Blackburn Center Against Domestic & Sexual Violence

makes a commitment to end gender-based violence:

A case study in audacious leadership

By Ann Belser

Dear Colleagues,

Some stories need to be shared.

As grantmakers and community leaders seeking promising practices and emerging innovation, too often we limit our inquiry to large scale efforts in major cities, nationally funded projects, widely recognized organizations. But audacious leadership also exists in small towns and rural communities. And, I strongly believe that the models they offer — driven by passion, commitment, longstanding relationships and vision rather than a large influx of cash — can put innovation and social change within the grasp of more communities.

The national spotlight on violence against women has created a unique opportunity for long overdue progress on prevention of these crimes. However, the urgency of the moment can make short term pre-packaged solutions appealing at the expense of lasting change. But prevention is more than a curriculum. It cannot be accomplished in a three year initiative. Ending domestic and sexual violence requires re-weaving a community’s way of thinking — about our expectations of social roles, gender, sex, relationships, consent, respect, responsibility and accountability.

With this report, we have attempted to convey something special that is happening in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania. We’re shining the spotlight on Blackburn Center Against Domestic & Sexual Violence, with its 40 year history and $1.5M annual budget, and its long-term institutional partnership with Seton Hill University, a Catholic, liberal arts university with a student body of about 2500 students. We want to provide a window into how they are setting about to change the culture of their community with modest funding. How modest? Over the first eight years of the initiative, FISA provided an average of $30,000 per year – the only dedicated funding Blackburn Center had to support their Social Transformation efforts. That amount was doubled starting in 2016, but it remains a shoestring budget for such comprehensive work. This is how the world can be changed. It takes time, and some resources. But mostly what it takes is leadership and relationships and a long term commitment.

Kristy Trautmann

Executive Director

FISA Foundation

What is gender violence?

Gender violence includes rape, sexual assault, relationship violence in heterosexual and same sex partnerships, sexual harassment, stalking and sex trafficking. The term “gender violence” reflects the idea that violence often serves to maintain structural gender inequalities.

To adequately address this violence, we have to address cultural issues that encourage violence as part of masculinity.

Setting the Stage

In 1976, the women and men who collaborated to found Blackburn Center Against Domestic & Sexual

Violence figured their rape crisis center wouldn’t be around very long.

When the Center opened as Westmoreland Alliance Against Rape, it was a heady time for women.

The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) had been passed by Congress four years earlier and was marching through the states to be ratified as an amendment to the U.S. Constitution, and Blackburn Center’s founders thought the problem of violence against women would be solved in a matter of a few years. But the tide turned. The ERA died three states short of ratification, thus slowing the momentum in the movement to end gender violence.

But the need for services did not diminish. In response, the Center grew over the next two decades to include a broad range of high quality services to victims of sexual and domestic violence. It was in planning the organization’s 25th anniversary that they acknowledged the problem wasn’t diminishing. With that in mind, the leadership of the agency committed to refocusing on the culture changes needed to end domestic and sexual violence.

Victims of gender violence have typically been blamed for their attacks. Women who were raped were told they wore skirts that were too short, they drank too much or acted too flirty. Women in abusive relationships were blamed for not leaving their abusers.

“It’s the default response,” Ann Emmerling, the executive director of Blackburn Center said.

“But we need to be talking much more about why this happens, not only about what victims can do to avoid it. We know, though, that talking about misogyny, talking about male privilege, talking about rape culture makes people really **uncomfortable**.

” Stimulating these kinds of conversations has become the heart of Blackburn Center’s primary prevention work. Their hope is that one day it will be automatic to place the blame and responsibility for abuse squarely on perpetrators of violence rather than on its victims, and to recognize the cultural and gender norms that perpetuate this violence. They envision a time when it will be rare to hear excuses such as “boys will be boys” to dismiss sexually aggressive behavior. They foresee a future where men and women alike will speak out in response to comments about what a victim was wearing or how her behavior may have invited or provoked abuse.

**Changing a culture, even just focusing on Westmoreland County, PA *(population 364,000)* takes a multi-pronged approach.**

Blackburn Center History: the Roots of Social Transformation

During a strategic planning process in 2000, Blackburn Center board and staff members began to ask themselves – “Why are we in much the same place our founding mothers had been when they launched the agency, in terms of the prevalence of these crimes?” And so over the next few years, they committed to reinvigorate the social transformation aspect of their mission, which focuses on the root causes of domestic and sexual violence. This was significant on many levels. Blackburn was stepping into uncharted territory. They would no longer be focusing only on risk reduction for the community; they were going to start talking about things that make people very uncomfortable. And this would no longer be about one-shot public awareness campaigns or short-term schoolbased programs. Blackburn Center’s leadership recognized that they were embarking on something that would change the face of the agency, that would require both a long-term commitment and a tolerance for an evolving process that didn’t yield immediate results. They also recognized that it would take a significant commitment of resources to measure the impact of these efforts.

