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Framingham: Victims of sexual violence find 'angels' at SMOC



Safira Amazan, SMOC bi-lingual program advocate, facing camera, with a client who was a victim of human trafficking. Daily News Staff Photo/Art Illman

By Chris Bergeron/Daily News Staff
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FRAMINGHAM - In Mary Gianakis' office at South Middlesex Opportunity Council, a framed photograph of Carla Sousa reminds her that domestic violence can end lives with brutal finality.

She directs SMOC's Voices Against Violence division that annually helps an estimated 3,000 people in 14 area communities deal with the "crisis of intimate partner violence (IPV)" such as the murder of Sousa and her 11-year-old son in 2006 when were bludgeoned to death by her then husband. Citing privacy laws, she can't say if Sousa, a native of Brazil, received any services from SMOC while living in Framingham.

"Our goal is to mitigate the short- and long-term effects of violence in peoples' lives," said Gianakis, a former police officer who oversees a staff of about 32 advocates, counselors and specialists. "Most people threatened by ongoing violence must deal with specific behaviors used by their partners to keep them under control."

Two young women credit their advocates from Voices Against Violence with helping them cope with the repercussions of sexual violence and remake their lives in a new home. Their real names are not being used because they are survivors of sexual assault.

Legal advocate Claudia Segura has been helping 23-year-old "Julia" get approved for asylum in the U.S. and receive a Green Card after fleeing beatings and death threats in an abusive relationship in El Salvador.

And advocate Safira Amazan has been working with "Cristina," an 18-year-old junior at Framingham High School who was sexually assaulted by a "coyote" after he smuggled her across the Mexico-Texas border so she could reunite with her mother.

With Segura translating, Julia matter-of-factly recounted 18 months of physical abuse and forced sex in an arranged relationship in a rural village.

"When he drank, he would be more violent. When I refused what he wanted, he threatened to kill me with a machete," she said.

Fearing for her life, Julia came to the U.S., overstayed her visa and came to the attention of immigration authorities who put her in touch with SMOC.

Working with Segura, Julia has studied English with a volunteer at the library and rented an apartment with her sister. She hopes to attend a technical school to study nursing and get on her feet economically so she can apply for custody of her children from another relationship who now live with relatives in El Salvador.

"I feared for my life so I escaped. I needed to talk to someone when I came here. Claudia was my angel. I'm not afraid anymore," said Julia. "God willing, I will be reunited with my children. Now I do have hope for the future."