

Domestic violence a serious Miss. issue

April 25, 2010

Michael David Graham shot and killed his ex-wife, Adrienne Klasky, in downtown Pascagoula in 1989, after he stalked and harassed her following their divorce. Graham served 19 years of his life sentence. In July 2008, Graham's sentence was suspended and he was released from prison.

A law recently passed by our state Legislature aims to protect women like Adrienne by strengthening the existing stalking law so that a woman no longer has to prove that her stalker was trying to kill her before the behavior is considered "stalking." This is important because there is a higher risk of death when stalking occurs in a relationship. Under the new law it is enough that a stalker's behavior makes persons fear for their safety, the safety of another person, or the safety of their property.

Several elected and government officials deserve recognition for introducing and/or supporting several domestic violence-related bills this session, including state Reps. Kimberly Campbell Buck and Brandon Jones; state Sen. David Blount; and Heather Wagner, special assistant attorney general in the Domestic Violence Division of the attorney general's office.

Through our work with the Women's Fund of Mississippi, we are also seeing other signs of progress with respect to domestic violence.

With a grant from the Women's Fund, the Gulf Coast Women's Center for Nonviolence is implementing a new Coordinated Community Response Program in Biloxi. This program will redefine domestic violence

within the community as a crime, not just a family problem. And the fact that we have elected officials who view domestic violence as a serious crime and not just a "women's issue" is no small victory.

While these developments are definitely progress, we've still got a long way to go.

Consider Mississippi's pardon record, briefly mentioned above. According to Radley Balko, an investigative journalist and former Fox News columnist, over the past few years our state has only pardoned, or suspended the sentence, of five men. Of those five men, four were convicted of murdering their wives or girlfriends.

Although we recognize and congratulate Gov. Haley Barbour and the Legislature for signing and passing these bills into law, we must also consider other actions, such as the pardons, before we proclaim victory for Mississippi women and their families. Tell your elected officials that you're listening and watching. The Women's Fund has found that a relatively small number of well-timed handwritten letters, phone calls and visits can make all the difference. Until we hold our elected officials, friends and colleagues accountable for their attitudes and actions toward domestic violence-related crimes, we will only achieve limited progress.

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The Women's Fund of Mississippi

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