



Women, Homelessness and Domestic Violence
By Linda A. Osmundson*

Estella** came into the CASA (Community Action Stops Abuse) shelter looking a little worked over. Her hair was matted and her clothing was not very clean. She clutched her meager belongings to her in a garbage bag like many battered women. Looking into her eyes, we could tell she had lived a harder life than some of us. Her skin was leathery and tan and she had visible scars on her arms and legs and some open lesions. She told the CASA advocate that she was hungry in her gravelly voice and we heated a bowl of spaghetti left over from last night's dinner in the refrigerator that she gulped down quickly and asked for more. Her eyes darted around the room as she ate.

She was younger than she looked, we discovered, when we completed the ubiquitous paperwork for her intake. She had been living here and there on the streets and had no permanent address or any family in the area whose names she could give us for an emergency contact. When we asked her when she had last lived in a real house she vaguely answered, "...a year or two."

When we asked her to tell us why she had called the CASA hotline (727-895-4912 or 1-800-500-1119) at 4 AM, she sighed and said, "You are the place that takes in those battered women, aren't you?" Then she launched into the story of her life. Like most battered women who end up homeless, she had lived a life filled with violence since childhood when her parents beat her with a belt and left her alone without food for whole days. Estella got pregnant as a teenager and her parents put her out of their home and wouldn't let her come back even though she lost the baby. She bounced in and out of relationships with men who seemed nice at first but then "turned mean," as she described it. She never finished high school. She described being viciously raped by a man she'd been staying with and thought was nice at first. But, when the police were called, she said they looked at her funny and started asking her questions like did she let him into the house so she just clammed up and told them that she would be fine until they left in frustration.

Eventually Estella became a permanent street person. At least street people didn't ask questions and there was a sort of order about the streets that worked for her. She felt free, but always leery of the men who came in and out of her life, leaving their physical and emotional scars. The law of the streets for Estella and most women like her was to find a man to hang out with who became her "protector" from all of the other men. It was sort of an unwritten contract that he could do what he wanted with her and in return he would keep other men away.

When Estella tired of this lifestyle, she would retreat to a homeless shelter but they never listened to her or made her feel safe or understood the violence that had punctuated of her life nearly forever. Sometimes she called a battered woman's shelter

but they usually didn't admit her when they found out that she had been homeless. For her, homelessness was just more violence, more sleepless nights and exhausted days.

Women who are homeless are nearly all, like Estella, victims of sexual and physical violence. The violence of child abuse, rape and domestic violence frame their lives and make them feel hopeless. Many domestic violence centers refuse to shelter homeless women because they are not in immediate danger from their last abuser who is in jail or some other such "safe" location so she is not in eminent danger according to them! At CASA the staff is trained to understand that homelessness and violence go hand in hand for women. Living on the streets is not very safe for men and completely unsafe for women. Like Estella, women must make alliances with men for a kind of protection. Many women turn to alcohol or drugs to self-medicate away the pain and fear that are their constant companions. While at CASA women can talk to advocates that have a special understanding of the connections between abuse, violence and addictions since some CASA staff have had the same experience.

Estella met other women at the shelter who sounded like they were involved with the same partners that treated Estella so badly. In support groups they laughed together at their similar experiences and they cried together, too. Estella learned that CASA offered free support groups around the community during the day and in the evenings too that she could attend every week or whenever she felt down. CASA even offered support groups for women in jail and substance abuse treatment programs.

Estella set some goals for herself and began to feel a little better and safer each day. It was good to have a shower every day. She even went shopping for new clothes at CASA Collection Thrift Shoppe using a gift certificate that an advocate had given her. She helped with chores and cooked at the shelter some nights and began to relax more and feel normal. Some of the women celebrated successful applications for injunctions for protection with the help of a volunteer advocate. They were scared to stand up and talk to a judge in front of others but it felt empowering too when the judge awarded a permanent injunction.

Then there were the children. Estella found some of them a little annoying because they were always underfoot but she liked holding the babies sometimes. She also appreciated being in the room on the third floor where there were only women. She even found a couple of the books in the library that were easy to read. Estella began to feel hopeful. She could not forget her past but now she felt like there could be a future that might have light.

Figuring out where she would live after she left the shelter was a problem. Estella had never really kept a job very long. She didn't read very well, although she had learned to compensate for that over the years. When an employer discovered that she couldn't decipher simple written instructions, she was usually terminated. Subsidized housing was usually for women with children. There wasn't much out there for single women, another reason why she had to attach herself to the first man that came along. Estella was admitted into the St. Pete Women's shelter where she could stay for 6 months. She didn't know where she would go after that but she wasn't going to think about it now.

**Estella is not a real person but a composite of some of the women that come to CASA.

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