

Announcer:

In this episode of Tim Talk, Tim will explore the topic of domestic violence with two women working to bring positive change through dialogue and action.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you for joining us on this very important Tim Talk. I'm Tim Dentry, president and CEO of Northern Light Health. As you may know, October's domestic violence awareness month, and I felt it was important to use our podcast to bring awareness in an up close and personal way. To help me do that, I am here with two wonderful people. Christine Matson is supervisor in environmental services at Northern Light Eastern Maine Medical Center. As a child, Christine grew up in a home with domestic violence and will share her experience and thoughts. Thank you for joining us, Christine.

Christine Matson :

Thank you, Tim.

Tim Dentry:

Our second guest is Amanda Cost, executive director of Partners for Peace, a domestic violence prevention organization, based in Bangor. Welcome back, Amanda. As our listeners may recall, you joined us last year as well on this very topic.

Amanda Cost:

Thank you so much for having me back, Tim.

Tim Dentry:

My pleasure. And I'm thankful to both of you for being here with us today, really, really appreciate that. To begin our discussion today, may I ask you first Christine, about your life experience?

Christine Matson :

Absolutely. I grew up as a child, mostly with my mom because prior to that, my real father was abusive to her. There were several times that I remember waking up from naps and he would be beating her. When I was growing up it wasn't out of the ordinary for my mother to have a black eye or bruises in family photos. My sister, her first time ever having a memory, because she's so much younger than me, was actually a memory of my mother getting choked and raped. And that was when her mind finally became aware and alive. So when she looks back, that's her first memory, because of that she experiences a lot of emotional anxieties and stuff like that in relationships. We, as a family, have grown. We're an amazing family. I'm not going to knock that, but we do have our struggles because of what happened in the past.

Christine Matson :

My father never really served any time, because back in the eighties, domestic violence wasn't criminal offense, you could beat your wife. It was acceptable. So took my mother a lot of courage to come from that situation and run away with my sister and I. I spent the majority of two of my preteen years in hideaway homes with the Women's Crisis Service out of New Hampshire. We bounced from these homes all the time with other battered women. We constantly had to move because my father would find out where the home was, or another woman's husband would find out where the home was. So we

would disband and in the middle of the night, just go places and leave everything that we had behind. So I didn't have a lot of schooling during that time period, that wasn't by the Women's Crisis Service volunteers that would just try to have books and stuff on hand. It was a very different lesson of life. We were raised that this could be the reality. So you have to protect yourself at all costs.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you so much for sharing that. And I think that's exactly the personal context and message that we are hoping our listeners would hear. And it's not an easy thing for people to share and your strength and courage and who you are shined through. So thank you for sharing that. And I was just thinking also, the use the words struggles, so the struggles and we are an amazing family like present state. So, you were acknowledging the struggles, and in the very same sentence you said, and we are an amazing family. I just think that's amazing. That's awesome. Thank you for that. Amanda, how does Christine's story resonate with what you see in the lives dealing with domestic violence every day?

Amanda Cost:

Well, I too have to thank Christine for sharing her story. It's just so important that people hear the truths of survivors so that we can learn from what people have been through. And also, so those folks who are out there dealing with it right now know that they're not alone, and know that there are people around who care and also understand that you can get past it. You can become an incredible family, and that we know children are resilient. And oftentimes the people around them are the ones that help them see that resiliency to becoming a human who can share their story later on in an effort to help others. So thank you so much for that. And your story really does parallel what we see a lot in our work with survivors of domestic violence on our helpline or in the courts, children who are witnessing abuse, families who have to bounce around from shelter to shelter, or family members' homes. It's very common that, that happens.

Amanda Cost:

I think one of the things you said that really resonated with me was the fact that your sister saw something and that's when she recognized what was going on. Many of us think that if children aren't present in the room, that they don't know what's going on, and it's so not the case. They know what's going on. They feel it, they sense it. And as an organization, one of the things that we do is work really closely with the support of non-offending parent, to help them continue to be a support for their children, so that they can be a resilient family to be able to move through this abuse experience. So it's so important to hear stories from individuals like you to show the strength and the courage and the resiliency to others who need help.

