
CASE STUDY

Domestic Violence Intervention Program Unconditional Shelter?

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This case examines the difficult choices facing a domestic violence shelter in crisis. Beth George had been on the run from her estranged husband with her two sons for three years. When the shelter hired Beth rather than another former resident (her roommate at the shelter) for a staff position, the roommate called Beth's ex-husband and told him where they were. Police arrested Beth, sent the children back to their father, and began an investigation of whether shelter staff had knowingly harbored a fugitive. The shelter had just begun a fundraising campaign for a new building, but all financial contributions immediately stopped, throwing the organization into financial crisis. The executive director and staff were under enormous pressure and faced possible criminal sentences. The board had to try to minimize the damage to its reputation in the media, figure out how to keep the organization from failing financially, decide whether to continue to employ Beth George and the executive director, who were under criminal investigation, and fend off attacks from fathers' rights activists.

The case explores the difficult management issues facing an organization and individuals in crisis. It examines how class, sexual orientation, race, and feminist ideology structure services to battered women. It also provides a window into the difficult job of front-line workers skating on the edge of the law as the law begins to recognize and protect victims of intimate violence. It invites readers to consider how one should decide what and whom to believe. Finally, it considers the significance of grass-roots feminist mobilizing to support feminist organizations.

ON DECEMBER 14, 1991, thirty-six-year-old Beth George had just finished mopping her kitchen floor, tired after her all-night shift as a counselor at the Domestic Violence Intervention Program (DVIP), a battered women's shelter, but looking forward to decorating the Christmas tree with her two boys, ages six and seven.

It was not to be: FBI agents stormed her trailer, arrested her, took her to jail in handcuffs, and sent her two boys back to their father in Arkansas. Barb Larpenter, a volunteer at the shelter whom Beth had thought was her friend, had recently phoned Beth's ex-husband, Jess George, and told him that Beth was living in Iowa City under the assumed name of Kathleen Ruddell. Beth claimed Jess beat her.

Although Beth had had temporary custody of her children pending divorce proceedings in Arkansas, she had failed to show up for her husband's visitation with the boys ten days after he had filed for divorce. In March 1989, a criminal complaint against Beth had been filed in federal court charging her with interference with a custody order, a felony. Beth had been on the run with the children using an alias for three years while Jess searched for them, flying at a moment's notice to wherever there was a credible tip.

Beth had confided in Larpenter when they were roommates at DVIP, where both had sought shelter. Both women had later moved on, securing their own housing, Beth more quickly than Larpenter, yet both had stayed connected to the shelter that had helped them get on their feet. Their friendship soured when the shelter hired Beth instead of Larpenter, the 1990 volunteer of the year, when it had an opening for a counselor.¹ Furious, Larpenter found work as a maid at the Holiday Inn and severed her ties with the shelter. Beth shone as a counselor.

Larpenter had phoned Jess George, who had hopped on a private plane with his Arkansas attorney, Bunny Bullock. They contacted a local family law attorney, Lori Klockau, to help them with the process of verifying the custody order and felony warrant with the local county attorney and FBI. Jess gave Larpenter \$100 for her trouble and paid another woman, Phoebe Kessler, \$100 to go into the shelter and verify that Beth was there.²

Armed with Larpenter's affidavit claiming that shelter director Pat Meyer knew Beth's true identity, Dan Bray (Klockau's law partner) was demanding action far beyond returning Beth's children to their father in Arkansas and putting Beth behind bars. He wanted "to clean up" the shelter. Bray accused the executive director and DVIP of knowingly harboring a felon. Moreover, he alleged that DVIP was "part of a national underground for women hiding children from their fathers" and called for an investigation of the small, nonprofit organization. He wrote to the superintendent of schools, calling for an examination of the Iowa City School District's procedures that allowed Beth to enroll her children in Longfellow Elementary School under false names. Bray took the position that abducting a child constituted child abuse and therefore demanded that the mental health center that had been counseling the boys release its records in case any therapist there had known Beth George's real identity. He wrote to the head of the Johnson County Department of Social Services alleging child neglect at DVIP. And he wrote to the state attorney general, calling for a change in what

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he called a “loophole” that put the mandatory reporters for child abuse allegedly in conflict with those who aided battered women. He called for the state to inspect shelters regularly.

The chair of the DVIP board of directors, Barbara Xakellis, called the news “a lightning bolt out of the blue”:

- One of DVIP’s staff members was in jail and had lost custody of her children.
- A long-time volunteer was working with lawyers, accusing the organization of everything from child neglect, to knowingly harboring fugitives, to making threats against her, to food stamp fraud, to bad housekeeping.
- The schools were coming under pressure not to enroll shelter students, whose parents might be fugitives.
- A vocal attorney was demanding that the shelter respond to his demands.
- The county attorney, J. Patrick White, was investigating the shelter, and agents of the Division of Criminal Investigation were issuing subpoenas to shelter employees.
- The local media carried headlines such as “DVP [sic] Accused of Sheltering Felon,” leading to articles that gave Dan Bray free rein to repeat Barb Larpenter’s charges and report on the happy reunion of Beth’s husband with his children while not reporting a response from DVIP and the feminist community. (The media rarely quoted Barbara Xakellis’s press statements, such as the DVIP board’s February 15 statement calling Larpenter’s accusations vague, February 17 statement condemning the attack on it by the media, February 18 resolution statement saying that anyone harassing someone coming forward with information would be removed from the staff or board, and February 19 statement saying Bray’s charge of harboring a fugitive was baseless.)

In the midst of a circuslike atmosphere, the crowded and understaffed shelter was doing its best to carry on, preparing for its annual fundraising auction. For the past four years, DVIP had increasingly relied on the auction for operating expenses and this year hoped to raise \$21,000.

DVIP was facing the most serious crisis since its founding. Staff had to decide first whether to cooperate with the investigation by agreeing to be interviewed. Iowa law extends to shelter counselors the same privilege as priests, lawyers, and psychotherapists,³ although it was less clear to participants whether that privilege extended to shelter volunteers and board members.

