

WHY DOMESTIC VIOLENCE MONTH (DVAM) IS SO IMPORTANT

October 31st, 2022

According to the National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately 1 in 4 women (23.2%) and 1 in 7 men (13.9%) have experienced severe physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime. As Domestic Violence Awareness Month (DVAM) is ending, I think about how a survivor's experience continues to guide our mission and vision into the future. This year's unified message is #Every1KnowsSome1, and I cannot help but recognize how valid that message is. (National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017).

Since starting as President and CEO of The Center for Empowerment and Education (CEE), I think back to how my life could have been with access to the kinds of services and resources that CEE offers. As a survivor of domestic violence, I know how vital our resources are to the community. I often wonder would my path to recovery have been less rocky and littered with debris if I knew my legal rights and if I had access to professional support and advocacy? Would I have encountered fewer barriers? Would I have worked through the trauma and aftermath of the violence differently? I do not want to wonder that for anyone else. Our services are vital to help a victim navigate through trauma and into the healing process. We strive to ensure that our clients find safety and are empowered to gain or regain their voice so that they may become their own best advocate.

I know that if I had an advocate like CEE provides, my life would have taken a completely different path. I also believe my path was my path for a more significant reason. I know that every moment of my lived experience has led me to where I am today. I know the struggles a person faces when their abuser can escape an arrest because they are connected to the military, and the allegations were not taken seriously, even with witnesses. I know the fear as you watch your abuser sit in handcuffs while you quickly grab enough items to leave the house for the night while he "cools down." I know the anxiety a victim feels when they quietly hide money for an escape and make plans to leave. I know the struggles of trying to file a temporary restraining order and hearing the court say that there is no way to enforce it on an abuser living in another state. I know the feeling of shock to hear from the courts that the best option to protect myself from further violence was for me to inform my abuser that there was a restraining order. I also know that my lived experience can have a more significant and far-reaching impact to change systems utilizing living experience as an expertise.

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What is lived experience? Lived experience is defined as "The experience(s) of people on whom a social issue, or combination of issues, has had a direct impact." (Sandhu, 2017). When I think of that definition, it makes me think that as a social sector, we still have a lot of work to do to elevate the voices of those with lived experience and look at them as experts based on their experience. Over the past fifteen years working in the nonprofit sector, I have sat in rooms with executives, decision-makers, and stakeholders, hearing many say that those with lived experience get in their own way and are looked at as a barrier instead of an asset. I questioned whether I would ever come forward as a survivor because people might look at me differently or think that because of my lived experience, that somehow my vision or judgment was clouded. I moved past that fear because I wanted to model how lived experience is an asset.

People with lived experience should not be considered as the walking wounded but instead should be looked at as someone with expertise because of their experience. Their expertise can affect lasting change. Because of the path that a victim has walked, new policies and laws are born. It takes these experiences for the decision-makers to put a face to a story and understand the significance of their role in developing, passing, and implementing trauma-informed processes, policies and laws. We need to embed lived experience and the voices of survivors into every aspect of interpersonal violence programs and advocacy. We have work to do but CEE is here to continue to spark change, be the leader in our region to prevent and end violence and empower victims to gain or regain control of their lives.

DVAM might only be one month long, but we walk alongside survivors daily at CEE. CEE is committed to elevating the voices of those with lived experience to impact systemic change to help clear the path for those walking it in the future. CEE will continue to be an organization that lifts up and encourages survivors to no longer be silent, to support one another, and become one voice with a vision to end the violence.

CEE continues to be a client-focused organization that empowers clients to make their own decisions. We know that the individuals we work with have a unique story that requires a client-centered response to meet their needs. We support each survivor as they work through the trauma of violence.

We want to remind our community that we are here. If you or someone you know needs support, our no-cost confidential hotlines are available 24/7.

Ashley Dunn, President & CEO

 **24/7 Domestic Violence Hotline (203)731-5206**
24/7 Sexual Assault Hotline (203)731-5204

 **TheCenterCT.org**

References
National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2017). "The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2010–2012 State Report." Retrieved from National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/NISVS-StateReportBook.pdf>
Sandhu, B. (2017, July). The Value of Lived Experience in Social Change: The Need for Leadership and Organisational Development in the Social Sector. Retrieved from The Lived Experience: <https://thelivedexperience.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/The-Lived-Experience-Baljeet-Sandhu-VLE-summary-web-ok-2.pdf>