

Jennifer Durant's voice is heard at the State House on behalf of victims hurt by human trafficking

Staff report MANCHESTER — A voice at the State House for victims of domestic and sexual violence is how Jennifer B. Durant thinks of herself.

Durant, 32, was nominated for her work in helping to pass the state's law criminalizing human trafficking which took effect Jan. 1, 2010.

As a lobbyist for N.H. Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, "I worked extensively with the stakeholders on this issue, not only to pass the bill, but to then implement the bill and help get people trained throughout the community to detect this crime," she said.

She worked with victim advocates, law enforcement and attorneys.

"I believe that we're at the forefront of this human-trafficking

movement and being really able to address it in the state," she said.

While human trafficking is often thought of as an international crime, it is happening in New Hampshire as well, she said.

"It might present as something different ... sexual assault, domestic violence, child abuse, prostitution, but when you peel away the layers, you begin to identify something much bigger," she said.

Statistics show 80 percent of trafficking victims are women or girls and 80 percent involve sex trafficking, she said. "Of that about 50 percent are children," she said.

"So the majority of these cases are in fact children under the age of 18," Durant said. "So we're talking 12, 13, 14 years old."

"They're typically runaways or what's termed as throwaways, so they're kicked out of their homes, they're vulnerable youth that pimps often recruit and entice to get involved in the sex trade," she said.

"There is an estimate that between 16,000 and 18,000 U.S. citizens are trafficked within the United States every year, and

these are children ... These are American children," she said.

Durant was nominated by Col. Robert Quinn, who heads N.H. State Police, Sandi Matheson, who heads the victim-witness assistance program at the state Attorney General's office and Amanda Grady, public policy director for the New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence.

"Without her work in the area of human trafficking, there is no doubt that these statewide efforts would not have been achieved," the nominators wrote.

The coalition is an umbrella organization that provides technical and financial support to 14 member agencies who provide services to survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence, and stalking. A portion of marriage license fees goes to support the coalition's work providing free, confidential 24-hour services.

State budget cuts mean the coalition is doing more with less. "The impact is huge for victims, for us," she said.

In 2010, crisis centers served 16,008 victims, their children and extended family.



Durant also teaches sociology at Saint Anselm College. This semester, she is introducing a course on family violence.

"Our media, television, magazines, the Internet, often sensationalizes and unfortunately sexualizes violence and in particular violence against women," she said. "So that has a significant effect on our view of crime and how violent crime is handled at a real level."

"I might not see somebody get arrested for a protective order violation but you see that on TV, so very much television and the media in general, minus the UL, sensationalizes and sexualizes violence to the point where we often disconnect reality from how it's interpreted through media.

"We have to say how is this contributing to the ongoing crime of human trafficking and trafficking minors? How is this contributing to battering or violence against women?" Durant said.

"Violence against women is still a very real thing," she said. "I still think we have a long way to go."

There is a connection between domestic violence and the economy, she said.

"What we're seeing here in New Hampshire in our crisis center is that we're not necessarily serving more victims, but they were staying longer in shelter because of the economy," she said.

Her biggest challenge is maintaining strong domestic and sexual violence laws in the state, she said. "There are continuous attempts to weaken our current statutes," she said. "Knowing that if something were to pass that negatively impacts on victims,

that falls on me, so that's a huge burden to have," she said. "But that's what motivates me."

Working closely with Coalition policy director Amanda Grady, she said, "We're a force to be reckoned with."

Durant's life has been shaped by the tragic loss her family suffered when her sister Megan Durant, was killed in a freak highway accident in 1995. Megan, a freshman at Merrimack High School, was a passenger in a car when a metal engine cover flew off a truck on the F.E. Everett Turnpike, crashed through the windshield and hit Durant in the head. She died from her injuries hours later.

Jennifer Durant was 16 at the time. "That was obviously the turning point in my life and for my family," she said.

"As a result of that hardship and that tragedy, my parents and I, father and mother, are extremely close," she said. Her father and mother, Dexter and Christine Durant, are her biggest supporters, she said.



Jennifer B. Durant, 32

Home: Merrimack

Birthplace: Nashua

Immediate family: Dexter Durant, father; Christine Durant, mother; Megan Durant, sister (deceased: 1980-1995)

High school: Merrimack High School

College/post-grad degrees:

Bachelor of arts in sociology, May 2002, Saint Anselm College; graduated cum laude, The Dean's List of Scholars; master of arts in sociological practice (MASP), May 2006, California State University; graduated with honors, GPA: 4.0

Current Job: Public policy specialist, N.H. Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence (2006-present); adjunct sociology professor, Saint Anselm College (2006-present)

Key past positions held: Program manager, The Crime Victims Fund/Domestic Violence

Independence Program (San Diego, Calif.). I worked directly with victims of domestic violence and helped them develop educational and career goals, while assessing their needs, strengths and barriers to self-sufficiency. Case manager, Episcopal Community Services/Julian's Sanctuary (San Diego, Calif.). My work at Julian's Sanctuary really was the start of my advocacy on behalf of domestic and sexual violence survivors. This was a homeless shelter designed to provide support services to women and children at a long-term domestic violence housing program. My experiences at Julian's Sanctuary are really why I continue to do what I do today. Julian's Sanctuary and the women and children I worked with will forever be a part of my life.

Volunteer activities: Board of directors, N.H. Women's Lobby (2009-2011); N.H. Child Advocacy Network (NHCAN), steering committee member (2009-present); Multiple Sclerosis Society of Greater New England, government relations committee (2010-present); Multiple Sclerosis Society of Greater New England, Bike MS annual event. I helped raise nearly \$2,000 for the MS Society in August 2011 when I biked 26 miles. Multiple Sclerosis Society of Greater New England, Young Adults Support Group. I started and currently facilitate a support group for young adults with Multiple Sclerosis in Manchester.