

**About Health TV with Jeanne Blake**  
**Gay Domestic Violence**  
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JEANNE BLAKE: Welcome to *About Health* TV. I'm Jeanne Blake. What images come to mind when you hear the words "domestic violence"? Do you see a woman being abused by a male partner? On this edition of About Health, we're going to learn about domestic violence between people of the same gender. Surveys show that one in four gay men and woman have been or are victims of domestic violence. Here to talk with us about the subject are representatives of the Gay Men's Domestic Violence project. Curt Rogers is executive director, and Joseph Brescia is the director of client services. Welcome, both of you, and thanks for coming to talk about this subject. Curt, why don't you give us some background. You were founded in 1994, you founded the organization. What inspired it?

CURT: Basically, Jeanne, I exited an abusive relationship myself. At the time I left, it was after attempted murder, and I needed to go into hiding. I needed shelter. And I was denied shelter by mainstream domestic violence programs.

JEANNE BLAKE: Really? You were told that you didn't fit the criteria because you're a man?

CURT: Yes, and it wasn't even quite that nicely put.

JEANNE BLAKE: What did they say?

CURT: "We don't serve men." And one shelter just even hung up on me.

JEANNE BLAKE: Tell us a little bit about the circumstances – it's a shocking sentence to hear that you were a victim of attempted murder. Tell us about what the circumstances were. I think it will help us understand the difficulties people have in leaving an abusive relationship.

CURT: Well, it was about three years into the relationship, so it was the end of a long escalation of different events. That night specifically, it was becoming clear to my partner that I was wanting to leave and that I was going to leave. Actually, he said at one point during that night that if he couldn't have me, he didn't want anyone else to have me, and that was why he was going to kill me. During the

rest of the exchange that happened, I was able to talk him out of it, but it was a long ordeal, about a three-and-a-half-hour process while I was being restrained.

JEANNE BLAKE: I can't even imagine what goes through one's mind. Had he – I'm imagining that he had depicted violent behavior before.

CURT: Within the relationship and outside of the relationship.

JEANNE BLAKE: But you stayed. And you know people say this all the time, we've done programs about this before, and people who don't understand the cycle of domestic violence will say, "Why didn't you just leave during this time?"

CURT: It doesn't usually start out with the violence. The first year of our relationship was really rather incredible, and by that point in the relationship I was very much in love with him, and the abuse and control that started at the beginning was small, a small piece of isolation behavior here, a manipulation there, and I – and I think most other victims – don't identify it as domestic violence at that point. You rationalize it, and once you've rationalized something that's that small, it's easier to rationalize the next piece. Where do you draw the line, and when do you finally say I can't be here. For me it was when there was a clear attempt at murder, that's what brought me to a level of awareness that I said I have to get out.

JEANNE BLAKE: And how did you finally exit safely?

CURT: There wasn't a shelter available to me, so that next day I went into hiding. I was planning to leave the state, but my co-workers stopped me. They put me up in one of their houses, and I lived out of my boss's parents' house for about a month and a half before finally getting my own apartment on the other side of the city and slowly going back to work.

JEANNE BLAKE: And obviously that was six years ago, seven years ago. You've done a lot of work to help other men and women who are in your situation.

CURT: Since then, it took me about a year and a half to restabilize myself, and then it became pretty clear to me that it was important for me to make sure that other gay men who came along the same path of experience that I did didn't hit the same discrimination that I experienced.

JEANNE BLAKE: Were you, then, after this experience and your co-workers knew about it, did you start hearing about other people who had been in similar circumstances?

CURT: Some, but not that much. There's not that much – at that time there was very little information that was out about gay male domestic violence.

JEANNE BLAKE: But anecdotally, when you started to recognize a need?

CURT: That came more once I actually started the organization, started speaking out. We did our first public forum in '94, November of '94, about 100 people came to the Boston Public Library. That was just the first of several speaking engagements we did, and after every engagement people would come up to me and would say, This happened to me, you're the first person I've been able to tell. That's when I started to get the awareness that there were a lot more people out there that aren't even on our radar screen, because they've never told anyone.

JEANNE BLAKE: We'll talk about some of the reasons – and Joseph, we'll weigh in with you about the reasons you've heard over the years for people being afraid to talk about it. But let's first establish what is the Gay Men's Domestic Violence project.