In the 15 years since, Blackburn Center has made significant progress in their efforts to change the culture and has developed a comprehensive model of primary prevention. This approach is not limited to the education department of the agency, or addressed by a subsection of the Center. They have embedded these concepts throughout the organization—including a focus on internal agency policies and procedures – and in all aspects of programs and services.

**I. Seton Hill University and Blackburn Center partner to transform the campus and community**

In 2007, long before campus violence became a trendy topic and seven years before the

U.S. Department of Education’s investigation of 55 colleges and universities for Title IX violations because of how they handled sexual violence and harassment complaints, Blackburn Center and Seton Hill University initiated an institutional partnership. Together they sought to discover: *What does it take to change the attitudes and behaviors of a diverse cohort of college students to prevent sexual assault and domestic violence from happening? Working together, could we prevent these crimes?*

Though Blackburn Center had a long-standing relationship with Seton Hill dating back to the agency’s earliest years, this in-depth partnership between the center and the school started primarily because Seton Hill’s Provost, Mary Ann Gawelek, was already a member of Blackburn Center’s Board of Directors.

The project was dubbed STAR (Social Transformation through Awareness and Resolve) and is led by a team of key individuals: Seton Hill administration, student life professionals, faculty across departments, as well as Blackburn Center staff. Building the team took a commitment to a deeper conversation. They needed to spend time identifying the core beliefs that would guide their work, rather than assuming that everyone who came to the table was on the same page. They needed to articulate what they, as a group, believed was causing the epidemic of violence, in order to work in concert on prevention.

Over almost a decade of work, the project has grown into a universitywide initiative, encompassing all facets of the Seton Hill campus and culture. The STAR Team focuses on:

• providing support to faculty across disciplines in building competency in curriculum development on the issue of gender violence;

• advocating for campus-wide attention to root causes;

• developing strategies to engage men (including athletes) in meaningful ways in this work;

• providing bystander intervention training for all students, faculty, staff and administration;

• educating students about their rights and the services available to them – taking great care to ensure that appropriate responses to victims are in place and that perpetrators are held accountable;

• updating university policies and enhanced university training for residence life staff and other key players in this area;

• requesting a review of university HR policies (e.g., those related to family leave and equal pay) to address more global issues of equity.

STAR’s Assessment Team focuses on developing tools to gather and analyze data and quantify their success, and has developed quantitative and qualitative tools to assess the impact of campus programming. The primary method of quantitative evaluation is a survey that tests the effectiveness of class-based and campus-wide strategies intended to change attitudes and beliefs about gender-based violence. Beginning in 2007, the survey has been administered to incoming first year students and again before graduation. The survey determines what the students know about sexual and domestic violence, their attitudes about the broader social context of expected masculine and feminine roles and behaviors, their willingness to discuss root causes of violence, and their likelihood to blame the victim. By comparing data from students’ first year survey to their senior year survey, the Team determines how successful the campus activities have been. In addition, the data from the first administration of the survey is used by faculty and staff in developing their programming: they use the items they identify as “troubling” among the student body as a guide to drive the content of class or campus activity. 2014 was the first year that Seton Hill had data from outgoing seniors who had taken the survey as incoming freshmen. The survey showed positive movement on all items, but statistically significant changes in attitude for students who had participated in campus events and attended classes where gender violence prevention was incorporated. In the future, Seton Hill hopes to extend the assessment post-graduation.

Seton Hill faculty have presented on this project at several national conferences, and have had positive feedback from other colleges and universities about the project’s scope and depth.

The University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg campus joined this effort in 2014, committing to strengthening responses to victims of sexual assault and dating violence and systematically addressing attitudes that perpetuate domestic and sexual violence. Their project is led by a group of administrators, staff and faculty – the Committee on Gender Equity – that has followed a path similar to Seton Hill’s in their development. Policy change is underway, and faculty, staff and students are involved in incorporating prevention and culture change into coursework across disciplines. Researchers from Pitt Greensburg and Seton Hill are working together to measure the impact of these activities. Blackburn Center has established a goal of full participation by all college campuses in Westmoreland County. To achieve that, efforts are underway to engage St. Vincent College and Westmoreland County Community College, the other two regional institutions of higher learning, into this initiative.