After putting down the phone from talking with investigators looking for DVIP’s executive director, Pat Meyer, Meyer’s seventeen-year-old son was convinced that his mom, who was out of town, was headed for jail. Her long-time partner, Susan, burned all her journals. The journals contained nothing about the incident under investigation, but she

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loathed the idea of police reading her private thoughts. Staff too feared they might go to jail. All worried that the shelter would go under just as they were beginning a capital campaign for a new building. What would happen to women seeking shelter if DVIP closed its doors?

The board had to decide whether to continue to employ its accused counselor, Beth George, once she was out on bail, and what to do with its executive director, Pat Meyer. Could either continue to work effectively while under investigation? What message did their continuing employment send to the community, the community from which they were seeking major financial support? How should board members cope with their own fear of being investigated and charged? How should they manage the public relations of the issue? Should board members speak to the press while they as individuals and the organization and its staff were under investigation? And how should they deal with the funding crisis? As soon as the newspaper articles started appearing, financial donations stopped. The shelter faced a crisis in confidence just as it was trying to expand.

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Background: The River City

With nearly thirty thousand students, the University of Iowa spans the Iowa River in Iowa City, a town with sixty-two thousand year-round residents. The capital of the state is Des Moines, 120 miles away. The University of Iowa prides itself on being more liberal and cosmopolitan than Iowa State University, the land grant university in Ames, where the schools of agriculture and veterinary medicine are located and famous for being satirized by Jane Smiley in her novel *Moo*. Smiley, like many other famous writers before her, including Flannery O'Connor and Kurt Vonnegut, had participated in the University of Iowa's prestigious Writers' Workshop, and her novel *A Thousand Acres* is set in rural Iowa. The University of Iowa's Carver College of Medicine is part of one of the world's largest teaching hospitals, attracting international researchers and students. With the law school, medical school, and arts programs, the University of Iowa and Iowa City have always been seen either as the progressive, artsy center of the state or as wacky radicals, depending on one's point of view. In the 1960s, for example, Iowa City was the seat of the state's antiwar movement. Fearing serious unrest in the shadow of Kent State's student killings, officials sent students home before finals one spring semester as National Guardsmen stood atop high-rise dormitories.

Iowa City is in Johnson County, known within Democratic circles as "The People's Republic of Johnson County" because of its progressive politics. It long had a socialist, Karen Kubby, on its city council. The ethos of the town is egalitarian, and virtually everyone sends their children to the public schools. Since Iowa holds the first presidential caucuses, party activists expect to have close personal relations with presidential candidates. In 1976, "the peanut

brigade” —Jimmy Carter’s field workers and volunteers—launched Carter’s campaign in a surprise upset in the Iowa caucuses. At least since then, Iowa, like New Hampshire, has been a bellwether state for presidential politics. Perhaps because they dominate, Democrats mostly fight with themselves rather than Republicans. Students who provide the bulk of labor for political campaigns and presidential caucus workers come and go, but the long-term residents who are actively involved in Democratic politics comprise a minefield of fragmented progressive alliances. At the time of the Iowa caucuses, the field of hopefuls is the largest, and people have long memories as to which activist was in the Babbitt or Jackson or Kucinich camp way back when.

Second-Wave Feminism

Second-wave feminism thrived in the Midwest. This great movement of the 1960s and 1970s attempted to further the unfulfilled agenda of the first wave of feminism, which won the vote. Iowa vied with Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Ohio for many important feminist firsts. Iowa City’s Emma Goldman Clinic for Women, opened in 1973, was the first independent women’s reproductive health clinic in the country, and Iowa City’s shelter for battered women (DVIP) began shortly after Women’s Advocates, a similar shelter in St. Paul, Minnesota, opened its doors in 1972.

The vibrant feminist movement and the University of Iowa were symbiotic. The university’s Women’s Resource and Action Center (WRAC), a house across from the student union, connected town and gown. WRAC was more than a university women’s center; it was a nexus for the wider women’s community and an umbrella organization for many other activities.

During this period, University of Iowa student Kristy Kissel had begun researching domestic violence for a class paper. She had approached WRAC to house a Comprehensive Education and Training grant to study whether sufficient need existed for a shelter, and the executive director, Linda McGuire, had agreed. When Kissel placed an ad in the local paper to determine the extent of domestic violence, she was quickly inundated with urgent pleas from women trying to escape terrible violence. The WRAC basement began to house the belongings of women in transition, and Kissel then pulled together a group of twelve to fifteen women to operate safe houses, intervening in the most dangerous cases. But the situation was too dangerous for both the women and those sheltering them as they tried to elude batterers. Kissel then went to the city council of Iowa City, showed that violence was happening right here in the river city, and demanded \$10,000 to open the first shelter. She also recruited the first board for the Domestic Violence Project (DVP, the DVIP’s parent organization). The

first shelter was always overflowing and unable to meet the demand. Staff were under enormous pressure, coping with overcrowding, women in crisis, serious threats of danger, and never sure their paychecks would clear the bank from week to week.

The presence of the university bolstered the feminist movement in many ways. The first women's studies classes drew heavily on community activists' expertise. Women's studies professors and students participated actively in local activities, staffing rape crisis lines, campaigning for the equal rights amendment, marching for gay pride, and rallying against the Supreme Court's decision in *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* (492 U.S. 490, 1989) restricting abortion. Feminist law students worked for the county attorney, and feminist law professors in the law clinics provided legal services to feminist organizations and women in need. And university people—undergraduate and graduate students from Iowa as well as the far corners of the world, staff, faculty, and their partners—sought shelter or, as policy developed, orders of protection.

As a movement of the 1960s, the student wing of second-wave feminism differed from the older, more mainstream women's organizations in not just the age of its members but the way it chose to organize and in its thoroughgoing critique of patriarchy, capitalism, racism, and imperialism. Consciousness raising encouraged women to explore the most intimate details of their lives, such as their sexuality, and develop new politics and theory. Many women explored sexual relationships with other women, spurred sometimes by political ideology, sometimes by short-term emotional needs, and sometimes by a deeply felt identification as a lesbian that they felt they could express for the first time. Feminist politics mandated that all organizational work be done by consensus rather than through a division of labor with leaders at the top of a hierarchy, branding such organizational models male. Long, intense meetings resulted. Movement work was all-consuming. Feminism was a core identity. And feminists felt deep personal ownership of "their" institutions, particularly the battered women's shelters and rape crisis centers.

