

THE TWO RIVER TIMES™

SCENE

THE WEEK OF SEPTEMBER 26 - OCTOBER 3, 2014

Anna Diaz-White: Turning Lives Around

As a young girl growing up in North Jersey, Anna Diaz-White was always struck by the injustices of the world and had a strong desire to help right them.

A Cuban immigrant, who came to the United States as a little girl after her family left that country when the Castro Regime came to power, she always fought against double standards and questioned the unequal roles of boys and girls.

"I was always bucking injustices because I was a girl. I always had that feeling," she said.

She didn't know it at the time but that has proven to be a solid foundation for her post as executive director of 180 Turning Lives Around. The private, nonprofit agency, where Diaz-White is celebrating her 30th anniversary, is dedicated to ending domestic violence and sexual and child abuse and provides assistance to women and teens who have been involved in abuse. The organization has been at the forefront of training for law enforcement and tries to be sure that victims have the tools and resources needed to help them move forward.

"I've been a card-carrying member of N.O.W (National Organization for Women) since I was a teenager," Diaz-White said. "Growing up as a Cuban girl in North Jersey back in the '70s, there was always a double standard. There is a double standard in American culture, girls vs. boys, what they can and cannot do ... You layer that with the Spanish culture and that amps it up ... I found that really unjust. Why do the boys get to do this and the girls don't? That was kind of what fueled this sense that something needed to be done about women and empowering them.

She describes herself growing up as "a thorn in my parents' side," particularly her father, who she adored. He was "a *caballero*, a Spanish gentleman...but he was out of touch with the culture and what was happening in this new country."

Though her parents didn't understand her need to go to college, she went to St. Peter's College in Jersey City, got married and then earned her MBA from New York University.

After getting her degrees, she was commuting to New York City for work and discovered what many women realize about work and home. "It was getting to be a lot. I couldn't manage full-time work and motherhood. I quit my job and started looking for part-time work.

"Completely by accident, I happened to see one day an ad for the Women's Resource and Survival Center, which is what 180 was called back in the '80s," she said.

Diaz-White isn't sure now if the organization's name was even listed in the ad seeking a grant writer/finance person for a part-time post. She applied and was hired on the spot.

"It's funny that I wasn't really cognizant of what the mission was, I needed to work financially and to use my skills," she said.

But, the organization and its mission "slowly but surely got under my skin...My injustice button started getting pressed," she said.

Two cases in particular stick with her as defining moments when she knew she was in the right place at the right time. Both involved homicides of Monmouth County women who were beaten and killed by their husbands. Each case resulted in the galvanization of people to change procedures and practices then being followed by law enforcement and the courts.

One case occurred after the adoption of the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act. The act, which permitted the filing of restraining orders against batterers and other protections, was not being enforced at the time. Diaz-White helped the agency push for the enforcement of the law.

"We did outreach to the prosecutor's office and police departments and say, 'Hey, this is the law and you guys have to be training your officers and to use this law and follow this law. They don't get to choose what laws they enforce or don't enforce. This law needs to be enforced.'

"There was a big movement from us that, I believe, really helped to train officers on this new law. It was a cultural change, a social shift in the way these crimes were treated," Diaz-White said, noting that prior to the mid-1980s, domestic violence was not considered a crime.

"To the credit of John Kaye, who was prosecutor at the time, he invited us to provide police with sensitivi-

ty training about domestic violence and sexual assault at the police academy."

The initial efforts were not greeted with universal acceptance. Diaz-White remembers sessions during which some officers "literally turned their backs" on the 180 Turning Lives Around trainer.

During this time, Diaz-White was still involved with her part-time financial and grant duties while assisting the organization's then executive director. It wasn't until she was with the organization for eight years that the position opened up in 1992.

"I applied," she said. "It was the right time for my family ... I was granted the position which has been a tremendous, tremendous ride.

"This job has never been the same from one day to the next. There's always a new challenge, there's always something new to do, to work on. I'm learning

form, devised so agency personnel could alert the prosecutor about problems within departments, is no longer in existence.

One issue that frustrates police and those who deal with abuse victims is when the person abused goes back to the abuser. "When you think about crime, you're a robbery victim but you don't go hang out with the person who robbed you ... Name the crime and you aren't seeing them again," Diaz-White said.

"Guess what? This is a whole different story because these crimes are between intimate partners ... You can share a lifestyle and a lifetime with this person. It's a whole other type of crime."

The question "How could she stay?" is often asked. "When you're married or with someone there are so many entanglements, emotional, financial ... and in every other way.

abuse, shows that the sport is "a microcosm of our culture. It's not just the sport, it just so happens that the spotlight is on them now. It's no different than in small town USA."

