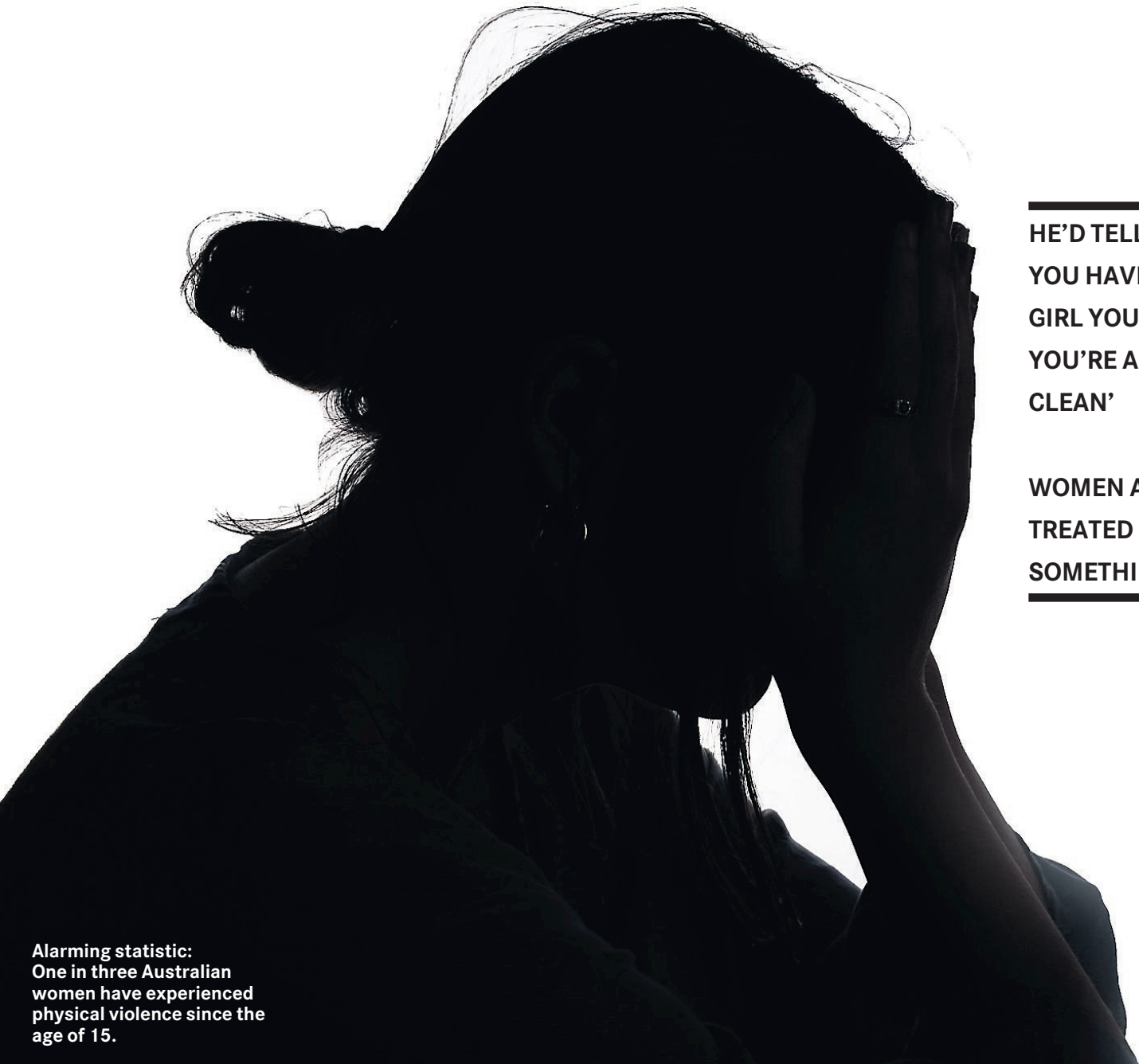
Azra* asked not to cook breakfast that morning. It was the first time she had refused in her 19 years. Waking with her period, the pain too excruciating to bear, she had requested her brothers cook instead. What came next is still painful to recall. But, sadly, it wasn't unexpected. Her older brother started screaming and her father flew into a rage, dragging her across the floor and beating her until her clothes were torn, skin bruised. But the humiliation wasn't complete. Her phone was then confiscated and Azra was locked in the house — she couldn't drive anywhere, leave alone, contact anyone. It was a final act of power, an ultimate stripping of any freedoms she had left. Growing up in a culturally conservative household, Azra always knew her place — to cook and clean and submit to the demands of the men in her family. It was something her older brother had latched on to and enforced daily, relishing the control he had been granted over his little sister.