The younger, more radical feminism grew out of the New Left and had some of the rigidities associated with emulating the Marxist quest for a single, all-encompassing theory of women's oppression. Third-wave feminists have been particularly vocal in criticizing the policing of appearance and behavior for political correctness.⁴ At the time, strict rules governed—no lipstick, no shaving, no pantyhose—and a dogmatic certainty about the rightness of the rules meant that violators were treated harshly. Professional and married women were suspect. What Latin American feminists call a *feministómetro* (a feminist yardstick) produced a cultural revolution—like fear, anxiety, and mean-spiritedness concealed under a thin veneer of the official story of the joys of sisterhood. Sometimes it seemed that feminism did not need enemies because feminists were already fully occupied devouring each other.

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Shelter work at the time was very much identified with radical feminism, although the distinction between radical and liberal feminists often obscures as much as it illuminates and women did not easily define themselves as one or the other. Radical feminists had developed a critique of sexism that saw patterns in the many forms of violence against women and used terms like *patriarchy* to denote a deep structure of oppression that permeated all aspects of life. Where liberal feminists such as Betty Friedan focused on rights of citizenship and employment, radical feminists such as Adrienne Rich and Mary Daly addressed the so-called private sphere of sexuality and the family. Rather than seeking to appease men and hold up heterosexual women as role models to gain more mainstream legitimacy for feminist causes like the equal rights amendment, radical feminists wanted feminism to challenge the heterosexual imperative and talk about rape, battering, and sexual slavery. Radical feminists were skeptical of working within the system for change, preferring direct action on behalf of women. Many women who worked at shelters were either drawn to the work because they shared radical feminism's critique of patriarchy or developed a radical edge after their experience of working with battered women. Their clients would come to experience the shortcomings of the police and criminal justice system. Volunteers and staff were often more radical than those who sought shelter, served on the board, or donated money.

Feminists did not operate all battered women's shelters (Reinelt, 1995). Most emerged from other kinds of institutions whose relationships with the feminist movement were more distant and complex, such as the YWCA or churches. Similarly, the profession of social work had a complicated relationship with the movement. Since its inception, social work has always included those who operate on a model of experts helping the downtrodden as well as radicals who seek to empower the disadvantaged to be agents of systemic change.

Domestic Violence

The extent of domestic violence in the United States is shocking. More than 90 percent of the victims of domestic violence are women (U.S. Department of Justice, 1994). The American Medical Association estimates that between 2 and 4 million women are beaten each year in the United States (Glazer, 1993). Violence by intimates is the largest cause of injury to women in the United States (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2003). Homicide is a major cause of death among pregnant and postpartum women, second only to car accidents and well above the risks of dying from complications resulting from pregnancy or childbirth (Chang, Berg, Saltzman, and Herndon, 2005). Between one-fifth and one-third of all women in the United States will be beaten by a partner or ex-partner in their lifetime (Mahoney, Williams, and West, 2001). Forty-two percent of the women killed in the United States are murdered by an intimate or former partner (U.S. Department of Justice, 1994). In Iowa, more

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than sixty-six women have been killed by abusive partners since 1990 (Domestic Violence Intervention Program, 2005). Iowa police respond to more than six thousand incidents of domestic violence a year (Domestic Violence Intervention Program, 2005).

In 1992, researchers estimated that there were 30,500 parental abduction cases. Only 15 percent ended in arrest, and “cases in which the complainant had a history of committing domestic violence were less likely to result in the perpetrator’s arrest” (Grasso and others, 2001, p. 7). In 1999, it was estimated that 203,900 children were abducted by family members (Hammer, Finkelhor, and Sedlak, 2002). Fifty-three percent of the perpetrators were the child’s biological fathers, and 25 percent were the biological mothers. Overall, 30 percent of abduction cases involve allegations of both child abuse and domestic violence. In about 25 percent of the cases, the abductors made allegations of abuse (Chiancone, 2001).

Pat Meyer explained that Barb Larpenter’s disclosure of Beth George’s identity was not unheard of.⁵ Conventional wisdom within the shelter movement was that men on the run tended to be caught because someone noticed that they did not seem to know how to care for children—change a diaper or feed them the appropriate food, for example. Women on the run tended to be discovered because someone betrayed them.

Among second-wave feminism’s most important projects was exposing the fact that many women were regularly beaten by male intimates, showing how neighbors, police, and clergy condoned the violence as “just life” through their actions or inaction, and changing laws and policies to express the community’s moral condemnation of such behavior. The first priority of activists was to secure women’s safety. Women survivors knew a police visit often resulted in a worse beating afterward. Police would try to cool the batterer down and then send him back in. Many wondered why women did not just leave—but where would they go? In fact, women were most at risk of being killed when they left. Batterers would find them, and the police, tiring of repeated calls, failed to answer. Many women, moreover, lacked the means to support themselves and their children. Feminists tried to change the question from, “Why doesn’t she leave,” to “Why does he batter?” and “How can we keep women safe?” Shelters tried to keep women safe and help them get on their feet by finding jobs, housing, and child care; helping them with their legal problems of divorce and custody; and helping them begin to tackle the difficult psychological problems resulting from long-term abuse.

Feminist policy advocates sought state funding for shelters and counselors. They established hot lines. They publicized the high number of women beaten and killed each year by intimates, and defended and called for leniency for women who killed their violent partners as a last resort. They worked to secure legislation requiring judges to admit expert testimony about the nature of battering. They labored to obtain orders of protection, making the batterer, rather

than the women and children, leave the family home, and attempting to secure for women a zone of safety around their homes and workplaces. They sued police departments that did not respond to calls of domestic violence.⁶ And they worked for mandatory arrest policies, making it more difficult for police officers to dismiss significant assaults after a cigarette and a talking to.

