

# Stopping the Violence

We have to  
decide the kind  
of society we  
want to live in

By Steve Lowery



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Staff writer

Like something out of the Dead End Kids, they came laughing and shouting as they vaulted over the grocery store counters and disappeared out the door. No one tried to stop them. No one would, least of all the man they had just beaten nearly to death.

He, the store's manager, just lay there, a woman screaming nearby, pleading with those gathered to stay quiet and to please not call the police. He had previously helped get one of the gang's members arrested for stealing and this was his reward. He accepted it.

"He didn't want to help himself," said Robert Burson, who was in the Long Beach store that day several years ago. "That's what it has come to: Even the victims don't want to get involved."

And how much is the public willing to get involved? Like a growing number of people, Burson believes it has all but ceded the streets to criminals.

"Most people are not going to come to your aid," Burson said. "People have just been beaten down, things are just ignored, people look the other way."

That's what they did, Burson says, the time he was mugged and the time a mob of kids, running from police outside the Los Angeles Coliseum, jumped all over the car he was sitting in, denting the roof and hood.

"No one did anything," he said. "I just had to sit in there and take it. It made me mad as hell. I could have killed them and not felt any remorse. I mean it."



### Who are the abusers?

■ Underneath the anger and aggression of most spouse abusers is fear. That batterers are afraid may appear an unlikely idea, but things are not always what they seem. Life is complicated, thoughts and behavior may be difficult to understand. But in counseling, many of these batterers are learning to identify what feeds their abusive behavior.  
**Coming Saturday in LifeStyle**

The reaction, rage born from perceived helplessness, is not unusual according to experts. And it's growing. And it could be dangerous. Jonathon Knepp, a New York-based

social psychologist and consultant, says he hears from an increasing number of people across the country who say they have had enough.

"These are the people who do look the other way, who do draw the curtains when they hear something that doesn't sound right," he said. "They feel trapped. It's like a trapped animal, either it's going to lay down and die or it's going make one last desperate stand."

That stand could mean vigilantism, Knepp said, or the kind of public pressure that causes politicians to take such extraordinary stands as Washington, D.C., Mayor Sharon Pratt Kelly proposing that the National Guard patrol her city's streets. Knepp says talk about "sweeping the streets" has become rather

## Wife beating, child abuse, muggings, carjackings ... we can't afford to turn our heads any longer

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Having stood nose-to-nose with a wife beater and said, "Yeah, I'm the one who called the cops," Alyce LaViolette was not the kind to shrink from a confrontation or a responsibility.

But she was tired that evening driving home, hauling son Jay (8 at the time) and daughter Cori, then 6, in one direction while attempting to ignore the man slapping and chasing the woman in the other. Unfortunately for the fatigued LaViolette, she had taught her children well.

"My kids started saying, 'Why didn't you stop?'" she said. "They said, 'You have to go back.'"

She did, pulling an immediate U-turn on Anaheim Street and searching an hour in vain for the couple. That was 10 years ago but LaViolette, who heads the Long Beach-based Alternatives to Violence counseling center, says the story still carries a moral: Those who beat their spouses and children can be pressured into stopping but only if "good people" can be pressured into getting involved.

"We have to role-model for each other, for our children," she said. "We are, in fact, our brothers' and sisters' keepers. We do, in fact, have responsibility for other people. It's not just about us. We have to rise above being

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tired or scared."

The U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse, established five years ago, plowed through countless documents, charts, statistics and interviews and came to that same conclusion in a report published last month.

Noting that reports of child abuse have increased to nearly 3 million a year, the board said solutions were to be found in "... friendship among neighbors, watchfulness of others' families ... and a sense of belonging, ownership and collective responsibility."

Comforting words, but more often than not difficult for many people to carry out.

Consider: If a man comes running out of a bank with a gun and a sack of money, a person can be reasonably sure a crime has been committed. That person can then decide whether to intervene physically or to call the police or to gather information to be a good witness or to look the other way. The choices are clear.