Meanwhile, her mother stood by, silenced by a system in which women are second-class citizens. But that morning Azra's spark of defiance, which her family had endeavoured to stamp out, caught flame. And she knew she needed to escape. "It was then I realised, 'this is messed up'," Azra recalled. "Women and girls should not be treated like his, like a tool, like something you can use." Born and raised in Shepparton, Azra was just eight years old when her parents divorced. That was also the year she began to grasp the inferior position women and girls held in her family. Thrust into a new role as unofficial mother to her two brothers, Azra was cooking and cleaning whenever she wasn't attending school. Often she would be up past midnight, trying to cram in chores and homework before she went to bed. As the years rolled by, her older brother became increasingly controlling of her, and her mother — even though her mother lived elsewhere. He began dictating how finances were spent and who entered and exited the house, as well as Azra's every movement.

"He kept saying, 'Dad's not home, I need to do this, I'm just trying to help my family'," she said. "But it wasn't for us. Because we'd get nothing in return. "He was given the power, the trust, everything. "He kept saying, 'I'm the man, I do what I want'. "And he'd tell me, 'because you're a girl you have to do this, because you're a girl you have to listen, because you're a girl you need to cook and clean'." This control only intensified as Azra's father began to battle mental illness, including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. "It got to the point my dad was partnering with my brother in controlling us," Azra said. "My brother had everyone in the palm of his hand." Deep down, Azra always believed her family's treatment of women and girls was wrong. But it wasn't until that fateful day in August this year that she decided to break free. "That's when I asked not to make breakfast and got physically abused by my dad," she said. "Then my brother came and took all my devices off me — mind you, I'm 19." With her technology confiscated and every movement watched, it

would be two weeks before Azra finally made contact with the outside world. By this point, a family violence worker who knew Azra had started to suspect something was wrong. "They managed to smuggle a phone to me. From there, we made a safe plan for me to escape," Azra said. It was her older brother's birthday the day police knocked on their door. "They just said, 'we're here to ask about an incident that happened down the street'," Azra recalled. "And then my brother just gave himself up. He took my phone — which he'd confiscated — out of his pocket and said, 'cultural reasons'." "But there's no such thing as cultural reasons for confiscating a phone." The police escorted Azra from the house, and she was taken to a safe place for 10 days. Her intentions were always to return home, as long as her brother promised to leave her alone. But it soon became clear he wouldn't relinquish his power that easily. "He came up with terms and conditions.

Continued on next page



HE'D TELL ME, 'BECAUSE YOU'RE A GIRL YOU HAVE TO DO THIS, BECAUSE YOU'RE A GIRL YOU HAVE TO LISTEN, BECAUSE YOU'RE A GIRL YOU NEED TO COOK AND CLEAN'

WOMEN AND GIRLS SHOULD NOT BE TREATED LIKE HIS, LIKE A TOOL, LIKE SOMETHING YOU CAN USE. — AZRA

Alarming statistic: One in three Australian women have experienced physical violence since the age of 15.

NOVEMBER 25 TO DECEMBER 10

● From previous page

“He said if I came back, he wanted access to all my social media accounts,” Azra said.

“I applied for an intervention order against him — just one that said he had to leave me alone, not touch my belongings and not get anyone to follow me.

“But he went against it.

“That was really shocking, because it wasn’t a lot to ask. It showed he still wanted total control.”

Azra returned home for a nightmarish two days, before fleeing again.

Staying in a refuge for 12 days, she then made her way to the Education First Youth Foyer, which provides accommodation for young Shepparton people unable to live at home.

Since then, Azra has been gradually rebuilding her life.

But her newfound freedom hasn’t come without costs — her relationship with her family has been left in ruins.

Azra called her father after her escape, but he said he



didn’t want to stay in contact.

And he claimed if he ever saw her again, he would kill her.

“When I go around where my father hangs out, I do feel fear,” Azra said.

“And while I know my brother can’t do anything, he would use my father to hurt me. Because then he can just blame it on my dad.”

She has also contacted her

mother since leaving.

“I worry for my mum. I tried saving her but because it’s her kids, she can’t do anything. She has no say — her voice isn’t heard, because she’s female too,” Azra said.

“And the strange thing is, my mum is second-generation Australian. She grew up here, her family grew up here. But they all have the same mentality towards women.”

I WORRY FOR MY MUM. I TRIED SAVING HER BUT BECAUSE IT’S HER KIDS, SHE CAN’T DO ANYTHING. SHE HAS NO SAY — HER VOICE ISN’T HEARD, BECAUSE SHE’S FEMALE — AZRA

While Azra believes some of her family members’ attitudes towards women may have stemmed from their culture, she staunchly denies these views are inherent in the Muslim faith she follows.

“When you actually look into it, controlling women, treating women like slaves — none of that exists in my religion,” she said.

“But sadly, people will twist words in the faith around so men have the power.”

It has taken months for Azra to shrug off the rules and regulations placed on her by her family since day one.

She still questions herself when she heads out with

friends, drives late at night or socialises past her family’s stringent 8 pm curfew.