The domestic violence movement soon developed a reputation as one of the most contentious corners of the feminist movement. All of the most fundamental questions were at issue: What should be the relationship of feminists to the state? Many were hostile to the police, recognizing that many police officers were themselves batterers, made more powerful by their state-issued guns.⁷ Others thought that no progress would come without working closely with police officers who knew how dangerous domestic disturbances could be to them and were looking for new approaches and solutions. What should be the relationship of women to men? Some women saw men as violent by nature and believed that women must separate from them in every way. Others saw no feminist contradiction in heterosexuality and argued that men were victims, too—conditioned to violence by cultural imperatives of masculinity and in need of help and support. Some saw a feminist organization as for women only, governed by consensus; others saw shelters as nonprofit community organizations that needed sound management. And as was the case with all feminist issues at the time, feminism intersected with other forms of oppression based on race, class, and sexual orientation. Many lesbians worked within the movement, but few women of color did. Middle-class women often had more options; working-class and poor women relied more heavily on shelters over time.

Veterans of the domestic violence movement knew the weaknesses of the system. They had seen at close view its many failures and shortcomings. They had seen police side with batterers and judges identify with them. They had watched women lose their children—their greatest fear—and become impoverished through divorce. They knew that police often failed to respond and that even their best efforts could not keep women safe from their abusers. Every year thousands of women were killed by their partners. While they worked for systemic change, they did their best to help individual women and their children. They believed the legal system was stacked against women, feared for women's safety, and harbored few illusions about justice. Women victims also distrusted the criminal justice system because of their direct experience and what others, including their batterers, had told them.

The DVIP Board

The Domestic Violence Project's board predated the opening of the first shelter and the hiring of Pat Meyer as its executive director. The board, not the executive director, recruited new members, largely

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through word-of-mouth and friendship networks, but staff, the executive director, volunteers, and a board committee interviewed prospective board members, and the board as a whole voted on nominees. Board chair Barbara Xakellis recalls Meyer having a great deal of power with the board, which admired and often deferred to her. Board chair Harriet Logan recalls a clearer division between board and staff, with board members aloof from the management and operation of the shelter but active in the shelter itself. At one point, shelter volunteer staff served on the board, but according to Meyer, that proved divisive because they knew so much more about what was going on at the shelter.⁸ Meyer remembers much talk about establishing “a blue-ribbon board” that would include prominent people in the community, not just shelter volunteers and activists, and would seek people of wealth who were capable of making significant financial contributions and asking friends and businesspeople for contributions. Others felt the shelter needed to widen its circle of community support. The board chair in 1991, Barbara Xakellis, was relatively new to Iowa City, recruited to the board by the DVIP’s vice chair, Elizabeth Burns, a professor of family medicine.⁹ Xakellis was the administrator of the psychology department at the University of Iowa and had ties to the medical school through her husband, a doctor. Xakellis, who has a background in social work, remembers that board members were very involved in the shelter, volunteering hundreds of hours. She disputes that they were aloof, rich “do-gooders.” Logan, however, pointed out that being in and out of the shelter and serving as an active board member was not the same as knowing how the shelter was managed on a day-to-day basis.

Was the board divided between radicals and liberals or between middle-class professionals and wives and working-class women? Or between lesbians and heterosexuals? Understanding the conflicts as a simple class conflict between the more economically privileged women on the board and the less affluent staff and often poor residents would be simplistic. Class and sexual orientation were imperfect predictors of feminist ideology. A professional woman who had served on the board previously, Carol Thompson, was then the director of Johnson County Social Services. A progressive feminist social worker, Thompson strongly supported both Meyer and the feminist model and smoothed the way for all relations with the Department of Social Services. Another former board member, Loret Mast, was the ex-wife of a prominent ophthalmologist and herself a successful artist. Mast was a vocal critic of the system’s many shortcomings and a powerful voice for women to do whatever they needed to be safe. Just as you could not automatically know a person’s political position by her class or sexual orientation, you could not reliably discern it from her appearance. A board member who looked more like Betty Crocker than Andrea Dworkin was harshly criticized by radical feminists although she was one of Meyer’s strongest supporters. She apparently did not look like a radical feminist, and there was a

prevailing sense that one could judge feminist books by their covers. The archetypical feminist of the times, according to some board members, was an androgynous-looking woman with cropped hair who never wore makeup. Those who did not fit the stereotype were suspect.

But race and class did shape the perceptions of many board members toward the shelter. Meyer reported that many board members were appalled at the condition of the shelter; she had to tell them that for many residents, the shelter was the most middle-class experience they had ever had. One board member was shocked that the children were eating Froot Loops for breakfast. Another wanted to bring in a lamp and end table to really “bring a corner together.” But Meyer knew that with the number of preschoolers racing around, the lamp and table would be broken immediately. Board members volunteered to paint the interior to make it look better, hoping to improve the shelter one room at a time. One board member who was painting upstairs was appalled to overhear an African American boy say to another, “Don’t go up there; that white bitch is up there.” That was not how one should speak about guests in one’s home! Misperceptions about who came to shelters and what they were like were widespread. Meyer recalls David Morrell, the author of the books from which the Rambo movies emerged, calling her for research for a current project. He wanted to see some of the shelter’s menus, as if it had a five-star restaurant. Meyer informed him that the women did their own cooking. Sometimes they did not clean up. Sometimes food was left out and spoiled. Although staff and residents felt that they vacuumed constantly, the shelter, with so many adults and children crammed together, was often messy and chaotic.

Meyer’s account of the chasm between middle-class board members and residents and their failure to grasp the reality of shelter life contrasts sharply with Xakellis’s account of the mother of the children who called volunteers “white bitches.” Xakellis saw this resident as a huge problem for the shelter and not because she and her children offended volunteers or challenged their middle-class assumptions. She was abusive of her own children and created problems among the other residents. Xakellis was skeptical as to whether this resident had been abused at all and was unhappy that she had disclosed the location of the shelter to her alleged abuser, who dropped her off after dates. She thought Meyer was too soft-hearted in her “pro-woman” line of “women helping women” and thought this problem client was taking advantage of the shelter. Moreover, it became increasingly clear to board members that women were not using the shelter for temporary shelter while seeking a transition to other forms of housing; they were staying there for a long period of time or frequently returning after they had left.