Now consider spousal and child abuse. Many times it happens behind closed doors with only screams and cries to announce it. The victims are often too scared to seek or even accept help. Those who might do something about it are often unsure if a crime is being committed.

Even if they do see something — a child slapped about in a market — some people believe it's not their place to get involved in another family's business. Finally, having heard how volatile domestic violence is, some are simply afraid to get involved.

And so there will be more than 1,000 domestic violence cases prosecuted in Long Beach this year, a fact that caused the Long Beach Police Department to form a Domestic Violence Unit in August.

But, as anyone involved in the field will tell you, once it gets to the authorities it's too late. The damage, sometimes fatal, is done. The fact, experts say, is that those who commit domestic violence do care what their neighbors think.

So if you hear incessant cry-

ing, especially from a child you never see outdoors, Deanne Tilton Durfee, who headed the U.S. Advisory Board, says it's time to consider doing something.

"Never seeing the child is serious," she said. "Two-thirds of children killed are under 2. They are the kids who don't go to school and aren't missed."

But doing something doesn't necessarily mean calling the authorities. Tilton Durfee, executive director of the Los Angeles County Inter-Agency Council on Child Abuse and Neglect, says inroads can be made by showing concern.

"A phone call in which you say 'I heard the crying. Isn't it hard raising kids?' Perhaps you offer to take their kids for the day, or to bring over some dinner," she said. "You're sending the message, in a very soft way, that children are valued in this neighborhood and that there is a sense of concern. Believe me, people react to that."

Likewise, LaViolette says, "most people care what people think, even if they beat their wife."

In fact, she said, many batterers are people who have trouble being assertive in their everyday life outside the home. Without the ability to handle anger in public, they drop down on those it's safest to hurt.

"So if people stop and say 'This is wrong,' it has a big effect on this type of person," she said.

But you should know that you probably will not hear about the abuse from the victim, who may well be trying to smooth things over and may be suffering from what experts call the hostage syndrome.

Listen for escalating arguments, LaViolette says, for yells and screams, verbal put-downs and, quite literally, for people hitting the walls and floors.

If people are afraid to get involved because the violence might spill over onto them, LaViolette argues that though domestic violence is the single most common police call, rarely does a police officer get shot at.

"Just because it's a volatile crime doesn't mean they're going to turn on someone else," LaViolette said. "That's not who these people are. People are so para-

noid, they think there's a bogeyman lurking around every corner so they become immobilized. I can tell you in 15 years in working in this field and knowing what I do about these people, I've only been afraid a couple of times."

Neighbors may fear alienating other neighbors, or they may simply hope that if they ignore the problem it will go away. But according to a recent study, published in the October edition of American Demographics magazine, doing nothing about a problem tends only to feed that problem. That was the finding of a team of social psychologists, led by Robert Levine of Fresno State, who attempted to rate the most helpful cities in America.

Levine wrote: "Stressful situation and their consequent behaviors ultimately sustain one another. Violent crime results from stressful conditions but is itself a source of urban stress. Ultimately, inaction becomes the norm." And it's exactly what the likes of LaViolette and Tilton Durfee see everywhere.

"This is happening across the country," Tilton Durfee said. "Where there is no accountability, no support system, there is a higher prevalence of abuse. Peer influence is powerful. When (abusers) see that somebody notices, it breaks the little box they think they can operate in."

Like so many, she has a story to tell about what happens when people don't step in. It's a story about a grocery clerk who sees a woman beating a child in her store. When the woman checks out, the clerk gets her name, address and phone number from her check and resolves to notify the authorities. But she catches herself before she does and eventually does nothing.

Weeks pass until the day the clerk is reading the newspaper and happens upon a story about a child who was killed and about the mother who was being held in the death. It was the woman the clerk had seen in the store.

"I know there's a lot of fear and anxiety," says Tilton Durfee. "But that really pales when you weigh it against the life of a child. Just think how horrible you'd feel for the rest of your life if you did nothing when you knew you could."