She still feels a sense of awe when someone cooks a meal for her — a luxury she never experienced at home.

And for the first time in her life, she is beginning to make plans for the future.

Azra recently bought her first car. Soon she hopes to buy her first new phone.

And next year, the 19-year-old plans to start studying nursing and midwifery.

But while healing has begun, Azra knows she still has a long road ahead.

“It will be a while before I can trust again,” she said.

“Because I’ve already experienced bad stuff with

men in my immediate family, I don’t want to experience that in a relationship.

“But I hope further healing will happen. Because I would like to build my own family one day.”

**Not her real name*

● If you, or someone you know, is experiencing domestic or family violence, services are available, including: **1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732)** — a confidential information, counselling and support service; **NSW Domestic Violence Line (1800 656 463)** — a statewide telephone crisis counselling and referral service for women; **Men’s Referral Service (1300 766 491)** provides telephone counselling, information and referrals for men; and **Link2Home (1800 152 152)** can help refer women experiencing domestic violence to crisis accommodation. **If you are in danger or in an emergency, always phone 000.**

Respect is the key

By Charmayne Allison

There’s no silver bullet when it comes to ending violence against women.

But the Shepparton Family Violence Prevention Network believes it all starts with respect.

On Wednesday, November 25, the local network launched a campaign as part of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence.

The message: what does respect mean to you?

“A big part of prevention starts with respect,” network member Detective Sergeant Thelma Bull from the Shepparton Family Violence Investigation Unit said.

“Abuse is not just physical. It can be emotional, financial, spiritual, sexual or psychological.

“But if respect is in any type of relationship, it’s less likely any form of violence will be used against the other person.”

Year-round, the network aims to raise awareness about family violence and its affects on individuals, families and the community in Greater Shepparton.

Throughout the next 16 days, the network will be engaging with 16 different community groups and organisations to highlight this tragic issue.

They will chat to representatives about what respect means to them and snap a picture of them in a selfie frame, which will be shared on social media.

Decals will also feature in locations around town, including the shared pathway network, to provide visual messaging for the

community.

“We want people to think about what respect means to them, particularly in relation to women and children,” Det Sgt Thelma Bull said.

“For instance, respect is treating boys and girls equally — not having that preferential treatment which people often don’t realise they’re doing.

“Respect is sharing the chores, building each other up, celebrating our differences and understanding there is no right way to be a man or a woman.”

Community members or organisations can borrow the network’s 16 Days of Activism selfie frame to help promote the message.

To request the frame, call Greater Shepparton City Council on 5832 9700 and ask for Joel Board.



Prevention is the aim: Greater Shepparton Family Violence Prevention Network members Detective Sergeant Thelma Bull, Maryanne Stivactas, Narelle Best and Joel Board.

The future of local media is in your hands

We need your help to secure the future of local newspapers

Go to localnewsinnovation.org or scan the below QR code to be a part of Australia’s largest survey on local news:



Enter the draw to win one of 10 iPads



This study has Deakin University ethics approval, (ref: HAE-20-141).

16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence

Real change takes time

FAMILY VIOLENCE WORKER IS STRIVING TO EDUCATE COMMUNITIES ABOUT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Violence against women is a serious and widespread issue — and it’s right on our doorstep. From November 25 to December 10, as part of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, *The News* will be shedding light on this heartbreaking epidemic. Because for far too many Shepparton women, it’s something they suffer for more than 16 days — it’s every minute of every day.

By Charmayne Allison

Betul Tuna has sat at more coffee tables than she can remember, campaigning for the freedom, the choice and the lives of countless Shepparton women.

A primary prevention family violence worker with the Ethnic Council of Shepparton, she is striving to educate communities about violence against women.

But she knows it will take time — days, months, years and countless conversations — before real change happens.

“For instance, female genital mutilation is a 4000-year-old practice,” Ms Tuna said.

“So I’m not saying it’s going to end in this century or the next.

“But if we’ve protected even one little girl, there’s a very high chance the rest of the females in that family won’t be subjected to the same abuse.

“And by convincing one member of a family why a certain practice isn’t good, you find they become your next advocate.”

Ms Tuna first started in her role at the ethnic council in 2018.

But she had seen a desperate need for the position long before then.

For years she had been working with multicultural communities around female genital mutilation and early or forced marriage — both of which are considered forms of family violence, and both illegal.

Female genital mutilation involves the partial or total removal of external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons.

The practice has no health benefits for girls and women.

Ms Tuna said this procedure could be carried out for a raft of reasons, with some believing it made women more fit for marriage or less susceptible to rape.

For others, it was just what has always been done through the generations.

“But it’s just another form of violence against women,” Ms Tuna said.

“There are different reasons why people justify gender-based violence. And FGM is no exception.

“FGM is practised on every continent, there is no ethnicity or culture that has a moral high



Here to help: Ethnic Council of Shepparton family violence worker Betul Tuna.

ground. It’s a global issue.”

