

Breaking the silence of violence

Domestic Violence will effect one in five Australian women – but there’s a way to break the chains of abuse. One company is using a safe, fun and social environment to change lives by carrying the message to other women

BY JULIE MCGLONE

After being told she was “useless” and a “waste of space” for most of the 12 years of her married life, Philipa believed it. Her self-esteem was at rock bottom, she had been isolated from friends and family, had no money of her own, no freedom to even take the kids to school and no affection from her husband. Also, she was being physically abused regularly: that means hit, bitten, held tightly, pinched and intimidated.

Psychologically, emotionally, physically and financially, she was bereft.

On the surface, she and her husband ran a successful retail business and had what appeared to be a normal family life – nice home, three young children. Yet for Philipa, it was a living nightmare from which she saw no escape.

Philipa is a text-book case of Domestic Violence (DV). One in five Australian women will be in a similar situation to her. While the awareness of

DV is growing and less likely to be tolerated by judicial authorities, the real test in our society is understanding how difficult it is for women to leave violent situations and to restart their life.

“It’s too easy for people to sometimes write off a woman who they know is staying in an abusive relationship,” says Philipa. “They think, ‘oh, she’s always saying she’ll leave, I give up’. That’s the worst possible thing you can do.

“If a woman you know is talking about her situation, or even hinting to you that something might be wrong, then that’s the first step. She needs support and you need to maintain contact with her no matter what. Just by saying something like ‘I’m here whenever you need me’ or ‘call me any time’ can make the world of difference.

“One of the most common aspects of abusive relationships is the isolation. My husband never wanted to relinquish control and isolated me from my friends and family for years. When you have no-one to talk to, you don’t get a grasp of how dangerous your situation is.

“Even though I was unhappy for most of my marriage, I couldn’t speak to him about it. He’d fly into a total rage if I brought up anything, questioned anything.

“It wasn’t until the kids started at kindy and school that I started to meet a few other women and gradually got an understanding of what their relationships were like. It was then that I realised the abuse I was living with was not normal.”

Philipa started to lead a secret life. She got a small group of women friends, started to withhold a portion of the day’s retail takings without her husband’s knowledge, and began to look around for a way out.

Finally, she’d saved enough in secret to put a bond on a small rental property and called upon her women friends to help her extricate herself from the family home. “The husbands of a couple of my girlfriends came around to the house with me and said to my husband that they didn’t think it was

safe for me and the children to stay there for the night. They took me and the kids and we stayed the night with a girlfriend. The next day, they helped me organise a removalist to come around while my husband was out and we took some of the furniture and our possessions and moved.

“In the end, it was as simple as that, but without support and help I don’t know how I would have done it.”

Speaking to Philipa today, you find a woman filled with confidence and hope. She’s vibrant and strong – and part of a unique network of women working for an amazing company called Intimo.

Essentially a party-plan operation selling women’s lingerie, Intimo has been operating under the watchful eye of creator Sue Whyte since 1995. While it began as a way to bring “bigger” women a range of intimate apparel that was stylish and beautifully made, it has since grown into an organisation that empowers women on every level – not the least being its dedication to raising awareness and money to beat DV.

With TV personality Nicky Buckley as its spokesperson, Sue says Intimo has now gained momentum and is changing lives in a tangible way that she could never have dreamed when she began the company.

“Initially, I began Intimo for a couple of reasons,” says Sue. “First, I’d been working my whole career in Melbourne’s fashion industry but I could never find beautiful underwear. I was a larger woman in the bust – a D cup – and everything out there was designed along the ‘nana’ lines.

“The other problem is that we live in such a time-poor society, I realised many women simply don’t have the time or ability to spend hours and hours looking for fashion lingerie. That’s why I came up with the business model for Intimo as a party-plan operation – it was private, intimate and allowed women to buy in a safe environment with other women facing the same constraints.”

But Sue’s social conscience also meant she wanted



Above: Intimo founder Sue Whyte (left) and spokesperson Nicky Buckley. While the company has been hugely successful in bringing quality fashion lingerie to women throughout Australia, it has another, far more important agenda – to help break the silence around domestic violence.

to give something tangible back to community. As Intimo's success grew, so did her desire to become involved in a charitable cause.

"Obviously, breast cancer would have been a natural choice for Intimo, but I resisted the obvious because so much corporate awareness already existed for this very worthy cause and also because breast cancer research is almost a bottomless pit of much needed funds. I thought a bit more, and realised our money could perhaps make more impact elsewhere, in a tangible way.

