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Czyczynska: In the company of another domestic violence survivor

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Editor's Note: This column is a part of a collection of stories SDNN will publish throughout the month of March to celebrate [Women's History Month](#) ^[1]. Join us as we recognize Women's History Month by sending in your stories too and checking SDNN every day for stories from other women in our region. Happy Women's History Month!

We are blond; blue eyed, and roughly the same age. We're college educated, writers and comfortable in the limelight. We're fit and fashionable: she liked my high heels, I envied her steel spectacles. At the close of the event, we talked as easily of statistics as of privilege.

This woman of means is Harvard graduate and author [Leslie Morgan Steiner](#) ^[2] who gave the keynote address at the 12th Annual "[In the Company of Women](#)" ^[3] fundraiser on March 11, at the Sheraton San Diego Hotel. Steiner is known for her recent book "Crazy Love," a poignant memoir about domestic violence, and "Mommy Wars," an anthology exploring the often conflicting roles between stay-at-home and career moms in the U.S. The "In Company of Women" fundraiser draws big named support and 100 percent of its proceeds benefit the YWCA's services for San Diego's women and child survivors of domestic violence and homelessness.

Steiner was invited for her speaking skill, her popularity and her ability to bust the stereotype that domestic violence preys only upon the down-trodden ethnic women of America who suffer from low self-esteem. Steiner is quite the opposite. She's sometimes overconfident. She comes from privilege, and a safe, supportive upbringing. Yet, for a few hellish years, she endured such harsh beatings they almost killed her.

I also endured repeated assaults, but I grew up in poverty and surrounded by drugs. My recovery began in my early 20s, when my parents died. Steiner was unscathed until her early 20s, when her abuse began. She's taken an additional 20 years to publicize the story. Both of our tales can shock people. I often hear, "how could something like that happen to someone like you?" As if I don't fit the idea of what a victim looks like. I assume partly because of my poise, partly because of my color, I pass as privileged.

Oddly, our Aryan appearance seems to deliver the message that anyone can succumb to the realities of violence at home. And from hearing our stories, the message seems clear that anyone, regardless of circumstances can be aided to heal.



Leslie Morgan Steiner speaks at the YWCA's "In the Company of Women" fundraiser on March 11. (Courtesy Photo)

This was the case with Steiner. Although the fundraising audience was far from white-washed, her message seemed to sink in, that we must look beyond the surface of domestic violence and into the psychological struggle of that happens when someone you love hurts you. I saw heads nodding in agreement to Steiner's words. I found myself relating to her ability to humanize her abusive ex-husband. She couldn't be with him in the end, but she always remembered why she first loved him. I feel that way. I remember the best in my father when he could be protective, but as my initial perpetrator, I also saw him at his worst.

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Steiner's story began idyllically. She met and married a seemingly gracious, romantic man who wooed her. Her idealism shrouded her denial when his violence began, and since "he never did the same thing twice" she believed each time was the last time. She felt she could help him overcome his abusive childhood, if she kept on loving him – despite it being a "Crazy Love."

She became isolated from outside support. But one day the best friend of her husband grabbed her hand as if to scold a child, and said, "Your voice trembles when (your husband) comes into the room and becomes normal when he leaves."

Although today she knows that "abuse thrives in silence," she wasn't able to speak just then. She said nothing to the friend, but her mind was awakened, and her heart heard the truth. Soon she demanded an end to her husbands' cruelty. But, after six glorious months of a violence free existence, her husband snapped again. He raged and beat and taunted her. Her fear rose to levels she'd never known, the end felt inevitable.

At this point in her story, the luncheon audience was so engrossed; it seemed everyone had stopped eating. One woman couldn't even watch Steiner anymore. She sat silently listening.

Steiner credits the help she received from two male police officers who responded to her 911 call with saving her life. These strangers displayed more care than her beloved husband, who had just hit her so hard that she had lost consciousness. The cops told her how to get a restraining order, and to get it that night. They told her to file for a divorce, and do it the next day. As they left, one of them warned "If you don't do it, next time we might find you dead."

She listened, and took action. That night the court provided a legal advocate to hold her hand through the restraining order process and she found help to file her divorce request the next day, a Sunday.

Even though the fundraiser opened with rousing spoken word by the men of Collective Purpose and closed with organic dance moves by women in TranscenDance, the candor with which Steiner delivered her words was unparalleled. Some women in the audience held their hands to their faces. Many men were stoically attentive. Throats cleared only when Steiner paused. It was as if interruption would halt the magic of her timely admissions. The 20 years it took to write "Crazy Love" spoke volumes for the depth of her understanding.

I commented to Steiner that her emotionality was impressive during her speech. She said every time she speaks of it, it's difficult. She's beautifully honed her craft of oration, yet her emotions remain real. And, she avoided coming across as needy. We learned she is lovingly re-married with healthy children and has rebuilt her friendships. Even so, the way she steps to the core of her experience reveals its validity. Her dilemma was real and the need for help was real.

Heather Finley, CEO of the San Diego YWCA, explained that an added dilemma to the domestic violence crisis is that California eliminated funding to 94 domestic violence agencies across the state last year, including the [YWCA's Becky's House](#) [8].

Finley said the \$20,000,000 that was cut as "part of the attempts to ...accommodate the deficit" was 70 percent covered by another revenue source but that source expires July 1, 2010. No new source has appeared.

Steiner closed by asking us to talk about what we had learned so that others will speak up. To break the cycle in which violence festers, you must break the silence so the need can be heard. She assured us that admitting to a broken life is a powerful step to a new one. Steiner is proof of her conviction that "Victims can go on to rebuild their lives." Indeed, with some help, she has. For me, I see her as both a kindred spirit, and an inspiration for how far healing can take you.

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[1] Women's History Month: <http://www.sdn.com/sandiego/2010-03-01/sandiego/womens-history-month>

[2] Leslie Morgan Steiner: <http://www.lesliemorgansteiner.com/>

[3] In the Company of Women: <http://www.sdn.comwww.ywcasantiego.org>

[4] More by Tryce: <http://www.sdn.com/search/?q=Tryce+Czyczynska&cx=005820339268722995395:rhktjngk9ay&cof=FORID:10&ie=UTF-8&sa=Search#1085>

[5] Politics: <http://www.sdn.com/sandiego/politics>

[6] Opinion: <http://www.sdn.com/sandiego/opinion>

[7] Domestic violence victim Steiner to tell all in San Diego: <http://www.sdn.com/sandiego/2010-03-08/politics-city-county-government/domestic-violence-victim-steiner-to-tell-all-in-san-diego#ixzz0iNncnpwF>

[8] YWCA's Becky's House: <http://www.211sandiego.org/referral/beckys-house>

[9] Twitter: <http://twitter.com/TryceCzy>

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