

CITY LIMITS

WWW.CITYLIMITS.ORG

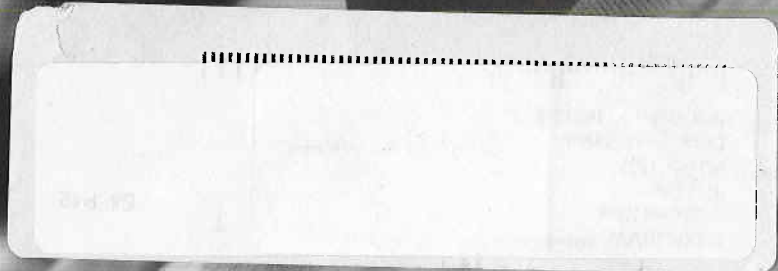
INSIDE:

- STOLEN ANY WELFARE LATELY?
- CRIME RATES: AFTER THE FALL
- WHEN A NEW MORTGAGE IS EVEN WORSE

A Troubled Age

Tough times for New York's youth

Vol. 34, No. 3
July 2010



Early Warning System

Fighting teen dating violence begins with recognizing it



Participants at a Day One session weigh in on whether they think certain teen dating behaviors are abusive or not.

On a midday afternoon in early April, Whitney Richards-Calathes, 24, poses a question for eight female teenagers to mull at Landmark High School in the Chelsea section of Manhattan. "Can you give me some examples of physical abuse?" she asks. Without skipping a beat, the students call out answers in rapid succession. Suddenly, one teenager—who projects her voice loud enough to be heard by all—eagerly offers her response. "Biting her toes!" she yells as laughter fills the classroom. "I never heard that one before," Richards-Calathes, a workshop coordinator at the Manhattan-based nonprofit Day One, says as she writes the answer on the blackboard.

It's a brief moment of levity in an otherwise serious session exploring everything—from verbal abuse to sexual assault—that characterizes teenage dating violence in New York.

Ten percent of New York City teens say they were physically assaulted sometime in 2005 by their partners, according to the city Department of Health and Mental Hygiene's 2007 youth risk behavior survey. Similarly, the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention found in 2006 that 1 in 11 teens nationwide also experienced dating-related violence. As a result, teen-dating abuse is garnering more attention than ever before.

Day One was the first local organization to solely concentrate its efforts around New York City teens and young adults aged 12 to 24. Founded in 2003, the group has combined violence-prevention workshops with legal advocacy and support services, a survivors' network and awareness campaigns targeting colleges and universities.

With six staffers—including an in-house attorney who dispenses free legal advice and also provides direct representation—Day One places strong emphasis on safety and privacy. "Our approach is always to figure out what kind of risk this person is facing immediately and what is the right course of action for them," says Stephanie Nilva, Day One's executive director, who previously handled domestic violence cases as an attorney with Legal Services for New York. "We do whatever they want us to do. If they want us to call their parents, then we do. If they don't want us to, then we don't. Often, there's a lot of complex issues involved, and our first priority is to ensure their protection."

For years, Day One and a coalition of advocacy groups urged lawmakers to provide New York teens in abusive relationships with access to civil courts to obtain orders of protection against their partners—an effort that culminated in a 2008 New York state law. "Many young people don't want to go through the court system no matter whether it's civil or criminal,"

says Nilva. "But this option is far better than the criminal courts because of the fear factor."

For Day One, equipping teens with the tools to protect themselves from potential abuse also encourages them to troubleshoot among peers. "It's important to know the warning signs," Richards-Calathes tells the students at Landmark High School, one of nearly a dozen sites she visited across the five boroughs in April alone. "No one says, 'Let's go to a movie, and in four months I'm going to abuse you.'"

As Richards-Calathes' session at Landmark concludes, she offers the story of a young woman who meets a man named Christopher. The students are asked to raise red strips of paper whenever they hear something in the tale that should trigger a red flag.

Richards-Calathes begins to describe a classic boy-meets-girl scenario. Lulled into a false sense of security, much like the teenage girl described in the story, the students provide resounding oohs and ahs as the relationship steadily progresses. But it isn't long before the story's main subject finds herself isolated, tracked via cell phone and, eventually, physically assaulted by her boyfriend.

By then, all the students waive red paper strips. But earlier in the narrative, the girl was told by her boyfriend to spend more time with him and less with her longtime friends. Only one red flag went up. The rest of the class would have given the guy one more chance.

—Curtis Stephen