CURT: We are a grassroots, statewide organization. We have two focuses: One is education, and one is direct services. Our education is to raise awareness, not only within the gay male community that domestic violence exists, that one in four gay men experience domestic violence, but also that there's a resource for them to turn to. And the other side is client services, which provides support and transition to gay men.

JEANNE BLAKE: How do you do that?

JOSEPH: We have a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week hotline that allows men to call us and to speak to someone who could offer them supportive counseling, legal advocacy, offer them the ability to transition into a safe home if that's what they need, to help them think through the process, because frequently they're so confused they may need someone to talk to, to help understand what they're going through.

JEANNE BLAKE: Can you explain what that network of safe houses is? What does that look like physically? It's obviously the response to Curt not having a place to go, but you don't have a shelter in a neighborhood.

JOSEPH: That's right. We made the decision that we couldn't have just one building, because being the only agency of its kind, we realized that one single shelter would be recognizable, so that anyone who was battering a particular victim would be able to locate them, and that would jeopardize their safety, of course. So we utilized what was being used in the Wilmington area, safe homes, which are provided by volunteers offering their own private homes and providing short lengths of stay to stabilize the individual through crisis.

JEANNE BLAKE: And your funding comes from?

JOSEPH: From the state.

CURT: We also get federal funding through the Victims of Crime Act. The state money comes from the Department of Social Services and the Department of Public Health. The Boston Foundation also funds us, and we get funds from individuals in the community.

JEANNE BLAKE: The U.S. Department of Justice has recognized your program as – let's see, I wrote it down – as an innovative new program. What kind of criteria – Joseph, you're smiling. You're proud of that.

JOSEPH: I'm proud of Curt more. He is very innovative. He has created an incredible organization.

JEANNE BLAKE: We know to build an organization like that, it takes determination, persistence, and innovation, so I think you're right. But that had to have helped, I think, a lot – to be recognized by a federal agency like that will help, I would think, take care of some of the criticism that you might be hearing within the broader community. A lot of the myths that are associated with domestic violence are probably enhanced around gay domestic violence, that – and we can go through some of this with you, but go ahead.

CURT: Actually, where it helped us the most wasn't so much in the gay community, it was in the mainstream domestic violence community.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's what I meant. I probably wasn't that clear, but when I mean the broader community, the city at large, who look in and say, Well, what do they expect? It's the discrimination against the gay community, they're going to think that you're involved in strange relationships anyway.

This is the bias, and this is discrimination that the gay community faces so often. I think, hopefully, it helped to legitimize the issue and the work that you're doing.

CURT: It also fed into starting to dismantle the gender bias around domestic violence as well. It's not just the homophobia and the discrimination there, but the unwillingness to look at men as victims of domestic violence.

JEANNE BLAKE: What do you think is at the root of that?

CURT: Domestic violence, the mainstream heterosexual female domestic violence movement grew out of the feminist movement, and so it's tied in to violence against women. So a lot of the group thought about domestic violence is that domestic violence comes out of sexism, comes out of male oppression of women, and that line of thought doesn't allow for a man to be a victim of domestic violence, whether the perpetrator is male or female.

JEANNE BLAKE: What kinds of obstacles are you – you said something very interesting before, that I heard that you're having to work with people on the hotline to help them understand that this really is abuse. Can you give me an example of someone that you've helped get to that point? I know that women who are experiencing domestic violence – I have a friend who went through that situation in Florida, and it took two years to recognize this was abuse. The guy hit her. ... I can only imagine that it's because of the things that Curt has said, it's even more difficult for gays in these relationships. I wonder if you could shed some light and give us an example of someone that you, as the director of client services, have helped bring to that awareness.

JOSEPH: I think, rather than more specifically, one of the things that happens generally is that all of these men are talking about a sense of confusion. They usually speak from a place of hearing this other person's voice rather than their own. They frequently describe the situations as "I'm told that I don't look right, that I don't dress right, that I don't behave right when we're together." There's a sense of shame that these people experience. So they're frequently talking from that place of the way that I used to see myself, the way that I used to think and the way that I used to be, and then in terms of how they're experiencing themselves now, and that's usually through the eyes of the other person. So they're having a hard time trying to figure out what to do, because they're in response to somebody else rather than in response to their own intuition and their own sensibility.