Ms Tuna has also been working for several years on educating local communities about early and forced marriage, unpacking the concept of consent.

“Many people justify it, saying, ‘she wanted to get married’ or ‘he never said no’,” she said.

“So then I say, if this person were to say no to the marriage, what would the consequences be? That’s when I see a lot of ‘a-ha’ moments.”

The impacts of breaking a marriage arrangement can often stretch beyond the individuals involved, according to Ms Tuna.

“The penalty could be someone’s life. Or it could be a certain amount of money,” she said.

“Or maybe a cousin or niece or sister of one family could be offered to one of the boys in the other family.”

These wide-reaching consequences can also apply for women fleeing violent relationships.

“We hear stories of perpetrators using the family back home as leverage,” she said.

“They threaten that if the woman goes to the police or doesn’t retract a report, they’ll hurt the woman’s family back home.

“And while the woman may have all these rights and protections in Australia, these don’t apply to her family in another country.”

Ms Tuna said representation was crucial in conversations with culturally and linguistically diverse communities about issues like violence against women.

And, as a Turkish Muslim Australian, she brings a level of sincerity to conversations within her community that an “outsider” cannot offer.

“There can be a fear the ‘outsider’

person is trying to assimilate them to the default Anglo-Australian culture,” she said.

“But when you’ve been raised with the ethics and values of that culture, the conversation is much more equal from the start.”

With each community member, Ms Tuna emphasises that violence against women is not inherently part of their culture.

“For example, forced marriage is not an Islamic practice, and it should never have become a Turkish practice, but somehow it has,” she said.

“For families who have migrated to another country, it can be a way to preserve culture and identity. It can also be driven by war, economic crises or being displaced.

“Then it starts becoming a norm because it serves the patriarchy. And the Turkish culture is not exempt from the patriarchy.”

While Ms Tuna said the pressures and trauma of migration could exacerbate family violence, she stressed it was not an excuse.

“Sometimes I’ll put the effort into educating people about family violence,” she said.

“Other times, I’ll just respectfully say, ‘the law is the law, and you can’t do that here’.”

The tight-knit nature of Shepparton’s CALD communities can also present added complexities for women trying to leave abusive homes, with victim survivors often the targets of significant judgment.

“If the community is not aware of what’s going on in the home, they hear of a woman leaving and decide ‘she was the problem’,” Ms Tuna said.

“There’s that automatic judgment that she’s just trying to be ‘like the Australians’.”

Tragically, this can result in

women being shunned from their communities.

For women from refugee or migrant backgrounds, these communities can be their only support system in Australia.

“So they’re not just leaving home, they’re leaving their spiritual and ethnic communities,” Ms Tuna said.

“Then, if service providers aren’t intersectional in their practice, the woman can feel very out of place.”

This disconnection from cultural or religious identity can cause a woman to return to an abusive home.

“This is why service provision without unconscious biases is crucial to maintaining the safety of the person seeking that support,” Ms Tuna said.

“But even if a woman chooses to return to a violent home, we always emphasise that we offer unconditional support.

“There is no shame in going back and wanting to leave again. It is all a part of the process and a clear indicator of the crisis women and children are experiencing.”

In each culture and ethnicity, Ms Tuna said there were some people with progressive attitudes towards gender equality, while others still clung to the “convenient ways that serve the patriarchy”.

But across all communities, there is a prevalent issue of women struggling to see their options.

“That is one of the greatest tragedies,” she said.

“These women came with very little and they’ve worked very hard — they are strong.

“And when they don’t know their options, that’s tragic because that then affects their children,

especially their daughters.

“All women, regardless of the boxes they tick, deserve to live in a safe home free from violence.”

Ms Tuna said the wider community also played a crucial role in ending family violence.

“Call it out. If you can’t do something physically or verbally, acknowledge the person, make eye contact,” she said.

“Let them know you’re seeing, that you hear them and see them, however it is safe to do so.

“By acknowledging her, you’re giving a massive sign of support, and that is powerful.”

SERVICES

● If you, or someone you know, is experiencing domestic or family violence, services are available, including:

1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732) — a confidential information, counselling and support service;

NSW Domestic Violence Line (1800 656 463) — a statewide telephone crisis counselling and referral service for women;

Men’s Referral Service (1300 766 491) provides telephone counselling, information and referrals for men; and

Link2Home (1800 152 152) can help refer women experiencing domestic violence to crisis accommodation.

If you are in danger or in an emergency, always phone 000.

16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence

Past tense, hope for future

UNITING TEAM WORKING WITH PERPETRATORS IN BID TO REDUCE FAMILY VIOLENCE IN SHEPPARTON

Violence against women is a serious and widespread issue — and it's right on our doorstep.