Former board chair Gwenne Hayes-Stewart (who had operated one of the original safe houses) thought “it was Pat who didn’t get it.” Other shelters, such as the one run by Pat’s successor,

Cris Kinkead, had rules and enforced them. She felt the women had enough chaos in their lives and there was no reason for the shelter to be filthy. Another board member described Meyer as a hero who “successfully created an organization of women of diverse life situations devoted to the protection of women and their children” but analyzed the situation as follows:

Arbitrary and unstable labels such as “middle class,” “lesbian,” “heterosexual,” “wealthy” only signify in order to obscure personal interests and perpetuate egotistic illusions. The bottom line is cleanliness is hygienic; smoke filled rooms (with babies and children coughing and wheezing) are unhealthy; feces lying about in the rooms other than the bathroom are unsanitary; unkindness and disrespect are hurtful; mismanagement is bad for an organization, and stress debilitates.

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Despite a shortage of resources, DVIP enjoyed meteoric success as the grassroots organization evolved into a nonprofit organization listed by the United Way—a transition that many executive directors do not survive. By the 1990s, it provided support to five hundred to eight hundred women and children a year and responded to more than ten thousand calls on its crisis line. It had been scored very highly under the United Way’s system for judging an agency’s effectiveness and need. From its original safe houses and the basement of the women’s center, the organization had secured a building, remodeled it, and had plans under way to build a new one. Meyer worked well with police, was revered by the feminist community, and was recognized nationally as a leader and an innovator. Hayes-Stewart praises Meyer as an exceptional educator: “She taught us the right words” and “how to reevaluate tendencies we all have for victim blaming.” She communicated effectively across the board, from radical feminists to business leaders. “There was no one like her.”

But trouble was brewing. Demands on the shelter were growing, and Meyer could not keep up with the management tasks and take care of women in crisis. She failed to report on a federal grant DVIP held jointly with other agencies, imperiling the grant’s renewal, a significant source of funding for the organization. Board members intervened, and an overdue grant application to the county was, luckily, accepted late. In her embarrassment, Meyer told the board chair that she had submitted the report and reapplied, going so far as to search file cabinets in the presence of the board chair for nonexistent documents. Hayes-Stewart mused that what likely happened was that “some woman came in in crisis and that always took priority over administration.” Vice chair Elizabeth Burns observed that Meyer far preferred telephone counseling to organizational management, which she neglected.

The board felt some residents behaved intolerably toward Meyer and other staff and volunteers. Contributions seemed to go into petty cash and out again for groceries for women in need without regular

accounting. Some board members felt women took advantage of Meyer and the shelter and that Meyer was too free with money. Others noted that the shelter was about the dignity of women, not just domestic violence, and that women in crisis should not be nickel-and-dimed. During the preceding years, board members were upset about the management of the shelter—some going so far as to want to fire Meyer. Some believed that Pat Meyer had been the right person for executive director when the shelter began, but as its budget climbed over \$150,000, she could no longer meet the demands of management. But there was no money to move her to a job as program director and hire a manager, no money to allow her to work with women in crisis and delegate to others the tasks of management and accounting. In 1990, a tearful Meyer asked the board for a different role, feeling the job's growing management responsibilities were too much for her. Board members knew that the demands of the job were tearing her apart, but the wider feminist community felt she was indispensable and pressured her to remain with the organization, oblivious to the personal toll the work was taking on her. As she soldiered on, board members tried to fill the management void. Other board members remembered it differently: they saw Meyer calling on external support as a trump card when the pressure from the board for better management became too intense.

The Crisis Unfolds

Board meetings were open to the public only for the new business component for members of the public who had something to report. Once Beth George was arrested, board members and staff began to consult lawyers, who advised them to say nothing publicly as individuals or to the press. The media rarely quoted Barbara Xakellis, preferring the salacious details of Beth's fugitive existence and Dan Bray and Barb Larpenter's allegations of lesbian undergrounds and midnight death threats. Bray wrote to Xakellis demanding access to the board meetings and a list of all board members. He sent copies of Larpenter's affidavit and a list of his concerns to those he believed were on the board, although many no longer served. Moreover, he demanded that the board address his concerns over the next twelve months and that board meetings be held in public. The DVIP's lawyer, Margaret Poepsel, repeatedly questioned whom he represented and on what authority he was making demands, suggesting that he set out his evidence and concerns in writing.

Although the negative publicity went largely unanswered in the media, much occurred behind the scenes. News traveled quickly among the closely knit feminist community of Iowa City. Linda McGuire wrote an open letter to Dan Bray and sought the services of a skilled mediator, but her offer was rejected. University of Iowa business professor Nancy Hauserman wrote a lengthy letter to J. Patrick White, the county attorney, long considered an ally of the

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future of the
organization*

domestic violence movement, requesting a meeting. Xakellis's files contain more than one hundred letters to the editor or to White from community supporters of DVIP. An open meeting was called to rally support for Meyer and the shelter at Wesley House, an ecumenical community center that offered meeting rooms and housed a free medical clinic. About thirty feminist activists who were neither board members nor staff showed up to get more information and find out what they could do to support the shelter. The mood was tense. The person who knew the most, Pat Meyer, was present but guarded in what she would say, clearly overwrought and fighting back tears. No one knew what J. Patrick White was going to do, what would happen to Beth George, or what Dan Bray would do next. Without exchanging words, some of the women in the room assumed that Meyer knew about Beth's false identity, assumed that Meyer believed Beth was in physical danger, assumed that Meyer sheltered Beth with full knowledge, and approved of what Meyer had done. Others thought she did not know but was right to take what Beth said at face value. Others thought Beth George's lies to Pat Meyer were about to bring down the whole organization.¹⁰ Long-time Democratic stalwart and community leader Gertrude McQueen said, "I just can't stop thinking about that poor woman," meaning Beth, then being held in jail while her children were back in Arkansas with their father. The group was somber. What, they wondered, could be done to protect DVIP, Pat Meyer, Beth George, and the others, all under threat?

An open board meeting was called in late February to discuss the crisis. Long-time feminists pressed others to attend, even those who had had little to do with the shelter in the past. Some were told that the middle-class board was conspiring to get rid of Meyer because she was a lesbian, because she was a radical feminist, and because she unconditionally helped women in need. They knew little of the management difficulties. When Xakellis opened the meeting of more than fifty, an iconoclastic former employment lawyer and labor organizer, Clara Oleson, made a remark audible to all and clearly directed at Xakellis: "I *hate* middle-class women." Women broke into small group discussions that were tight-lipped. One could not help feeling that some people knew what was going on but they were not telling others. It was difficult to discern the fault lines, all of which were subterranean. It was also clear that the board legitimately feared for the future of the organization. Once board members were attacked as classist, liberal, and homophobic, to raise concerns about Meyer's management or to wonder whether harboring a fugitive jeopardized the organization would have been only to confirm that one was not a real feminist, as had been suspected all along. To criticize Meyer while the organization was under attack from the outside seemed to be aligning oneself with Dan Bray.

