

Beyond

Beyond Freedom participants place their hands on the drums they play during meetings. Playing drums provides mutual encouragement and emotional release.



Freedom

Survivors of Domestic Violence Learn Self-Care

by Pearl Brownstein

In the article "The Unlikely Homeless: One Woman's Experience in a Domestic-Violence Shelter," published in the Fall 2012 issue of UNCENSORED, Pearl Brownstein wrote about what led her to seek shelter and about the value of her time there. In this article Brownstein describes a post-shelter support group for DV survivors.

From my apartment in the far corners of Brooklyn, it takes approximately an hour and a half to get to "Beyond Freedom," and that's if I get an express train. My weekly journey, which involves toting my 17-month-old son in his stroller up and down the subway stairs, is not unlike those of the other women who attend Beyond Freedom meetings with me—most of them residing in shelters with their families in far less desirable areas. We all come from far away, be it the outer reaches of Brooklyn, the Bronx, or Queens, and yet every Friday from 11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. we manage to converge in the Freedom House community room. As my son and I walk through the building's sliding double doors, we are immediately welcomed by staff, who still remember our names, even though we no longer reside here; it has been nearly a year since we became residents at this domestic-violence (DV) shelter serving survivors and their families.

The premise of Beyond Freedom began as a simple one: bring DV survivors together on a weekly basis to share their feelings and experiences. Through sharing, an emotional release occurs, as does the possibility of relating to others, making friends, forming a network, and becoming inspired.

During the hour-and-a-half meetings, our sons and daughters are placed in child care down the hall, and because they are already familiar with the shelter staff, the time apart from their moms is not one of tantrums and longing, but of shared play and fun. For the mothers, time away from our children is crucial, as a majority of us are stay-at-home single moms. This brief weekly respite from the constant demands of mothering is a huge relief and gives all of us the opportunity to focus on ourselves and speak our minds.

We each sit in one of the chairs that form a circle in the center of the room, with bongos in the center of the circle. Drumming is an integral part of the Beyond Freedom meetings, serving as another method for self-expression and emotional release. Meetings typically start with a round-robin of check-ins, or "shares," each beginning with one's name and discharge date from Freedom House and concluding with an accomplishment for that week. Although the bongos usually sit unused until the last few minutes of the meetings, when we're particularly enthusiastic about one of the shares, the beating of our hands on the tight goatskin becomes a form of exclamation

and a way of relaying our congratulations. After each share, the facilitator provides feedback and suggestions on self-care, parenting, and planning for the future. There are refreshments, including coffee, juice, yogurt, and pastries—and sometimes a special treat of fried chicken served with hot sauce.

After the DV Shelter

Beyond Freedom has been up and running for less than two years. “It’s a support group,” Freedom House’s associate director, Vanessa, tells me plainly. (For privacy and safety purposes, most of the names of the people mentioned in this article have been changed.) “For people coming out of DV shelters, support is imperative. We realized that we needed a service in place that’s readily available for women and their children.” Vanessa goes on to mention the need for women to protect themselves in a variety of ways after escaping domestic violence. “During our meetings,” she says, “we always try to weave in a discussion on the importance of safety in relationships, at home and in the workplace, in managing your Facebook profile and cell phone appropriately—always making sure your GPS is turned off—as well as finances, such as keeping your bank account secure. It’s a complete change of lifestyle. It’s changing the way that you live.”

For most people, breaking the cycle of abuse doesn’t happen overnight; the possibility for change has to be ingrained, and it takes time—not only for the women who have experienced the abuse, but for their children, too. “If you are a child of domestic violence,” Vanessa explains, “the trauma you experienced impacts you when you become an adult. That’s why we talk about breaking the cycle now. A little girl doesn’t have to be controlled and degraded. A little boy can be taught to treat girls with respect. When the DV system first started out, the social services were just for women, until people started realizing that the abuse also affected the children.”

While at Freedom House, residents and children benefit from individual counseling, group counseling, and tight security, but when a family’s stay is maxed out after 135 days, those services inevitably come to an end. “We were concerned about what happens to families afterward,” Vanessa says. “Coming into shelter is traumatic enough—but the other crisis is when they have to leave here. We wanted after-care services for those who are getting ready to go or have already left. We knew it was important, and even though we didn’t have funding for Beyond Freedom, we decided to do it anyway.”

After discharge, a majority of women and their families go to the Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) office. Located in the Bronx, the PATH office is where New York City families with children are evaluated for eligibility for shel-

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ter and assigned shelter placements within the five boroughs. At this point, without services for DV survivors, many families can quickly become isolated or, in the worst-case scenarios, return to their abusers. Understanding this, Freedom House established Beyond Freedom as a mandatory program for all residents to attend in their final month prior to discharge, in preparation for their lives ahead, and with an open invitation to continue attending meetings after they leave.