From November 25 to December 10, as part of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, *The News* will be shedding light on this heartbreaking epidemic. Because for far too many Shepparton women, it's something they suffer for more than 16 days — it's every minute of every day. **CHARMAYNE ALLISON reports:**

Looking around the room during a men's behaviour change session, Shane Maskey doesn't just see family violence perpetrators; he sees fathers and sons, brothers and partners.

Men who can never be fully absolved for their pasts or the pain they've caused.

But men who have the potential to change their futures — and the futures of those closest to them.

"Men are leaving these groups with their lives changed. And by default, that means people around them are safer," Mr Maskey said.

"You can isolate a victim survivor or incarcerate a perpetrator, but that doesn't necessarily change the outcomes.

"But if you guide a man on how to have healthy, respectful relationships, that can break the cycle."

A Uniting Family Violence Intervention Program team leader, Mr Maskey has been spearheading the Men's Behaviour Change Program.

Launched in January, his team had to wait until March before receiving enough referrals from court to start group sessions.

But just as they were about to kick off, COVID-19 hit.

Experts warned the pandemic was a perfect storm for family violence, as uncertainty and stress increased, unemployment rose and victims were isolated with their perpetrators.

And for three months, Mr Maskey and his team could only provide one-on-one sessions in person or over the phone.

But after significant advocating by Uniting, they were finally given the okay in June to launch group sessions.

"That allowed us to get some men into the program who had been sitting waiting since January," Mr Maskey said.

"This was a relief, as the evidence shows the longer you wait, the less likely people will engage with the service."

Months on, the program is now running four groups, with eight to 10 members in each from all walks of life — all ages, cultures, religions and socioeconomic levels.

Instead of running a "closed group" model, Uniting is running a rolling model — when one man completes the course, another man steps into his place.



Turning lives around: Uniting Family Violence Intervention Program team leader Shane Maskey, who heads up the Men's Behaviour Change Program. Pictures: Rodney Braithwaite



Attentive: Men's behaviour change practitioner Peter Uzande talks to a client.

"The benefit is that people can get into the groups quicker. They're hopefully waiting no more than a month," Mr Maskey said.

"Plus you've got more experienced participants in the group others can lean on. There's also less collusion and bonding."

Demand for the program has only increased, with Uniting already noticing a growing trend of men aged 18 to 25 entering the program.

Many of these young men were victims of family violence themselves from an early age.

"Then as an adolescent they've learnt those behaviours and started using them against other family members," Mr Maskey said.

"And when they themselves became adults, they used that violence on their partners."

"So this is a key opportunity to mentor and positively engage to hopefully realign their perspective of what's normal when it comes to violence."

When men walk into a session with Mr Maskey, they're often confused about why they're there.

Many struggle to see what they did as violent.

This is where group practitioners work to unpack when control becomes a violent act.

"Because violence isn't just physical or sexual. It can also be emotional, financial, spiritual and technological," Mr Maskey said.

Participants' bewilderment soon



Showing the way: Men's behaviour change practitioner Katie Richter talks to Uniting Family Violence Intervention Program staff.

evolves into anger and frustration, with many defending why they shouldn't be there in the first place.

"Many men say, 'Why aren't there groups for women?' or 'She was giving as good as she got, she was pushing my buttons. She was the one who was out partying. She was the one taking the drugs'," Mr Maskey said.

"So there's always a validation for why they've done something, which is completely natural."

From there, they dive into six weeks of in-depth conversations.

The program walks men through different aspects of a relationship, highlighting the abuse and "non-abuse" facets of each.

"Each negative attribute will have a corresponding positive one — so foundational stuff like respect, trust, accountability and honesty," Mr Maskey said.

"As we work through each aspect, we wait for the men to find something that resonates with them."

Above all, the program emphasises accountability.

"Violence is a choice," Mr Maskey said.

"And that choice is made based on cultural expectations and learnt behaviour."

"A person will choose to punch a wall to end a conversation."

"A person will choose to check the bank balance, to have financial control and monitor a person's activity."

"They will choose to send their children home in soiled nappies when they hand them back to their ex-partner."

"While we never directly accuse a person of being a perpetrator of violence, we focus really hard on them being accountable for what they've done that landed them here."

Mr Maskey said far too often, society pushed all responsibility back on victim survivors when it came to family violence.

And culturally, the weight of responsibility to leave a violent relationship was placed more on victim survivors than perpetrators.

"In fact, it's the responsibility of the person who perpetrated the violence to be accountable and give the women and children space in their own home," Mr Maskey said.

Even after participants complete the behavioural change program, Mr Maskey said Uniting's doors were always open.

So if a man needed support or may have regressed months down

the track, he could still seek support or receive a referral to another Shepparton service.

While Mr Maskey admitted it was still early days, he said Uniting was already seeing encouraging results from the program.

"We know no-one's perfect. I'm not saying they're changed men and they're never going to have an incident or dispute again," he said.

"But we're seeing men identify at least one area where they've become less controlling. Or they're being more engaged and less dismissive in their relationships."