Christine Matson :

Thank you, Amanda, thank you for all the work that you do.

Tim Dentry:

And staying on that topic, Amanda, as it relates to partners for peace. I love how you just shared your own personal reflections on with what Christine shared with us. Now, maybe put it in a broader context of the kind of work that Partners for Peace does.

Amanda Cost:

Sure. So Partners for Peace is the domestic violence resource center that provides support to people in Penobscot and Piscataquis counties. And we are one of many organizations that exist across the state that do similar work. And our work has a two pronged approach to it. One is we're really invested in providing information and support and resources to people who are experiencing abuse firsthand. We also are very invested in making sure that family members, friends, community partners, service providers also know that we're available to them if they have somebody in their life, someone they care about or someone they're providing services to who they might need additional information about how to be helpful to them, we can help those third party individuals as well.

Amanda Cost:

We do that through helpline, we do that through groups, we have a temporary emergency shelter, a number of other housing programs. We call ourselves a resource center because we're not focused on just helping the person in one way, we're really trying to figure out what they need and how we can help meet that need no matter what it is. So, that's one side of the work that we do. And then the other side of the work is about working in our community to come up with prevention strategies. As you just said, Tim, we are in the business of working ourselves out of a job. We want to work with children to make sure they understand what relationships that are equitable and healthy look like. We want to make sure that employers in our area understand that they have a responsibility to help keep their employees safe and to recognize when controlling and abusive behaviors might be happening on work time.

Amanda Cost:

There are so many different sectors in our community that are impacted by domestic violence. And we see it as our job to help those sectors recognize that and then come up with strategies for dealing with it. So we do that prevention work through this community awareness raising work, and we do prevention in the work that we do every day with survivors, because we feel like if you're reaching out and calling us and getting help, that level of intervention might ultimately lead to prevention. And that is what we're hoping.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you. That's a really terrific connection between personal stories and what Partners for Peace does. And it makes me think, Amanda, staying with you for one question, one of the initiatives that we are really trying to prioritize here, really trying to make sure our staff know that we have their backs, and that is really a zero tolerance policy, those are big words, but on workplace violence, workplace violence and in healthcare, it's really troubling infuriating for me as a leader of the organization that workplace violence is so, it's increasing and it's so rampant and it's serious.

Tim Dentry:

And here we're trying to have caregivers feeling really good about what they do. And everybody is a caregiver in Northern Light Health. And for them to be in situations where there's violence, that they are on the receiving end of violence and other forms of verbal et cetera, abuse from the patients and families that we're just trying to serve. My being infuriated gets in the way. So we need people like you to help us think of a good, constructive way we can go about making sure that doesn't happen. So a long way to ask really the question, but in domestic violence situations you are involved with, [inaudible 00:10:45] spill over into workplace violence. And if so, do you have any advice for us?

Amanda Cost:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. I have really mixed feelings about this one. One being, because I'm enraged that you all have to deal with this and I'm grateful that you all are taking this up, because it is really critical to the safety and wellbeing of our communities and your workers. We know that domestic violence definitely spills over in workplaces. And I think it's common for people to assume that it's going to come from the outside to within. And I would encourage you all to think about it a little bit differently because many of the people who are employees of Northern Light are experiencing domestic abuse in one way, shape or form, or they have somebody that's close to them who is. And so that can show up in the workplace in a variety of different ways, lost time at work, coming to work with injuries, someone feeling like they can't fully engage in work because of the experiences of what's going on at home. There's so many things to look out for.