The facilitator of Beyond Freedom is Rebecca, a domestic-violence survivor, poet, and musician who runs Freedom House’s popular drumming circle and potluck dinner every Sunday afternoon. “In choosing a facilitator,” she tells me, “Freedom House wanted someone who was a survivor, who was also an advocate and activist in domestic violence and homelessness, and who believes, as I do, that the arts—drumming and theater in particular—can instigate healing. The fact that I am a survivor offers the women hope that they won’t always be receiving aid, and that they should strive to make a livable wage.”

That is easier said than done for a majority of survivors, as many cannot find work that will support them, let alone their children. The city’s homeless population continues to swell, and with sustained funding cuts for various low-income housing programs, working one’s way up to self-sufficiency is challenging at best. In April 2012 the city stopped providing housing subsidies to homeless families and domestic-violence victims. A shortage of public housing is also a national concern, as there was a 700,000-unit decrease between 1995 and 2009, due to expired contracts and conversion to market-value rentals, according to a 2011 report from the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University. As rental costs become increasingly steep in the New York metropolitan area, it is not uncommon to spend at least half of one’s salary on keeping a roof overhead—if one can even manage to move beyond shelter, which is a huge accomplishment in itself. According to a 2012 editorial in the *New York Times*, 8.5 million very-low-income families without housing assistance paid more than half their incomes on housing in 2011—an increase of 47 percent from 2007. Often, people struggle after leaving the system to such an extent that they wind up back at PATH. A 2012 report by the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness, *A New Path: An Immediate Plan to Reduce Family Homelessness*, cites that nearly 50 percent of families who seek temporary shelter in New York City have had at least one prior shelter stay.

“When I was going through shelter,” Rebecca tells me, “there wasn’t anything like Beyond Freedom. First and foremost, we’re trying to prevent women from becoming homeless again. We’re empowering women to stand up for themselves through the use of journaling their feelings and experiences, by stressing the importance of maintaining strong boundaries and being aware of and acknowledging red flags. By using these tools, which for many women are completely new, their self-esteem naturally becomes elevated and in the process they become stronger. ... We’re looking at self-care, and we’re looking at safety as a lifestyle rather than a moment in time when a woman and her family resided in a DV shelter.”

With a penchant for thinking outside the box, Rebecca has some big ideas that differ widely from the city’s methods for dealing with homelessness. “What we need to do,” she says, “is work toward home *ownership*. If we become homeowners, one house at a time, we can create the change ourselves. We need to find funders who are willing to purchase below-market multi-family dwellings. We can then rent out one of the apartments to pay off the mortgage, and rent the other apartment at an affordable price to a survivor and her family.”

Reminders to Nurture Ourselves

Vanessa is the co-facilitator of Beyond Freedom. Paul, the CEO of the nonprofit organization Barrier Free Living, of which Freedom House is a program, also occasionally attends; when introducing himself to the group he says repeatedly with a smile, “I’m here to listen and to learn from all of you, so that I can be a better advocate for what you need.” In addition to supporting former residents, the Freedom House staff hopes that by tracking survivors’ experiences they might be able to demonstrate the need for increased funding for necessary programs and, on an even larger scale, initiate policy change.

At a Beyond Freedom meeting, Lorna shares with the group that she isn’t eating properly. I nod my head in understanding, as I too am having a problem with my appetite. We joke about having bought new belts that we’ve buckled in the last hole to make our sagging jeans fit. During our stay at Freedom House, Lorna and I, who have sons born one year apart, lived in studios across the hall from each other. We have both lost 15 pounds since we entered shelter, which Rebecca says is common for women who have been traumatized by DV: “Oftentimes, a woman will focus on caring for and feeding her children, and forget to care for herself.” As a holiday gift to each Beyond Freedom attendee, Rebecca provided a plate, bowl, and drinking glass as a reminder to nurture ourselves. “It’s important for the children to see their mothers eat well,” Rebecca says, “and what better way than to do so on special plates and bowls that remind them of the self-care tools they learn about at Beyond Freedom.”

Another former resident, Tania, who is a mother of three, reports to the group that she received all A’s for the college classes she took the previous semester. She says that she hopes to become a social worker and help other women who are making the transition to independence after leaving their abusers. When she finishes sharing, we all applaud and beat on our bongo drums.

Stephanie, a mother of two who originally hails from the Caribbean, announces that she just began a ten-week self-care program for women, which includes personal training lessons at a free gym and classes in meditation. She is also studying for her GED. More applause and drumming ensue.

During these meetings there is never talk of violence—I have never once heard a lurid story of blood or bruises, broken bones or visits to the emergency room. Nobody talks about their abusers or what it was like living with daily physical, economic, or emotional abuse. I chalk it up to the fact that we are living as well as we can in the present and letting go of the past.

