



Women's Center Update: Abusers respond differently to restraining orders

Lisa Michele Utzig
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Jazmin Gonzalez's murder shocked this community. The 22-year-old mother was allegedly murdered by her boyfriend Nov. 9, 2006, while at work at the Horizon Casino. Newspaper articles describing the event informed the public that Jazmin had a restraining order against her abusive partner. The discovery of this information raised questions throughout the community about the effectiveness of restraining orders.

A restraining order can be the first step on the road to a safer life for the victim and/or the victim's children, but it may not be the right option for everyone. Each individual in an abusive relationship has his/her own unique situation. Although the cycle of violence and the abusive partner share similar characteristics, each individual's level of safety is different. A restraining order can be a wake-up call for some abusive partners. The victim may have previously warned the abuser that he or she will seek assistance from law enforcement if the abuse does not stop. Following through with seeking protection from the courts sends a message to the abuser that the victim must be taken seriously. At this point, the abuser may back off, but other abusers may ignore the restraining order, and the situation could escalate.

An abuser does not typically take responsibility for his/her actions, and routinely blames other people or situations for their violence and abuse. These blaming behaviors, combined with other red flags (such as controlling behavior, lack of respect and extreme jealousy) can lead abusers to not care about the consequences of their actions. An abuser who is willing to kill the person they love does not care or respect their partner's life or their own life; therefore, a prison sentence poses no threat to this person. When an abuser adopts the mentality of "if I can't have you, no one will," the situation can be very dangerous for victims and their children. A woman in this kind of high-risk situation may want to consider a safe place to stay with family or friends, or possibly a domestic violence shelter program like the one offered through South Lake Tahoe Women's Center. It is situations like these when TROs, or temporary restraining orders, have been referred to by some as "just a piece of paper," "worthless" or just "no good."

Filing a restraining order can help victims of abuse reclaim power and control over their lives that abusers take from them. Once the paperwork has been filed and the court system grants the restraining order, this gives law enforcement and the victim leverage to take action. When a restraining order is in place, it becomes a crime for the abuser to call the victim, leave messages for the victim, or conduct any other harassing behaviors listed on the restraining order. California penal code section 273.6 lists possible consequences for breaking a restraining order, such as a \$1,000 fine and up to one year in prison.

If you or someone you know is in a dangerous relationship and you would like to speak with an advocate, or if you would like more information on obtaining a restraining order, please call our 24-hour crisis line at (530) 544-4444 or stop by our office at 2941 Lake Tahoe Blvd., across from South Tahoe Middle School. The Women's Center business office was financed through a low-cost loan from the Rural Community Assistance Corporation.

- Lisa Michele Utzig is an outreach coordinator at the South Lake Tahoe Women's Center.