Seton Hill Survey Results

Over the last five years the results of 12 to 14 items focused on the root causes of pervasive abuse of women have been consistently “troubling.” For example: “The degree of a woman’s resistance should be a major factor in determining if a rape has occurred.” The desired answer is “no” but many students still answer “yes.” The Assessment Team is exploring the underlying issues with those answers to determine what is at the root: do these students truly ascribe to the belief that if a woman doesn’t fight back “enough” she must have really wanted the rape to occur? The STAR team uses the survey results to tailor curricular and campuswide activities to address the themes where students need the most education.

Faculty across disciplines are supported to incorporate gender violence prevention into coursework. Examples include:

**Gender in the Media**

Communication students analyze the ways men and women are portrayed differently in the media. Following the course, student attitudes changed significantly, and they were less likely to support stereotypical roles that value men more than women (for instance, Men are, by nature, more capable of *leading than women;* and *There are certain jobs in which men should be given preference over women in being hired or promoted).*

**Arts for Community Change**

Art Therapy students *create art containing original photos and text that speaks to the root causes of gender violence. The pieces are shared, according to Assistant Art Therapy Professor Dana Elmendorf, “to stir discussion about root causes and to spark community change and dialogue.”*

Qualitative assessment showed shifts in the attitudes from most class members.

“I used to think of gender violence as an act between individuals in one relationship, but I now recognize how gender violence is learned socially. Relationships do not exist in a vacuum, they occur in the larger systems of the community.”

“The act of challenging the power is difficult, but I see myself developing a capacity to raise these important questions in conversation with others and still remain open to their response, as painful as that conversation may be.”

**Student PhotoVoice project:**

*“To me, this picture of toys I came across in a toy store makes me ask... ’What are we teaching our children?’*

“Why are boys taught to be emotionless, strong, working men and girls taught to be quiet homemakers? Where do these thoughts come from? Why are these ideas woven into the toys of our children?”

Located in Greensburg, PA,Seton Hill University is a Catholic liberal arts university with approximately 2,500 students. Initially a women’s college, it became coeducational in 2002.

TEN THINGS MEN CAN DO TO PREVENT GENDER VIOLENCE

I join Blackburn Center’s mission to end domestic and sexual violence by pledging to:

1. Approach gender violence as a MEN’S issue involving men of all ages, socioeconomic, racial and ethnic backgrounds.

2. Not look the other way if another man is abusing his partner or is disrespectful or abusive to women and girls in general. I will urge him to seek help. If I am not sure what to say, I will consult a friend, parent, professor or counselor. I WILL NOT REMAIN SILENT.

3. Have the courage to look inward. I will question my own attitudes and try hard to understand how my own attitudes and actions might inadvertently perpetrate sexism and violence and work hard toward changing them.

4. Gently ask if I can help if I think that a woman close to me is being abused or has been sexually assaulted.

5. Seek professional help NOW if I am or have ever been emotionally, psychologically, physically or sexually abusive to women.

6. Be an ally to women who are working to end all forms of gender violence.

7. Recognize and speak out against homophobia. Discrimination and violence against lesbians and gays are wrong in and of themselves. This abuse has direct links to sexism.

8. Educate myself and others about gender inequality, the root causes of gender violence and how larger social forces affect the conflicts between individual men and women.

9. Protest sexism in the media. I will refuse to purchase magazines, films or music that portray women in a sexually degrading or abusive manner.

10. Mentor and teach young boys about how to be men in ways that don’t involve degrading or abusing girls and women. I will lead by example.

For more information, contact

Blackburn Center Against Domestic & Sexual Violence, [www.blackburncenter.org](http://www.blackburncenter.org)

**II. Community Leadership**

Beyond this work on college campuses, Blackburn Center has also developed strategies to engage other groups in the community. A primary example is a community-wide annual event that the Center has been implementing since 2011: ***Walk a Mile in Her Shoes.*** This event invites men to don high heels and follow a milelong course to show their support of the Center’s mission to end gender violence. In the first year, 300 people participated; by 2015 that number had grown to 1,100 walkers. Participants, including men (in and out of heels), women and children, are from a cross-section of the community and include university administrators and faculty, student groups, athletic teams, business leaders, schools and community members.