I share with the group that I am looking for well-paying full-time work so that my son and I can move to a neighborhood with better schools. In the meantime, I manage to support us with various freelance projects, and somehow we break even every month. With each passing week that I am no longer a resident—I left Freedom House approximately seven months ago—I see that I have many more possibilities than the other women, a majority of whom continue to live in shelter and rely on food stamps and Medicaid. I live in my own apartment; I have college and post-graduate degrees; my son’s father provides steady child support and a healthy percentage of child-care expenses; and I have prior work experience as well as some savings. At the same time, my career has never been particularly lucrative, and I know that without my advantages I

Artwork adorns the walls of the Freedom House community room.



would be living on the edge. According to a recent editorial in *The Nation*, more than half of single-mother households find themselves below the poverty line.

When I ask Vanessa what the biggest hurdle is for women leaving shelter, she says quickly, “Finances and child care.” She continues, “If a woman doesn’t have appropriate child care, how can she find employment? But if she’s not making enough money to pay for a sitter, if she doesn’t have that security, she can’t make a step forward.” Hearing these words, I am reminded that I am not all that different from Stephanie and Tania, who sit on either side of me. Prior to this Beyond Freedom meeting, I did some math to decide whether it was worth it to put my son in child care the following week while I look for more work. Would my job-seeking bear enough fruit to pay for those hours with a sitter? I couldn’t be sure.

The biggest hurdle for the growth of Freedom House is funding as well. “My wish would be to really expand our after-care services,” Vanessa tells me, “but in order to do that you need extra staff—a supervisor and social workers to provide the advocacy for people who need it and the continuation of support. We just don’t have the funding.”

Even without funding, the Beyond Freedom program has grown so popular that it has split into two groups, with Spanish speakers meeting on Thursdays and the English speakers getting together on Fridays. Despite the long distances that I and the other women travel to attend, when another Friday rolls around we always decide that it’s well worth it to make the journey yet again. Vanessa tells me that a few days before a snowstorm was

expected, she called all of the Spanish speakers to tell them that Beyond Freedom was canceled for that Thursday; everyone showed up anyway, acting as if they had never received her message. “It was a lesson for me to see how much they really need to be here,” Vanessa says, “and how important these meetings are to them.”

On Valentine’s Day a special guest was welcomed to the group: Beluchi Jeanot, a makeup artist from the nonprofit organization Project Papillon, whose mission is to

improve the self-esteem of homeless female victims of domestic violence. Beluchi tirelessly made up the faces of 18 former residents as well as shelter staff, applying false eyelashes, lipstick, rouge, and shadow. In the process he managed to bring out everyone’s inherent beauty, which is often hidden beneath masks of stress and anxiety. It is hoped that someone from Project Papillon will come to Beyond Freedom regularly.

“Beluchi told everyone that he wasn’t putting makeup on them so that they could go out and look cute,” Vanessa says. “More than anything, it’s about feeling good inside by making your outside look good. It’s about boosting self-esteem.” The development of self-esteem, which the Freedom House staff emphasizes continually, is extremely important after women have been tyrannized and beaten down in physically and emotionally abusive relationships. Poor self-esteem, my Freedom House social worker reminded me repeatedly, is often what causes women to choose unhealthy relationships in the first place.

Beyond Freedom appears to be expanding in other ways, too, as it continues to invite guests from outside the group. The next visitor will be Marcella Goheen, whose acclaimed one-woman show, *The Maria Project*, uncovers a particularly gruesome act of domestic violence that was a secret in Goheen’s family for generations. Marcella will lead a six-week intensive program called “Codes of Hope,” which will involve collecting survivors’ stories and will culminate in a handbook of participants’ writings. For many of the women who attend Beyond Freedom, this will be the first time they have put pen to paper about their personal lives and why they sought shelter at Freedom House. The process of self-expression promises to be both a creative and cathartic experience.

The Beyond Freedom meetings always go by quickly, and for the last few minutes we are encouraged to take part in a drumming circle, which is initially led by Rebecca. The unified mimicking of her beat brings us all together even more than the sharing we have just completed. After following Rebecca’s rhythm, each of us leads the group with a rhythm of her own.

As I beat on my drum, I think about my son, who that morning walked unsteadily through the doors into the Freedom House lobby. My social worker, who first met my son when he was seven months old and not yet crawling, exclaimed, “Wow—look at him go! I remember when he was half that size!” A similar growth, we hope, is occurring inside all of us who attend the Beyond Freedom meetings. As we bear witness to our personal transformations, I see firsthand that we all, in our own ways and despite the odds, are flourishing. At the end of our meetings, I already look forward to the following week, when I will surely hear—and tell—stories about grit, perseverance, and triumphs that are both small and large. ■

On display in the Beyond Freedom meeting room are the boots and handbag worn by a facilitator when she escaped her abuser. The items symbolize freedom and strength.