Xakellis recalls being confronted on the street by women who felt she was not sufficiently supportive of Meyer as well as by members of Bray's church who felt she was blameworthy for continuing to

employ Meyer. The interactions were face-to-face and personal in this small community, where one lacks anonymity in the grocery store, restaurant, video rental store, or on one of the few downtown streets. Four board members were the spouses of doctors or medical school staff. Xakellis's husband, for example, was told to "rein in his wife" for fear that her association with DVIP might hurt his chances of tenure. It seemed the crisis permeated everything. Once Bray began his crusade to "clean up the shelter," board members who had raised such concerns were framed as disloyal to Meyer, middle class, and aiding the enemy. Besieged board members, however, felt it was those on the outside who were aiding the enemy. As one board member recalls:

Some women took the easy way out and left for fear of losing face or popularity with certain ideological groups while others dug in their heels and fought to keep the shelter open regardless of criticism launched by those who weren't or didn't want to be informed or carry the decision-making responsibility for its existence. And women betraying/berating/beating up other women almost let the bad guys win.

Meyer's good relationship with law enforcement and the county attorney's office, built up over many years of hard work, was shattered. Law enforcement believed they had worked hard with DVIP as partners to make the system work. They knew if they called Meyer and asked if a particular person was in the shelter, she would not tell them, but she would work with that resident to turn herself in or make herself right with the law. They had won training grants together to improve services; one current governmental grant paid for part of Beth George's salary. Police would return women who were drunk and disorderly to the shelter rather than arrest them, confident that Meyer would deal effectively with the problem.¹¹ Police knew that when they were called to a scene of domestic violence, they could expect to be called again as the situation worsened. Yet when Meyer intervened, everyone would calm down. She would develop a plan of where the woman and her children would go for the night, and everyone could go to bed. Meyer seemed to many to be an exceptionally gifted miracle worker, capable of calming and mediating even the most difficult situations.

Beth's arrest ended that trust. Not only did law enforcement believe that Meyer and Beth should have worked within the system and that no one is above the law; they also felt duped. Here was a wanted person parading into the police station under their noses—and not just sheltered but employed by DVIP. They felt deceived and began to think the trusting relationship was a mistake and that they had been fools. Meyer tried to reach out to one of the officers with whom she had worked most closely, but he would not look her in the eye. Former board member Carol Thompson, however, reported that

Meyer's good relationship with law enforcement and the county attorney's office, built up over many years of hard work, was shattered

others in law enforcement called DVIP to see what they could do to help Meyer and thought the relationship could have been repaired. But Meyer and county attorney White worried they could not reestablish trust.

Although journalists pursued Xakellis at home and at work, staff and board members' voices were not heard in the media for the most part. According to board member Henrietta Logan, however, the wide community networks that new board members enjoyed with the establishment were paying off as they used them to rally support. After two months of one-sided press reports, Linda McGuire (1992) published a letter to the editor on February 25, framing the issues for the feminist community rather than allowing the media to do so. McGuire was a former coordinator of the Women's Resource and Action Center as well as an attorney who had worked in the county attorney's office for White. She was one of the most respected leaders of the Iowa City feminist community. McGuire questioned Dan Bray's motives and Barb Larpenner's truthfulness. She labeled as preposterous Bray's allegations about a national underground of women on the run¹² and called it part of the backlash Susan Faludi had just documented in her new book (1991). She praised Meyer's record and dedication and urged supporters not to try the case in the media.

Early in March, White arrested Beth for perjury and tampering with records for obtaining a driver's license under a false name, and he suggested that future arrests of shelter workers might be forthcoming if they had knowingly harbored Beth. The investigation dragged on. Early in May, the group Women Against Violence Against Women called for a rally on the courthouse steps to "express our anger at the tactics being used against the battered women's movement" and to urge the county attorney to drop the investigation. DVIP board chair Barbara Xakellis told the press that DVIP was not involved. Board member Gwenne Hayes-Stewart could only hover on the edge because her five-year-old son was not welcome at the rally, which was designated for women only. The banner headline on the flyer for the event satirized the investigation saying, "Crime Wave Rocks Small Midwestern Town: Scores of Women Nabbed with 'Phony' Driver Licenses." Rather than portraying the dilemma Beth George faced as working within the legal system or protecting herself and her children, the flyer constructed her crime not as violating a custody order and depriving an alleged batterer access to his children, but simply lying on her driver's license, ostensibly something many people do because Iowa driver's licenses include weight. The more than sixty women who gathered put on name tags that said "Beth George." When the speaker asked the crowd of women, "Why is my name Beth George?" they replied, "Because it could happen to any of us!" A second speaker called Beth "a woman of courage" and said that DVIP workers were being investigated for doing their jobs, offering shelter to women and children. A woman who was dressed as a witch likened the treatment of Beth George and DVIP staff to

witch hunts. Speakers relayed the statistics about domestic violence and put on a skit where a battered woman went first to her minister, who told her to pray harder and obey her husband, and then to a police officer, a lawyer, and a judge, all of whom blamed her for the abuse. Finally, she went to a woman who said, "I believe you; it happened to me." In a second skit, Officer Richard Testosterone said, "We have arrested a woman for the heinous crime of putting false information on her driver's license." Two women went through the crowd, urging women to compare the weight listed on their driver's license with their weight on a scale. Few women leaped onto the scale, but the point nevertheless was made.