CURT: But you also asked what's the difference for a gay male that's experiencing domestic violence, as opposed to a heterosexual woman. One of the issues that plays in to this is that there are relatively no healthy role models, so gay men who are in, say, their first gay male relationship have limited awareness of the community. If they're told by their partner, This is what a gay relationship is like, they don't have the reality test against that to know that that's not necessarily true. That's something that happened in my relationship.

JEANNE BLAKE: How did you get that sense of reality back? Who gave that to you? You didn't have the Gay Men's Domestic Violence project.

CURT: I didn't. And I didn't ever label my relationship as domestic violence until, after the attempted murder, I met with a victim advocate who labeled my situation as domestic violence. I went to the library and started reading up on domestic violence, and there was my relationship in these books. It also gave me a road map for how to get out. But having the awareness that that was what was happening to me, the self-awareness, the self-identification, is what helped get me out of the relationship.

JEANNE BLAKE: Why do you think you were vulnerable to that?

CURT: Isolation happens in domestic violence relationships. I think for gay individuals, it's even more. I wasn't out to my immediate family. They didn't live near there, they were down in Georgia, so I wasn't talking about my relationship with them. I really wasn't talking about my relationship at work, because even though work was a supportive environment, it wasn't comfortable. Maybe it's my own internalized homophobia, but it didn't feel like a comfortable place to be sharing my relationship. So I wasn't sharing the dynamics of my relationship, where I think I might have if it had been heterosexual relationship.

JEANNE BLAKE: Maybe not.

CURT: Maybe not.

JEANNE BLAKE: There's so much shame around being – and I think Joseph has spoken so well to how subtle it can be, that one thinks on some level – and I'm wondering if you did think it, for a time – I deserve some of this.

CURT: No, I never actually went through the “I deserve some of this,” but I did go through the “Well, maybe this is what gay relationships are like.” I may have been too ashamed to share some of the more stark elements of abuse, but I would have shared the more mundane things that were happening in the relationship that other people could have caught on to were controlling, and might have brought in the intervention of, You know, this sounds like controlling behavior.

JEANNE BLAKE: Such as?

CURT: Such as telling me what I should wear, telling me who I can talk to, who I can spend time with, limiting how I should be spending my money. Things that, at the time, because I didn't have the awareness, I was definitely not labeling as abuse or domestic violence. And if I was chatting with someone about what was happening with me and my partner, it would have come up.

JEANNE BLAKE: Does that sound typical to you?

JOSEPH: Yes, it does. But something passed by us that I want to kind of go back to, is that victims aren't necessarily vulnerable to abusers. People who abuse are very selective, and they're very watchful. They look and they see where people's strengths and weaknesses are, and there's a preying that happens, and they watch and they learn how to manipulate those particular things that maybe are actually attributes, that may be qualities of somebody's personality in other circumstances, but for this relationship they use those qualities as a tool, a weapon against the person. So if somebody is perhaps a little vulnerable in an area, they will capitalize on that.

JEANNE BLAKE: I think it's really important that you pointed that out, because I think that what I said could be interpreted as saying that he in some way was experiencing low self-esteem, or there was a reason he was vulnerable, and I think that's a really wonderful way that you clarify the way a person can hone in that is looking to manipulate a situation, that maybe this is a person who does a lot of giving, so they'll take advantage of that. And in a healthy relationship, that would be an attribute. I like the way you described that. I'll tell you what. We're going to take a quick break, 30 seconds, so don't go away. We're going to show the 800 number, along with the poster that you use for your campaign, and when we come back we'll talk about that campaign. We'll be right back.

[BREAK]

JEANNE BLAKE: We continue our discussion on About Health now with Joseph Brescia and Curt Rogers, both of the Gay Men's Domestic Violence project. You do a survey every year that has given you a wealth of information, information that, because of the nature of the denial and the shame around gay domestic violence, you might not otherwise have. What has been some of the most illuminating information from that survey?

CURT: We've touched briefly on the fact that one in four gay men experience domestic violence. That survey gave us that information and was actually the first information of its kind that came out nationally.

JEANNE BLAKE: Were you surprised by that?

CURT: Not really. The same statistic is in heterosexual relationships.

JEANNE BLAKE: I don't know why people think it would be different. A relationship is a relationship is a relationship. Go on.