"Evidence shows once a person has acknowledged one thing and changed it, it creates this continuous shift, which can cascade to more change."

While most men entered the program confused, sceptical, even angry, Mr Maskey said many were exiting thankful for what they'd learnt.

"They've said it's actually improved their relationships," he said. "They're now thinking about their partner or ex-partner, recognising the effects on their children and taking steps towards healthy relationships."

● **If you, or someone you know, is experiencing domestic or family violence, services are available, including:**

1800RESPECT (1800 737 732) — a confidential information, counselling and support service; **NSW Domestic Violence Line (1800 656 463)** — a statewide telephone crisis counselling and referral service for women; **Men's Referral Service (1300 766 491)** provides telephone counselling, information and referrals for men; and **Link2Home (1800 152 152)** can help refer women experiencing domestic violence to crisis accommodation. **If you are in danger or in an emergency, always phone 000.**

16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence

From a battered past, to a

GROWING UP IN A HOME SHATTERED BY FAMILY VIOLENCE, GV MUM VOWS TO BREAK THE CYCLE FOR HER KIDS



Inspiration: Sarah* says her five children kept her going after a life filled with abuse.

Violence against women is a serious and widespread issue — and it’s right on our doorstep. From November 25 to December 10, as part of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, *The News* will be shedding light on this heartbreaking epidemic. Because for far too many Shepparton women, it’s something they suffer more than 16 days — it’s every minute of every day.

Charmayne Allison reports.

Sarah* wrapped her arms around her pregnant stomach and whispered a promise to the little life kicking inside her: “The abuse stops with me”. Fifteen years old and scared stiff, the teenager still hadn’t told anyone about the pregnancy she’d managed to keep secret for 7½ months.

But when she was alone, Sarah dreamed up the idyllic childhood she’d provide for the little baby growing in her womb.

And vowed it wouldn’t be anything like the horror of her own.

From a young age, Sarah had been the collateral damage of family violence.

Suffering abuse from a string of violent partners, her mother had poured all resulting hurt and anger onto her daughter.

Using her own child as a literal punching bag, she blamed Sarah for the bad hand life continually dealt her.

By her adolescence, Sarah was desperate for any shred of love she could get.

Love she’d never received from her mother, and which her mother hadn’t received from the men who’d walked in and out of their lives, leaving a trail of trauma in their wake.

“I sat there pregnant with my daughter and promised I wasn’t going to let her grow up in an environment like

that,” Sarah said.

“And I really, genuinely meant it. But somehow, it still happened.”

Now 32, the Goulburn Valley mother-of-five has survived two violent relationships — one physical, the other cruelly psychological.

She’s still not sure if she’ll ever recover, if the “stains on her mind” will ever fade.

But the promise she made as a teenager to her unborn daughter remains.

“It stops with me.”

Born in Melbourne, Sarah had an unstable childhood.

In and out of foster care, the only relief from the constant upheaval was brief, bright moments with her grandmother.

When she was with her mum, they were constantly on the move — sudden and secretive escapes with just enough time to pack a bag of clothes and toys.

Darting between refuges, they sometimes didn’t move back into a house but spent months at a time in derelict caravan parks.

But even a home didn’t bring relief from the instability as Sarah witnessed her mother abused by partner after partner.

“I’d imagine myself being in that picture-perfect family,” she said.

“I’d wish for that stable home.”

By the time she reached

Grade 7, Sarah had attended 16 primary schools.

Every day after school, she dreaded returning to the violence she knew awaited her at home.

She can still remember being eight years old and hiding under a desk to escape another attack from her mother, who had just been abused by her partner.

“She just started kicking me and kicking me, screaming that it was my fault,” Sarah said.

“I didn’t cry. I just stayed quiet and took myself to another world, pretending it wasn’t happening.

“I’d dream of when I was older and could have control over my own life.”

Discovering she was pregnant at 15, Sarah kept it a secret until, 7½ months in, she mustered the courage to tell her mum.

Her mother insisted she terminate the pregnancy, but Sarah refused.

She then demanded Sarah give the baby to her and her partner to raise.

“I refused again. I just knew I wouldn’t let them raise my child,” she said.

Grasping for a way to control her daughter, Sarah’s mother had her admitted to a psychiatric facility.

But it didn’t take long for psychiatrists to detect signs of trauma in their patient.

Sarah was diagnosed with environmental depression, and aided in escaping to a refuge.

Giving birth to a little girl, it would be two years before Sarah reconnected with her mother, allowing her to meet her new grandchild — but the relationship never healed. By then, Sarah was living independently in her own house, finally in control of her own life.

Continued page 11

WHO WILL YOU Nominate?

The Awards recognise, encourage and reward the positive achievements and community contributions of young Victorians aged 29 or under as of 31 December 2020.

Category winners will each receive \$2,000 in prizes, consisting of a \$1,000 Bartercard account from Wheelton Philanthropy and Budget Rent A Car, plus \$500 Qoin and \$500 cash.