When White came out of the courthouse during one of the skits, Gertrude McQueen belted out, "J. Patrick White, we're heeeeeereeeee!" Looking back, White expressed disappointment that his friends, such as McQueen and McGuire, did not just come into his office and discuss the matter. He saw the primary issues as the best interests of the George children and the fact that Beth George and perhaps others had taken the law into their own hands rather than coming to him. While the community rallied to their defense, wearing buttons that said "DVIP Unconditional Shelter," Beth had been arrested and lost custody of her children. Dan Bray was demanding action. White was investigating Meyer, staff, and volunteers, including board members. As the board gathered for its meeting, the agenda items included whether to continue employing Beth George and Pat Meyer, how to respond to Dan Bray, whether to hire a lawyer for the board, how to complete the remaining tasks for the fall auction and ensure its success, how to respond to the press, and whether to approve newly drafted practices and procedures.

Epilogue

At its annual auction, the DVIP board raised \$28,000, \$7,000 more than they had hoped for and more than they had ever raised before.

White's investigation dragged on for fifteen months, until April 29, 1993. After several months of strained relations with the board, Meyer says she offered her resignation and claims the board asked her to take time off instead. She agreed and said that when she came back, she wanted her position to be redefined, freeing her from management and giving her more time to work with women. According to Meyer, the only way the board could give her an extended leave was to call it a medical leave. The announcement left community members thinking she had had a nervous breakdown, which she denies. Everyone who saw her knew, however, that she was under considerable stress. Shortly after, she read in the newspaper a job advertisement for her position. She still feels bitter about the way she was, in her mind, fired. Others report that Meyer was indeed fired by the board. After working at a grocery store, she now works for a neighborhood center.

Beth George pleaded guilty to charges in Arkansas of fleeing illegally with her children. The judge gave her probation. Her ex-husband gained custody of both boys. County attorney White charged her with two charges of fraud for using fake identification, and the Iowa judge also gave her probation. White reported that once he could finally interview Beth after her trial finished in Arkansas, he found her to be a credible witness. He believed that her husband had abused her and that she genuinely believed, because of her husband's taunts, that she would never receive a fair hearing. The small-town Arkansas judge was a friend of her husband and had himself allegedly gained notoriety by throwing his own wife through a plate glass window. When he interviewed her, White found Beth to be remorseful, regretting that she had not realized that she had legal options short of running. Beth broke her silence on September 26, 1992, and gave a lengthy interview with the *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, describing the extent of the violence she had suffered and how when she called the police, they did nothing. Her husband repeatedly told her that he had the judge and police "in his pocket." When she confided her secret identity to a shelter director in another state, that director told her she had to leave but that she should go to DVIP because "it was one of the best."¹³

J. Patrick White deposed board chair Barbara Xakellis, and the subpoena included all employment records of Beth George/Kathleen Ruddell. One W-2 had the name Beth Benefield (Beth's maiden name) on it. Apparently, no I-9s had been done for DVIP employees. W-4s had the name Beth Page Benefield on it, although that name did not appear on payroll reports. An Iowa unemployment compensation form listed Kathleen L. Ruddell with a different social security number on it. A woman named Rose Metts did the payroll for DVIP and Pat Meyer signed the forms.

Fifteen months after Beth was arrested, county attorney White decided the evidence was not strong enough to support criminal prosecutions against DVIP executive director Pat Meyer or any members of the DVIP staff or the board. Meyer never agreed to be interviewed by investigators. In 2002, White received the annual Pat Meyer Vision Award for outstanding commitment to end domestic violence. In 2005, he announced his retirement.

Beth's ex-husband brought a civil action against DVIP, which its insurers settled for approximately \$40,000, far less than what he had sought.

Beth moved back to Dardenelle, Arkansas, to be near her boys. Her ex-husband was not a successful parent, and in an unusual twist of events, she regained custody within a year. She became an employee and spokesperson for the Arkansas Domestic Violence Movement. Tragically, her son Casey (Ryan) was killed in a car accident at age seventeen. She has since remarried.

Barbara Xakellis resigned as board chair after the episode ended and shortly after moved to Madison, Wisconsin. Twelve years later,

the new executive director, Cris Kinkead,¹⁴ wept as she tried to explain to new board members what had happened. More than ten years later, feminists in town remain embittered over J. Patrick White's fifteen-month criminal investigation, which they regard as a punishment in and of itself. The new board chair, Henrietta Logan, went to churches and service organizations, such as the Rotary Club, to widen the sphere of community support for the shelter. She recruited former mayor Susan Horowitz to succeed her. Horowitz baldly declared, "This is not a feminist organization." Horowitz actively courted Republicans who were devoted to DVIP. Because of Horowitz's drive, leadership, contacts, and willingness to persuade businesses to make in-kind contributions, DVIP paid off the mortgage on the new building.

Pat Meyer's exit and the transformation of the organization were difficult for many loyal volunteers who felt betrayed and cut off from the changed organization. According to Xakellis, the fifteen-month saga, "a sad episode in the history of a good organization," destroyed many lives. At least one board member's marriage ended. The shelter worker who had dealt with the FBI looking for Beth George at the shelter was herself a survivor of domestic violence. She became frightened and hysterical, convinced that she was going to be taken away, or killed by Jess George. Shortly after, she entered a psychiatric hospital.

The current board chair, clinical law professor Lois Cox, tells all new members of the board that DVIP is indeed a feminist organization. Every day, more women are beaten. More children observe horrible family violence. And more women are killed by intimates. In 1993, more than four million American women were victims of domestic violence.

Teaching Note

For a teaching note and discussion questions regarding this case, see http://www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/wpp/case_studies.html.

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Notes

1. According to board chair Barbara Xakellis, who served on the selection committee, the personnel committee received thirty to forty applications for the position. Director of Johnson County Human Services and board member Carol Thompson chaired the committee. Beth's credentials were superior to Barb's. Beth had a college degree and experience as a counselor at her church. As a volunteer, Barb had been too emotionally volatile, board members believed, and lacked the necessary interpersonal skills. Beth had done a good job as a counselor, vindicating the choice.

Pat Meyer's exit and the transformation of the organization were difficult for many loyal volunteers who felt betrayed and cut off from the changed organization

However, how much of her résumé was fabricated: merely her identity or her qualifications as well? One can only speculate, but Barb may have been especially aggrieved to have been passed over in favor of Beth if she felt Beth had lied about her qualifications. It was the task of the executive director, Pat Meyer, to check Beth's references.