The crimes and issues Diaz-White, the staff and volunteers for 180 Turning Lives Around deal with on a daily basis are difficult ones for people to discuss.

"With the work I do, it's really uncomfortable to talk about these things," she said. "Who wants to talk about them and, if you've experienced them, it's not necessarily something you want to revisit in your life and we know so many women have experienced these things. Those of us who haven't want to think that it won't ever happen to us.

"For men, the vast majority of men don't do these things, so they are really uncomfortable about those who do...Still it is a man's world, here in 2014. There have been a lot of strides made ... There are plenty of places in everyday homes where the struggle for equality - for women's rights - is occurring every day. It's getting better but we still aren't there yet ... The fact that domestic violence and sexual assault are as prevalent as they are tells you that we have a long, long way to go."

The organization offers a wide range of services to address domestic violence and sexual assault. They include rape services, hotlines, emergency shelter, longer-term shelter, supportive counseling and creative art therapy for children who have been exposed to domestic violence.

"We are looking at piloting a rapid rehousing model with the county, meaning we can hopefully help with permanent housing in the near future," she said.

In addition to having volunteers at police departments, 180 Turning Lives Around also has staff members located at the family courts who can help those impacted by domestic violence get through the restraining-order process and other court procedures.

The best way to access the organization's services "is to pick up the phone (732-264-4111 or 888-843-9262). The phone is the best way, it's 24/7," she said. "You can also go through the website (www.180nj.org)."

Police, doctors and employees at schools and other social service agencies know about the organization and refer those in need.

180 Turning Lives Around has 45 full-time employees, 40 part-time staff and then the volunteers. The agency operates with an annual budget of about \$3.5 million, 60 percent of which is from federal, state and local government sources, the remainder is fundraising from individuals, religious groups, corporations, foundations, civic groups and anywhere funding can be found.

The hotline gets about 5,000 calls from sexual assault and domestic violence victims annually. About 1,700 people are assisted at the family court, 700 or 800 are helped at police department and 80 to 100 families are housed at the emergency shelter.

While the services are specifically for Monmouth County residents - each county in New Jersey has a similar agency - there is a statewide program, called the Second Floor Youth Helpline (www.2ndfloor.org or 888-222-2228). It is for kids "to call about anything and it's our prevention arm." Calls, which number 60,000 to 80,000 a year, involve such issues as sexuality, drugs and alcohol, family problems and peer issues. "We feel, in terms of prevention, the helpline is our way to start the conversation with young people early on when they start to experience things," Diaz-White said.

She is particularly proud that the agency had the first federally funded battered women's shelter in the nation. The organization's "Founding Mothers" advocated in Congress during the late 1970s for the funding.

180 Turning Lives Around is about to embark on construction of the largest domestic violence emergency shelter in the state. The groundbreaking is slated for the next few months and a fundraising campaign will be launched. "We're hoping the community will really support what we do. It's going to be really vital," she said.

Donations to 180 Turning Lives Around can be made by calling 732-264-4111 or visiting www.180nj.org.



DANNY SANCHEZ

something new every day. This is not something that you learn it all and you're done. You are constantly learning nuances and things about sexual assault and domestic violence that you didn't know."

She has seen many changes - from the difficulty that the agency had gaining acceptance from law enforcement to nowadays when the police and 180 have "co-volunteers.

"They are our volunteers but we share them with the police department. These volunteers, who we jointly train with the police officers, respond to police departments after domestic violence has occurred," she said.

"Officers call the volunteers to talk with the victim, help out with the kids and support the victim through this process as the police officer is doing his investigative work," Diaz-White said. "Police departments have a domestic violence liaison officer in every department who is assigned to work with these volunteers.

"It's a truly amazing partnership," she said. The partnership between law enforcement and agency has worked so well that the formal compliant

"How could he do this to someone he loves is the question that should be asked.

"The fact of the matter is, leaving is not always the answer," she said.

Diaz-White said the incident involving former Rutgers and Baltimore Ravens star Ray Rice is one that is very sad for his family but has shown a spotlight on domestic violence. It has offered an important platform for discussion about the topic. "Any attention shined on it is a good thing and generally, it does lead to improvement, but it's very slow," she said.

The case shows "only the tip of the iceberg. It happened to be caught on film but the other millions of cases that happen each year don't get caught on film. They happen behind closed doors ... Behind those doors for some, it's a war zone. You wouldn't know that from looking at their calico curtains or looking at their nice neighborhoods or watching their family at a soccer game."

The situation in the National Football League where the Rice case has been discussed along with allegations of abuse by other players, including child

By Michele J. Kubn