

Speakers pull veil off abuse

Peace Breakfast lauds victims, law officers

By Mary Maraghy

Clay County Line staff writer

Many eyes brimmed with tears as Cat Bowden told about her experiences with domestic violence: a mother who burned her with cigarettes and chained her, a father who sexually abused her and later, a spouse who beat her and held a gun to her head.

"Domestic violence is one big giant secret," said Bowden, who was the guest speaker Friday at the first Clay County Peace Breakfast, which kicked off October as Domestic Violence Awareness Month. "We shouldn't have secrets. It's all about education, sharing and not keeping secrets anymore."

Michele Tornello was among the tearful.

"What a serious impact to hear her talk so openly," she said. "We need more people out there willing to take that step."

The breakfast kicked off October as Domestic Violence Awareness Month and raised more than \$1,600 for the Clay County Domestic Violence Task Force, which works to prevent domestic violence.

About 50 people attended the event at the Hilltop Restaurant in Orange Park.

The task force is made up of representatives of local law enforcement, Clay Behavioral Health Center, Healthy Families and Quigley House, the county's domestic violence shelter.

Quigley House Director Sharon Youngerman said there's a desperate need for awareness and money for the shelter, which lost \$66,000 to federal budget cuts this year. Also, the shelter has been fuller than usual as it has housed victims from hurricane-hit communities. Youngerman said stressful conditions often increase incidents of domestic violence.

Meanwhile, she said, participation waned in a recent golf tournament fund-raiser, and she's worried about the upcoming chili cook-off.

"Our fund-raisers are going down the tubes," she said. "People aren't thinking about chili or golf." At the breakfast, Youngerman pinned purple ribbons on Orange Park Police Chief Jim Boivin and Clay County Sheriff Scott Lancaster.

"A visible symbol to our community and to victims," Youngerman said.

Clay children drew pictures based on the theme "Safe at Home" for a contest. The winners were Allyson Pickren, a second-grader at Middleburg Elementary School, fifth-grader Jordon Troxel of Grove Park Elementary School, third-grader Sierra Hamlet of Clay Hill Elementary and sixth-grader Lauren Youngerman of Paterson Elementary School.

All entries were converted to laminated place mats for the breakfast.

Lancaster said the place mat at his seat was surprisingly fitting. It was a drawing of a boy sitting on a commode. The young artist signed his name, "Tommy." Lancaster held it up to the group and said the first child abuse victim he ever dealt with was a boy named Tommy who was forced to sit on the toilet for hours on end as a form of potty training. If he didn't go, his father would punch him off. He said it is important to always remember the victims.

"The danger is that we become callous," Lancaster said. "We can't. Our commitment and our resolve absolutely cannot stop."

Bowden received a standing ovation following her talk of being a battered wife in the 1970s and police officers who told her to go home and work out her spats with her husband. There were no shelters then, she said, and people didn't discuss it. Bowden said recalling her past wears her out emotionally but helps her healing.

"My healing came when I trusted God and started helping others," she said.

Ellen Siler, the chief executive officer of Hubbard House and former executive director of Quigley House, Jacksonville's shelter, blotted her eyes with her napkins.

"I've been going to these things for 15 years, but I still cry," she said.

Staff writer Mary Maraghy can be reached at (904) 278-9487, extension 19, or mary.maraghy@jacksonville.com.



Cat Bowden talks about the abuse she endured. Many in the Peace Breakfast audience wept Friday as she spoke.

MARY MARAGHY/The Times-Union