

Domestic violence victim praises changes in legal system

Changing attitudes:

Susan Fuller says her injuries convinced many to stand against such abuse.

By PAUL FEELY

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Nearly 20 years ago she became the face of domestic violence crimes against women. Battered, bruised and bloodied, lying in a Wolfeboro hospital, Susan Fuller Sarno's picture ran in newspapers across the country, making her a poster child for victims everywhere.

That same woman stood at a podium in Bedford yesterday, now an advocate for local and national victims of the same crime.

Susan Fuller (she now goes by her maiden name) was the keynote speaker yesterday at the New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic Violence's Hall of Fame Luncheon, held at Carrabba's Italian Grill in Bedford. Fuller was honored for her efforts on behalf of survivors of domestic violence, while Scott Hampton, a psychologist; retired Henniker Police Chief Tim Russell, and New Hampshire State Police Sgt. Jill Rockey were inducted into the Hall of Fame. October is National Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

"We held our first luncheon for the Hall of Fame last year," said Coalition Board Chairman Steve Varnum. "We realized we had a lot of people, for whom recognition of their efforts on behalf of domestic violence victims was long overdue."

In 1992, Fuller, then 33, was brutally beaten by her

estranged husband, requiring 17 stitches to her face. Though she lived in Massachusetts at the time, the beating took place at a home in Wolfeboro where he found her staying with another man (she had been separated from her estranged husband for a year at the time of the attack).

Steven Sarno pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge, and received a 29-day jail sentence, which he could serve on weekends. The sentencing judge, William O'Neill, at the time of sentencing reportedly said that the attack "wasn't entirely unprovoked" and that her husband "should have merely slapped her."

Susan went public with her story, which made national headlines. Then-Gov. Stephen Merrill declared, "New Hampshire has vowed to become a leader in placing domestic violence on the national agenda and to implement proposals across the state to deal effectively with this heinous and intolerable crime. Domestic violence has reached the front burner in New Hampshire because of Susan Sarno." Both Merrill and then-Attorney General Jeff Howard initiated a process to improve the prosecution and handling of domestic violence cases statewide, which resulted in the creation of The New Hampshire Governor's Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence in 1993, to develop and implement programs to reduce the level and seriousness of domestic and sexual violence in the state.

Fuller said she doesn't make many public appearances, but was honored to speak Friday because of the special place the people and victims advocates of New Hampshire hold in her heart. "I hold such a place in my heart for the folks in New Hampshire, because of the way that they stood up beside me, behind me, did such wonderful things. I'm always getting credit for doing something that changed New Hampshire, but honest to God, it wasn't me. There were lots of people working very hard to change things. I think I just gave it a face, and the public saw me and said, 'This isn't okay.' But the people who did the work to change the policy, they are the ones who should get the credit." (cont'd)



Domestic abuse survivor Susan Fuller expresses gratitude to members of the state's victims advocate staff during her keynote speech at the annual luncheon of the New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence in Bedford Friday.



Susan Sarno, now Susan Fuller, with the severe facial injuries she received in beating by her estranged husband Stephen Sarno in August 1992. WOLFBORO POLICE PHOTO



Fuller said the victims advocates she dealt with in the days following the attack, and New Hampshire state officials, gave her the courage and strength to tell her story. “When I spoke up, they actually listened,” said Fuller. “When someone listens to you, it validates your experience.”

Scott Hampton was recognized for his work as director of Ending the Violence, a Dover-based organization that provides educational classes to perpetrators of domestic and sexual violence. Retired Henniker Police Chief Tim Russell was honored for his current efforts as coordinator of the New Hampshire Domestic Violence Lethality Assessment Program, while Sgt. Jill Rockey was inducted for her work over her 17year career and current position in charge of the Family Services and Missing Persons Unit.

Fuller said that while many strides have been made in preventing and prosecuting domestic violence cases in the last 20 years, one thing hasn’t — the continued reluctance of some victims to report attacks.

“I think there’s still a lot of shame around it,” said Fuller. “If my daughter were killed in a car accident, that would be tragic, that would be painful, but people would surround me and share in that tragedy. If she were killed in a domestic violence situation, it would be very different. There might be judgment, there might be hurt feelings. The dynamic is just so different. There are so many layers and it’s so complex. It can be embarrassing, ‘Why would I ever be with someone who would treat me that way?’, but anyone can be violent. There’s no shame if it happens to you. No one has to live with it.”