CURT: Other startling statistics that came out of the surveys is that the laws of Massachusetts around domestic violence do apply to gay male relationships. However 87 percent of gay men in Massachusetts are unaware of that. So they don't know the laws that protect them. And less than 1 percent consider the police as a resource, 70 percent can't list any resource for a victim. So here you have this huge chunk of the gay male population experiencing domestic violence that they don't think the laws apply to them, they don't think the police are a resource, and they can't name any other resource, so they're further isolated and trapped and not reaching out for help.

JEANNE BLAKE: Joseph, do you find that when people who call the hotline find out this information, which I assume is one of the ways they find out that there is help available, that they're willing to access it? Or is there still a hesitation because of a lot of the discrimination?

JOSEPH: There is still a lot of hesitation. People are very cautious. There are number of reasons why members within the gay community don't want to come forward, particularly in front of courts. They would have to identify their same-sex relationship, thereby outing themselves, that may jeopardize their jobs or their standing in the community and other issues along that line. So they're cautious about that in and of itself. Then, just whether or not people will recognize same-sex relationships and the quality of

that relationship exists in and of itself. So they're concerned that they won't be treated fairly, even within the system, even though the law stands there to protect them.

JEANNE BLAKE: Curt, let's go back to talking about when you got out of your relationship. You said, if I heard this correctly, it took you about a year and a half to sort of get back on your feet. Is that right? Emotionally, kind of straightening out your thinking around it.

CURT: I would say I was pretty well grounded again within four to five months, but to start actually being in a place where I could work on something for other people, that took me almost an additional year.

JEANNE BLAKE: Can you talk about what that process was? We talked a lot about how one feels when they get there, the isolation and feeling of powerlessness, would be an adjective that we could use appropriately. I'm wondering, for others that might be listening – men and women, actually – how you rebuilt that part of who you are.

CURT: I've never talked about this before. I've never thought of it. But here goes. ... There was a lot of loneliness, because I had to isolate myself from all of my friends, because that was a way back to me for my obsessive partner. There was a lot of loneliness. I can't really say it's a wonderful thing to look forward to, that healing process, what's good to look forward to is the freedom after you regain your footing, your grounding, and to know that you can spread out a new network of friends that are going to be healthy, and you know now what you don't want. I personally have a stronger filter as to who I let in to my life, and I don't allow for controlling and abusive behavior.

JEANNE BLAKE: Some people might be listening and wondering how it is now that you live in the same community ...

CURT: My partner committed suicide a year and a half after the relationship. That's actually what allowed me to start speaking publicly. I spoke for the first time a month after his suicide. I wouldn't have been able to, he was too obsessive and too violent.

JEANNE BLAKE: You still felt threatened.

JOSEPH: This reminds me of a man who traveled across many states that we provided services for here in Massachusetts. He had crossed half the country and his batterer pursued him ... and we had to continue helping him to be safe from this man.

JEANNE BLAKE: What would you say to other people who are living in that kind of fear and terror, and under that control?

CURT: Start talking to people. Let other people know what's going on inside your relationship.

JEANNE BLAKE: Then some of the distortion or confusion ... might start to dissipate, you might get a clearer picture.

CURT: Yes.

JOSEPH: We need each other to understand what is really happening. People who batter utilize a variety of tools to manipulate the reality of the person they're abusing.

JEANNE BLAKE: Your national campaign has drawn a lot of attention to your organization and that has resulted in a lot of people calling your hotline. If someone wants to sit in an educational forum as you described, that you started seven years ago, how can they find out about that? How can they access one of those community forums?

CURT: We don't have our forums necessarily publicized, but if an organization were to contact us, we would be more than happy to come out and bring a presentation to their group, even if it's a small group within a person's home. We've done presentations and events at people's homes as well.

JEANNE BLAKE: And you have a presence at Gay Pride Day every year.

CURT: Absolutely.

JEANNE BLAKE: OK, so it's easy to find you guys. We'll give the number National Hotline number again: 1-800-832-1901, and because it's a national hotline folks in the other cities that air *About Health* TV will be able to call and talk with you also on this toll-free telephone number. Thanks so much for coming in and talking about this subject, and Curt for sharing a very painful story.

And we'd like to thank you for joining us on this edition of *About Health* TV. I'm Jeanne Blake. See you next time.

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