"Domestic Violence seemed a perfect cause for us to make a real difference. Apart from the money we raise, it's about breaking the silence. Our consultants are trained to be able to recognise,

respond and refer – and with more than 1000 consultants across Australia and New Zealand doing an average of four presentations each a month, that's potentially 40,000 women each month we have interaction with.

"While the women all come to have a look and buy our range of lingerie, our consultants do talk about DV and make sure all women are made aware of our website and its links to DV help lines. Even if only one woman makes use of this, it's well worth it. We've made a real difference to someone's life."

In fact, many women are taking advantage of Intimo's DV information. Sue says that apart from the product lines, the DV link to the website is by far the most viewed page. "We get around 7,000

hits a month for the DV information, compared to around 9,000 for our product list. That's got to tell you something."

For many of Intimo's consultants, Sue says the company offers much more than just a way to make an income – it also supplies a great social network while for others it's an opportunity to re-enter the workforce.

"Many of our consultants are women with small children who see this as an opportunity to make some money part-time and also to create new networks with other women.

"Also, around 30 per cent of our consultants are outside of metro areas, and that's growing. With women on-farm, for example, being an Intimo consultant offers a great social aspect and can often be much more than pocket-money, but can make a significant contribution to the farm income and bring about real lifestyle changes.

"For example, one of our top five sellers last year came from rural South Australia. She lives on a farm and her closest neighbour is a 90-minute drive away. She's created an incredibly viable business. Even though she's clocked up a huge number of kilometres, she's developed a great network of friends, broken her isolation and created a large income to boot."

Realising she needed to overcome a couple of big marketing challenges ("we didn't want to be branded 'adult' lingerie because of the sleazy connotations and also we needed to break the mould of the Party Plan stigma that was created during the 70s by some fly-by-night organisations") Sue approached television personality Nicky Buckley for help.

"Nicky offered the credibility we were after in a spokesperson," says Sue. "She has a strong position as an ethical woman, she is a professional with great status. She is an ideal match and I'm thrilled she agreed to join us."

For her part, Nicky, one-time *Sale of the Century* co-host and last year one of the top names in *Dancing with the Stars*, finds her association with Intimo totally fulfilling.

"When Sue approached me I did some research into the company and found that it wasn't an ill fit at all," says Nicky. "I found out more about the things they were involved with, such as the DV issues, and I was mightily impressed with how they look after their girls. It's a company that offers personal growth as well as business growth, where they support each other and give each other tips for mutual success.

"It's all about sharing, and I don't think there is anywhere near enough of that in business today.

"I catch up with many of the consultants when I do an appearance. It's great to get to meet them as it's obviously a 'women all the way' concern.

"One of Intimo's girls I know has lost 30kg since she started finding new self-esteem and confidence through this work. She told me how it's great for

large women to have a look through the product range, find a nice lacy bra in a 12B, then be happily surprised when she lifts up her top and says 'see, it comes in a 16D as well!' Intimo caters for all women in a safe environment."

Having relocated from Melbourne to a small holding in a rural beachside community in Southern Victoria with her husband and three young boys, Nicky is also finding a real correlation with Intimo's focus on the importance of networking and relying on community.

"Moving to the country has taught me how everyone helps each other out," she says. "That doesn't happen anywhere near enough in the city anymore. Community has become very important to me – and with Intimo, it's all about

growing that community to reduce isolation for so many women."

For Philipa, escaping one violent relationship was only the beginning. Just as her life was starting to come back to some level of normality, two years later she became involved with a man who seemed kind and concerned.

"But this new relationship ended up being even more violent than the one I'd had with my husband," she reveals. "Four months into the relationship, he asked me to marry him. From that point, everything changed – he'd follow me everywhere, he tried to run my 11-year-old son off the road while he was riding his pushbike, he would hide down the street to make sure I didn't go into the schoolyard with the kids, because he

didn't want me to talk to anyone, he wanted me completely isolated. He even threatened me with a sword.

"After each incident, he was remorseful, begged for forgiveness and wanted me back. Then the whole cycle would start again. I knew it was wrong, I knew it was old familiar territory. While I did get myself into this situation, this time I was determined to get myself out of it as well.

"I approached the police and had a restraining order placed on him – but even that was a battle. This was in the year 2000 and police were not well trained to handle DV incidents. Finally, after he continued to break the restraining order and continued to threaten us, I managed to have him charged. Since then, he's left us alone."