NEWS
YOUNG ACHIEVER AWARDS

For more information call 03 9720 1638 or email vicyaa@awardsaustralia.com

NOMINATIONS CLOSE 14 JANUARY 2021.

WE'RE LOOKING FOR OUR NEXT Young Achievers IN THESE CATEGORIES:

 Leadership Award	 Philanthropic Award	 Career Achievement Award
 Group Achievement in the Community Award	 Create Change Award	 Indigenous Achievement Award
 Community Service and Social Impact Award	 Health and Wellbeing Award	 Online Achievement Award
 Inspirational TAFE Student Award	 Tech Visionary Award	 Environmental Sustainability Award
 Small Business Achiever Award		

Don't wait! Nominate today at youngachieverawards.com



 /VICAYAA

 @VicYoungAchiever

 vicyaa@awardsaustralia.com

 #VICYAA

NOVEMBER 25 TO DECEMBER 10

future filled with hopes

From page 10

She had another child before, at 19, she met her partner of the next six years.

He came from a wealthy family and was an incredible father to her two children, as well as the two children they later had together.

He would lavish her with gifts and compliments — from the outside, it was the picture-perfect family she'd always wished for.

But behind closed doors, he was physically abusive.

"He would choke me and hurt me in places people wouldn't see," she said.

"Some really awful things were done to me — he tried to rip my caesarean stitches open.

"I had a haematoma on my head from where he smashed a big Rexona can."

As a mother of four children to two fathers — one of the children with special needs — Sarah was initially afraid to abandon the relationship, unsure where she would go.

But after six years of hidden violence, she finally left.

Looking back, Sarah wishes that ex-partner well despite the relentless abuse she endured at his hand.

"I think it's a case of 'hurt people hurt people'," she said.

"His father had been an alcoholic, and abusive to him.

"We've spoken since and he's apologised, saying, 'It's my fault, I just don't know how to fix myself'.

"It's a bit of a sad story with him."

Traumatised by the relationship she'd escaped, Sarah suffered a mental breakdown after the separation was complete.

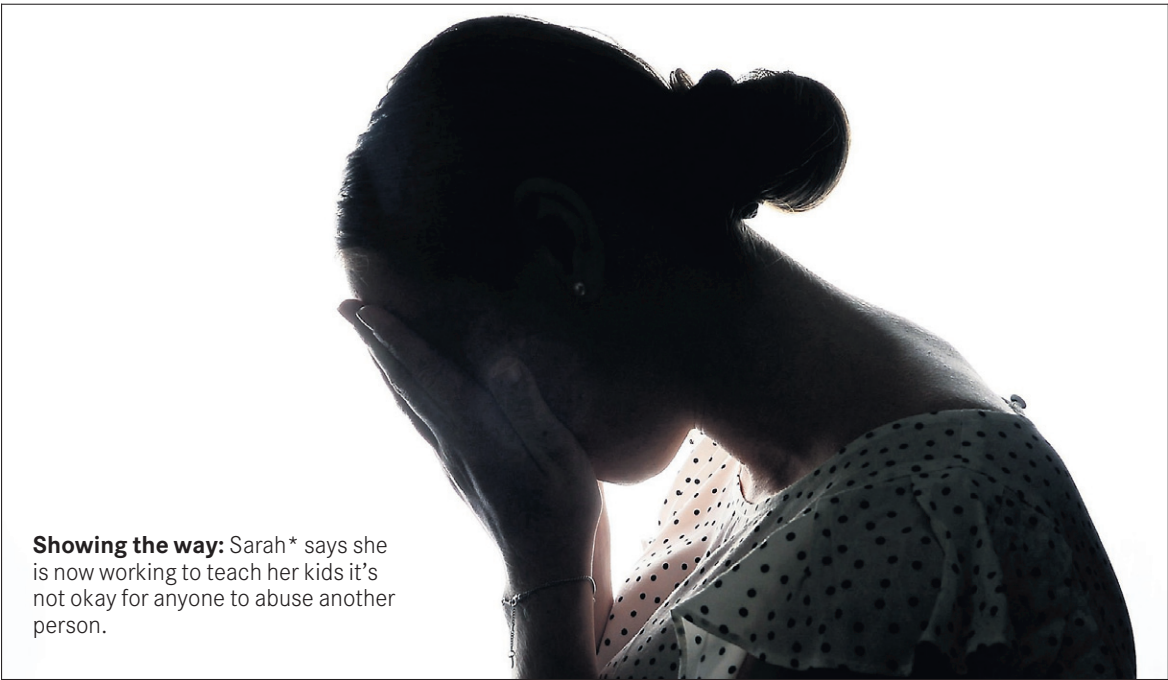
She was sent to a psychiatric facility for three months, and her four children were removed from her care.

For the next two years, she fought to be reunited with her children.

"The hospital said, 'You're not crazy, you've just been beaten black and blue for six years straight'," she said.