2. From that point on, the legal relationships between the parties are more difficult to discern. Klockau stated that as a family lawyer, her work for Jess George ended after he regained custody; she did not assist him in his civil suit against the shelter. Klockau also stated that Barb Larpenter never hired her or her partner, Dan Bray, but that they did provide her a great deal of advice and assistance. A letter from Bray and Klockau to the director of the Community Mental Health Center says, "I represent Barbara Larpenter." It was never clear what, if any, legal claim Barb made and against whom. Pat Meyer's attorney, Davis Foster, questioned whether Bray and Klockau were representing Jess George or Barbara Larpenter and, if both, whether that represented a conflict of interest. Newspaper accounts quoted Dan Bray and Barb Larpenter rather than Klockau.

3. The Federal Family Violence Prevention and Services Act of 1984 provides that states receiving federal funding for their domestic violence prevention programs must develop and implement procedures for protecting the confidentiality of shelter clients. No exception is provided for reports to law enforcement. In general, the only legal exceptions to domestic violence shelter confidentiality tend to be if a shelter client is abusing or neglecting a child within a shelter or commits a crime against another shelter client or staff member (Takas and Bass, 1996).

4. Baumgardner and Richards (2005) define third-wave feminism as an evolution of the second wave by women who have grown up with the privileges of feminism, but also taking to heart the critiques of feminism from women of color, poor women, gay women, and women with disabilities. Third-wave feminism is influenced by postmodernism and is anti-essentialist. (Essentialism is the position that all women have one set of fixed biological characteristics that shape behaviors and abilities, such as a disposition toward nurturing, and all men have another, such as a tendency toward violence. Essentialists see the two groups as natural and dichotomous rather than possessing overlapping and socially constructed traits.)

5. Others speculated in retrospect about Beth's poor judgment in confiding in Barb, given that she had been cunning enough to have eluded the FBI for three years. They wonder if, since her children were sharing a room at the shelter with Barb and Beth, Beth feared her children might disclose something and so preempted that risk by telling Barb.

6. In *Town of Castle Rock v. Gonzales* (125 S.Ct. 1413, 2005), the U.S. Supreme Court decided that local police departments cannot be held liable if their officers fail to properly enforce domestic violence restraining orders.

7. Surveys of police officers self-reporting have found that 40 percent of police officers' families experience domestic violence compared to 10 percent of families in the general population (Neidig, Russell, and Seng, 1992). Because they carry guns, know where the shelters are, and know how to work the system, police officers who batter are especially dangerous. The International Association of Chiefs of Police is just one police organization that has developed policy on this issue. Diane Wetendorf (2002) has written a handbook for victims for the Battered Women's Justice Project on police domestic violence. In 1997, Senator Paul Wellstone caused a furor among opponents of domestic violence when he sought to weaken a gun law that denied a gun license to those convicted of domestic violence misdemeanors, including police (Byrne, 1997). For a fictional example, see Quindlen (1998).

8. According to former board chair Gwenne Hayes-Stewart, this division exists across nonprofit organizations. Volunteers and staff believe they are doing the "real" work of the organization. The staff operate at "the runway level" while the board is responsible for long-range planning, operating at the "50,000-foot level." The board tries to operate more like a business and is sullied, in the eyes of staff and volunteers, by their focus on money rather than the more noble work of serving women.

9. The DVIP board's practice was to designate a chair-elect a year before that person took office. Thus, the board would include the current chair, the past chair, and the chair elect, to secure a smooth transition. One-third of the board rotated off each year.

10. Who knew what when remains a puzzle to this day. Whether staff at DVIP knew about Beth George's assumed identity rendered them potentially subject to criminal prosecution and liable in Jess George's civil suit against DVIP. Barbara Xakellis, under oath, said she knew nothing of Beth's identity and that Meyer told her she did not know either. Barb Larpenter's sworn affidavit alleges that Beth confided in Barb and claims Meyer knew everything.

11. Board members commented that the prohibition against drinking at the shelter or being hung over and unable to get one's children properly prepared for school were rules Meyer strictly enforced.

12. Bray's allegation of a national underground is not without foundation, although the largest undergrounds were to help victims of child sexual abuse, an allegation that was not part of Beth George's case. For a discussion of an underground started by Faye Yager, go to http://www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/wpp/case_studies.html. Yager claims there were between five and ten known underground organizers in 1988. A 1988 *New York Times* article quoted Yager as saying that up to nine hundred women were housed in battered women's shelters ("Secret Network," 1988).

Attorney Dan Bray's allegation of an underground network that may have included some battered women's shelters was thus not as wild as it originally sounded to the Iowa City community. Beth George's case did not involve allegations of the sexual abuse of her children, the reason for the undergrounds. Board chair Barbara Xakellis did agree that there was a national network of shelters that tried to keep women safe from spouses who threatened them. To what extent the DVIP assisted Beth in assuming a false identity and to what extent it knew about her identity is disputed to this day. Ironically, members of the feminist community speculated that it was Dan Bray who was part of a network of fathers' rights attorneys. Bray had won custody of his children in his own divorce because, as a board member reported his ex-wife told her, "he was the better parent." He represented men who had become active parents and challenged the assumption that mothers should always win custody after divorce. He came to believe that women too easily could claim domestic abuse, thereby shifting the burden of proof on the husbands and fathers to prove their innocence.

13. Board chair Gwenne Hayes-Stewart disputes that this statement supports the position that DVIP was part of an underground sheltering fugitives from justice. She said people knew where the good shelters were, just as one knows which are the good schools of journalism. Back then, the best shelters were in Iowa City and Minneapolis.

14. Since I conducted this research, Kinkead has moved on to become the director of a homeless shelter in Hull, England. The board hired a new director. Lois Cox remains on the board but is no longer copresident. Because of conflicts between the legislature and the attorney general, in 2002 domestic violence funding was cut by 15 percent. In response to funding cuts, DVIP restructured its staff and reduced their hours. Twice a year, they issue direct mail appeals to the community, which responds more generously each time, although DVIP receipts were down, as were those of most other nonprofits, after 9/11. In 2005, DVIP celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary and served more than four hundred people at its "Souper Bowl."

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Note: An expanded bibliography and several appendixes can be found at http://www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/wpp/case_studies.html.