# ...nue to turn our backs on it

## How to help police

Most police departments are hesitant to ask people to intervene physically when a crime is committed. They prefer that people be good witnesses. But what does that entail? Officer Bob Anderson of the Long Beach Police Department offered these tips:

### ■ Get a good description of the suspect or suspects.

"So many times we get calls that say 'It was a male Hispanic in black pants.' Well, that could be anyone out there. We need something that is distinguishing. A type of jacket they were wearing. Did the jacket have an emblem? Did they have facial hair, tattoos if you can see them. Look for anything that sets them apart, bad skin problems, anything that you would normally notice about the person."

### ■ Do the same with their car and weapon.

"Don't just tell us what color the car is; try and figure out the make. If you can not only tell us it was a blue Ford but a blue Ford Taurus it narrows things down a lot. Believe me, it helps a lot. Look for things like a

cracked windshield, one light out, maybe the license plate is missing."

### ■ License plates.

"If you can see the license plate and remember it, that's wonderful. But sometimes people are so concerned with the license plate they might miss something else that's equally important."

### ■ Don't want to get involved? No problem.

"A lot of people are afraid to get involved because they fear retaliation. They can call (310) 435-6711, give the information and then have nothing more to do with it. When you call 911 your phone and address is automatically flashed up. So the 435 number is a good alternative.

"Still, if the crime is just being committed, 911 is still the number to call. You can call 911 and request anonymity just say 'I don't want to be contacted' and that will be respected.

"If you see something that is ongoing and suspicious, something having to do with narcotics or gangs, though, you can call 435-6711 and our people can look into it."

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commonplace.

He said people "may decide they don't mind losing a little official freedom since they already feel so trapped."

Stories of carjackings have become almost commonplace. As have the stories about muggings, assaults, rapes that occur in broad daylight, criminals almost daring civilians to get involved. When Paramount High School cheerleader Sheila Lorta was shot in 1992, it was around 3 p.m. next to a busy street (Downey Avenue) by a man on a bicycle who simply rode away.

"There's no more fear on (the criminal's) part," said Doris Doolan of Bellflower, a robbery victim herself. "They don't fear the police; they don't fear going to jail and they certainly don't fear regular citizens doing anything. They know damn well we'll just sit back and take it."

But the alternative carries dangers all its own. When a New Mexico man named Alfredo Reynaga chased after and caught the man who had mugged him, he withdrew a knife and began

pulling the criminal from his car. An off-duty deputy sheriff saw Reynaga, saw the knife and after telling Reynaga to drop the weapon, which he did not, shot Reynaga dead.

Michael Armstrong of Long Beach was walking home from his public relations job when a suspected rapist ran past.

"A woman yelled 'Grab that guy, grab that guy!' I ran after the guy. He turned around and pointed a gun at me," Armstrong said. "I backed off, but I followed him from a distance for a while longer."

Armstrong's actions helped convict the rapist. Jason Kane ran across a busy street to help a woman being accosted as she left a video store. Kane engaged the assailant and suffered head injuries after being hit with a bat, but managed to scare the assailant off.

Armstrong and Kane received commendations from the Long Beach Police Department. Still, when it comes to soliciting public help, the requests of most police forces are timid at best.

LBPD officer Bob Anderson's response is typical: "We don't

ask much of them. We just want them to be a good witness."

Anderson says there are simply too many variables to ask people to do any more.

Indeed, though Armstrong says he would do the same thing again, he doesn't think any less of someone who decides not to get involved.

"I see someone who needs help and I help them," he said. "That's just who I am. But there are a lot of people who are cynical about getting involved and I understand that. There's a lot that could go wrong. I mean, if that guy had really wanted to blow me away, he would have."

A happy medium for many has been the numerous tip phone lines such as New Mexico-based Crimestoppers, where calls led to the clearing of more than 448,000 cases. The organization offers rewards but, according to Crimestoppers' Bill Naegele, more than two-thirds of those eligible for them refuse.

"They just want the crime solved," he said. "These are good citizens, but even they don't want to get any more involved than they have to."