Many communities have adopted the Walk a Mile event, but what has set Blackburn Center apart has been its intentional effort to use the forum to advance its primary prevention

strategies. The centerpiece of the event is a pledge to end gender violence (adapted from work of Dr. Jackson Katz).

Until recently, gender-based violence has been viewed as “a women’s issue,” but that is changing, even in this quiet suburban community. At the Walk, prominent men in the community (politicians, business leaders, clergy, university leaders, athletes and artists) make a public commitment to end domestic and sexual violence and call on other men to join them in taking action.

Beyond the Walk, Blackburn Center is reaching out to the community to effect change. One example is the ***Future Advocates of Blackburn (FAB)*** group, which engages over 100

young professionals in strategies to end gender violence. They attend public events, lead conversations with groups of family, friends and neighbors, and participate in social

media outreach, engaging people who will argue that gender violence is the victim’s fault.

**III. Communications**

“We believe the best chance of success in changing attitudes about root causes of gender violence is to engage the community in conversation. These attitudes are deeply embedded in social norms, so we expect this to be a long haul. Given that, we need to develop initiatives that can be supported over an extended period of time without requiring a lot of special funding.”

*— Ann Emmerling, Executive Director, Blackburn Center*

Early efforts to incite community conversation through billboards proved to be ineffective, generating no calls, emails or other responses. So in 2012, Blackburn Center shifted its focus to social media. For the first few years the Center’s posts went out mostly to a small cadre of people who would ‘like’ and sometimes add a comment.

Blackburn Center worked hard to tweak and refine their messages, and they were particularly successful on August 2, 2015, when their “Causes of Rape” post went viral. In short

order, the page had 11,000 likes and was shared 64,000 times. Facebook’s analytics showed that more than 5 million people saw the post, while the number of people following the

center’s Facebook page grew to more than 2,500 people.

“We put information out there to start a conversation,” Emmerling said. “We don’t want to be preachy. We need to be part of a community dialogue.”

In 2014, Blackburn Center revamped the organization’s website, making it more user-friendly and adding a new blog feature. Through the blog, Blackburn Center has been able to speak out about current events and important issues. This has given the center a platform to articulate its

mission and educate the community on topics central to ending gender violence. Its blog posts have been shared by other nonprofit organizations across the region, including its statewide partner, the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape.

After nearly four decades, Blackburn Center is still running its crisis hotline, counseling programs, shelter and advocacy services, providing this range of services to 3,000 people a

year. And the agency continues its education programming, constantly seeking new ways to engage the community in discussions about how to end gender violence.

The work is not done and Blackburn Center, despite its best efforts, is still needed.

But after 24 years of leading the center and 31 years with the organization all together, Emmerling said there has been progress. And most importantly, the level of real dialogue in the community about the root causes of gender violence is heartening.

In thinking about the possibility of making real change in the community, Emmerling comments: ***“This is the most hopeful I have ever been.”***

**What’s next for Blackburn Center?**

Over the next couple of years, Blackburn Center will continue to work closely with Seton Hill University and the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg and hopes to expand its partnerships with Westmoreland County Community College and St. Vincent University.

Additionally, it will focus on expanding its strategies for engaging men in the work to end domestic and sexual violence:

• Blackburn Center recently received funding to begin implementing Coaching Boys Into Men (CBIM) in area high schools. CBIM is an evidence-based sexual assault prevention program that trains coaches to talk to male high school athletes about respecting women and responding when peers are abusive. The Seton Hill football team – both coaches and athletes – will promote the program.

• The growing cadre of men who have become involved in Blackburn’s work over the past several years are being organized into an initiative called “Men as Allies.” The members of this group are trained as Allies and then serve as ambassadors in the community through a

speakers’ bureau to reach out to traditionally male groups (such as Rotary, social clubs, and sports leagues), through efforts in their own sphere of influence, or to author guest blogs and opinion pieces for social media.

• Plans are underway to enlist clergy to bring prevention messages into their congregations, building on regional efforts such as the Father’s Day Pledge to End Gender Violence.

FISA Foundation is a charitable grantmaking foundation dedicated to improving the lives of women, girls and people with disabilities in southwestern Pennsylvania. More information about other grant funded projects is available at [www.fisafoundation.org](http://www.fisafoundation.org). Other efforts to prevent domestic and sexual violence are highlighted at [www.SouthwestPASaysNoMore.org](http://www.SouthwestPASaysNoMore.org).

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