"But child protection said, 'It's your fault for not leaving, so we're taking your children'."

Feeling completely alone, Sarah started seeing a man who lived next door.



Showing the way: Sarah* says she is now working to teach her kids it's not okay for anyone to abuse another person.

At first, he was lovely, but when she fell pregnant with his child, things changed.

"He wasn't physical at the start, he only said nasty things. I tried to reason with myself — surely this can't be domestic violence," Sarah said.

In hindsight, she believes the second relationship was much worse than the first.

"I recovered from the first, whereas emotionally, I'm still healing from the second," she said.

With this partner, it was all mind games and gaslighting.

"He made me feel like I was going crazy," she said.

Her partner would leave the house but take all the phone charger cords, TV plugs and turn off the power.

He'd confiscate her car keys and take the air out of her tyres.

He'd call her while she was at work, claiming if she didn't come home immediately, he'd burn the house down or set fire to her car.

Then there were threats that torture Sarah to this day.

"He would blackmail me that he was going to break things that belonged to my grandmother," she said, holding back tears.

"My grandmother was such a big person for me.

"I felt like I was begging constantly, 'Please, please don't do this'."

Sarah was almost nine months pregnant when her partner unclipped her seatbelt while driving 120 km/h down a highway and tried to shove her out of the car.

It was the first physical incident, and an intervention order was made against him.

Living in his house at the time, Sarah had nowhere to go, so she moved into her partner's mum's place.

It wasn't long before he started creeping back in, regaining his stranglehold.

Unable to endure the abuse any longer, she fled to the only place that remained — the streets.

For a week Sarah, heavily pregnant, walked around St Kilda with a suitcase, sleeping in a cemetery.

"During the day, I just kept walking — I was too embarrassed to sit down," she said.

Eventually finding refuge at a homeless shelter, she lost her place at the accommodation when she was admitted to hospital to give birth three weeks later.

She was holding her newborn for the first time when a doctor asked: "What are your plans"?

"I didn't have a plan. I didn't know where to go," Sarah said.

"Child protection came to the hospital and said they were going

to take my baby.

"I begged, 'Please, no. This baby is the only thing I've got'.

"This was before the government got involved and realised this was such a big issue.

"It's like women were shamed for this."

With nowhere else to go, Sarah returned to her partner's mum's house — straight back into her tormentor's clutches.

But in a desperate snatch at independence, Sarah started working around the clock until she'd saved enough to rent a house of her own.

And finally, after two years out of her care, Sarah's children were returned to her.

But she still wasn't free — her new home was right next door to her partner's mum's house, and her partner soon weaselled his way back in.

She felt helpless once again — until she found out he'd been sexually inappropriate to her eldest daughter.

"He'd been sending her inappropriate texts," Sarah said.

"I had this surge of strength and called him, saying, 'You need to leave before I get to the house because I can't tell you what I'm going to do if you're there'."

He was gone by the time she returned home.

But following the breakup, the stalking, harassing and blackmailing only worsened.

"He'd call me, begging, 'Let's kill the kids then kill ourselves so we can all be together again'," she said.

"I was so worried he would kill us, that we had to flee."

While shame silenced her throughout the years, Sarah reached out for family violence support for the first time after her second breakup.

And two years on, she's slowly working through the trauma.

"As much as I tried not to make the same mistakes as my mother, I still did," she said.

"I don't think I was ever given any love. So I looked for it in the wrong places.

"At the first sign of someone being nice to me I'd think, 'That's love'. But it wasn't.

"I'm now working to teach my kids, it's not okay for anyone to abuse another person."

Sarah said her children kept her going and brought her hope as healing continued its long, slow course.

"I just know I have to keep doing the best I can do," she said.

"I've tried really hard to be a good mum. I know I'm a better mum than what my mum was, and that's my drive.

"Things may not be perfect. But I show and tell my children every day how much I love them."

***Not her real name.**

● If you, or someone you know, is experiencing domestic or family violence, services are available, including:
1800RESPECT (1800 737 732) — a confidential information, counselling and support service;
NSW Domestic Violence Line (1800 656 463) — a statewide telephone crisis counselling and referral service for women;
Men's Referral Service (1300 766 491) provides telephone counselling, information and referrals for men; and
Link2Home (1800 152 152) can help refer women experiencing domestic violence to crisis accommodation.
If you are in danger or in an emergency, always phone 000.

DO YOU MIND IF I ASK?

with Charmayne Allison

Honest conversations about physical and mental health

ONLINE TODAY

- sheppnews.com.au/podcasts/2020/09/10/1591363/do-you-mind-if-i-ask-peita-and-madi
- sheppnews.com.au/podcasts/2020/09/10/1591299/do-you-mind-if-i-ask-jacob
- sheppnews.com.au/podcasts/2020/09/10/1591270/do-you-mind-if-i-ask-brittany-and-hayley