In the years that followed, Philipa has taken charge of her life. With a degree in horticultural science, she approached the CWA as was rewarded with a scholarship to return to her studies and now has qualifications in marketing.

With her day job as an account executive and her part-time work with Intimo, Philipa says for the first time she is looking to the new year with excitement instead of fear. Her children have mostly recovered from witnessing the violence of her past relationships and have "settled right down". "Seeing me working hard, stabilising my life and offering them a safe, happy environment has really given the kids a strong sense that everything will be okay from now on.

"It's been more than five years now since I was threatened by another human being and the last violent man I was involved with still lives in our neighbourhood and sure, there's a small element of fear still there.

"But I'm not scared any more. I feel strong now. I am strong now." ●

What is Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence is any behaviour used by one person to establish and maintain power and control over another person in the domestic or family situation or relationship, and which causes the victim to live with fear. It is a form of bullying and is a significant health, social and economic issue for the Australian community.*

Types of Behaviour

- **Power and Control** – Domestic violence is not the same as an argument or relationship conflict. A "fair fight" can never take place if one partner is fearful of the other. Domestic violence is used to maintain power and control over another person. Controlling behaviours such as possessiveness, jealousy, put downs and threats are often evident before a relationship becomes physically violent.
- **Social Abuse** – Isolating from others, restricting social life and making it difficult for to have friends and maintain social contact with family.
- **Physical Assault** – Hitting, slapping, pushing, grabbing, kicking, pulling hair or threatening physical harm, breaking things, punching walls or driving a car dangerously.
- **Verbal Abuse** – Insults, name calling and swearing,
- **Economic Abuse** – Taking control of the finances and limiting the amount of and access to money and funds.
- **Psychological and Emotional Abuse** – Constant criticism and put downs, sulking, ignoring, humiliation.
- **Sexual Abuse** – Demands and forcing a person to participate in acts they do not wish to perform.

What are the effects of Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence has wide ranging physical, medical, emotional, social and psychological consequences including anxiety, depression and other emotional distress, physical stress symptoms, sleep disturbances, suicide attempts, alcohol and drug abuse, reduced coping and problem solving skills, loss of self-esteem and confidence, social isolation, fear of starting any new relationships.

Physical Impact

A recent Victorian study found that intimate partner violence is the leading contributor to death, disability and illness in Victorian women aged 15-44, being responsible for more of the disease burden than many well know risk factors such as high blood pressure, smoking and obesity.

According to Jo Cavanagh, CEO of Southern Family Life in Melbourne, "Women in abusive relationships are often on prescription medication for depression or to help them sleep and regularly struggle with heavy use of tobacco and alcohol. Changing these damaging conditions and habits is extremely difficult when the abuse has led them to feel worthless and think so negatively about themselves."

Psychological Impact

A South Australian study conducted in 1998 found that the psychological, verbal and emotional abuse was far more devastating and long-lasting in its effect than physical violence. Victims reported that psychological and emotional abuses were built into their relationships, and occurred around the "little things" of daily life. Most victims reported that the threats of physical violence were as powerful in controlling them as the actual incidences of violence. This was because the perpetrators had shown that they were capable of carrying out the threats.

Domestic Violence and Children

Children are often the "silent victims" of domestic violence. Even though they may not be the victims of physical violence the exposure to this type of behaviour and relationship model has severe consequences. The ABS Women's Safety Survey found that of the women who experienced violence by a current partner, 61 per cent reported that they had children in their care at some time during the relationship, and 38 per cent said that these children had witnessed the violence.

The research report, *Family Violence: A Whole Family Approach*, found that children living in families experiencing domestic violence are gravely affected even when they are not the targets of the abuse. The impact of witnessing violence can not be differentiated from the impact of experiencing direct violence.

* Above information taken from www.intimo.com.au

Get involved – or ask for help

Around one in five Australian women report being subjected to intimate partner violence at some time in their adult lives. If you are experiencing domestic violence, support and assistance is available.

It is sometimes hard to tell your story and ask for help – but remember no one should have to live in fear. Talk with someone you trust or contact one of the support services in your State.

* **National Confidential Hotline 1800 200 526**

For a full list of contacts in your State or Territory, and support group helplines, go to www.intimo.com.au and click on the Intimo Aware link. You can also find out more about Intimo's business from this site.

If you are interested in finding out more about becoming an Intimo Consultant, please email Intimo.on.newstarts@intimo.com.au or call (03) 9645 9939.