Amanda Cost:

And when it comes to advice about how to deal with it, the first thing I would say is don't ignore it. The second thing I would say is come up with a strategy that works for departments because how different departments deal with it, well, departments will need to deal with it differently based on exposure and all of the things that make that department a department. So individualize the plans that need to be made. And then I would also say reach out for help and support, whether it's internally or externally to an organization like ours, it's hard to deal with violence and abuse. It's even more challenging when you're dealing with it close to home or close to work. And so you can become very isolated in an insular and you're thinking about how to deal with it. And it's really important to get some outside perspective so that you don't feel alone, and so that you can really focus on how to help yourself and others can help you see the perspective of how to help a collective group, or a collective department.

Amanda Cost:

So those would be some tips that I would have for you. There's a lot more that goes into it. It's not really a simple answer. Don't minimize it would be the other thing I would say and give yourself some grace and patience as you work through it, meaningful progress is really important. You won't get it right the first time, but if you continue to work through it, you will make meaningful progress in the lives of people who will really feel grateful for that.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you. And several things really struck me. Don't ignore it. Absolutely, don't feel alone and having a strategy that works and pointing out that many of my colleagues, our colleagues, Christine, my colleagues in Northern Light are experiencing domestic violence, and it just made me think, and we don't see that. So to make sure we don't ignore it and understand that, but it made me think, Christine, that you had stated that for you, for example, schooling at that period of your life was a challenge. You stated that your sister feels anxiety in certain moments in relationships and that kind of a thing, which connecting what I heard from both of you, that's so important, I hope our listeners really reflect on this that a lot can be going on in people's lives that impact so many things. And so don't jump to a conclusion, or put people in a box of a definition of who they are, or what they are, or what they're dealing with, without having a little humility and open minds.

Tim Dentry:

So that's really leading me to a question so we can hear a little bit more on your experience that we had shared with previously, Christine. I know that you grew up in a home where your mother, you mentioned her already today, was helping make some changes to not only deal with your own family

situation, but the domestic violence laws in your home state of New Hampshire. Talk to us about your mom and what were those changes and how did that more importantly affect you and your sister?

Christine Matson :

Sure. So when she first entered, she was a victim and my mother tried as hard as she could to swap from being a victim, to being a role model. She immediately absorbed all the counselings that went on and said, all right, I'm going to stop this. She became a counselor herself to other women that were in the need for intervention, or to just help, even if it meant opening our doors later on for a young family to move in with us for a month, two months, three months, it happened all the time. We became a safe house in the middle of nowhere. It was fun. It was like our family would grow instantly, but then she also, because it was early eighties, there were no laws. So the laws were all for a man, regardless of if the man was the abuser.

Christine Matson :

So in cases where the woman's the abuser, because it can go either way. The man would have the rights, every single time he would have the right to see the children. As long as they were married, he could go to my mom's workplace, pull her out of work. He had all the rights. So she helped with the work of Jean Shaheen in New Hampshire, what they created were safe meeting spaces. So they would meet in police department parking lots and then swap the children off there. That was something that was totally brand new. They made each parent accountable for the children. So if they're paying child support, they also had to see the child because oftentimes it would be total abandonment. They made mandatory child advocates. So someone was there thinking about the welfare of the child the entire time. That wasn't a thing.

Christine Matson :

And they created, and I think it's obsolete now, but dead beat dad posters, because people in town if they were looking for the fathers that weren't paying, and it was the way to do something back in the eighties, I think it's obsolete at this point. However, she and Jean Shaheen would sit there and mull over the pros and cons of each one of these things for hours at the table. It was eye opening because at the time I was only maybe 10. So I didn't even understand half of it sometimes, but they would say, well, if we meet the police department, even if he does act up, the police are inside, they're not going to see in the parking lot. It wasn't as much video footage and stuff like that back then. So, then they created inside spaces. So if you felt safer to be inside and then have the police escort you, which we did quite often escort my mom home and then they did that. So there were those type of changes that were slowly introduced throughout the time.

Amanda Cost:

One thing that is not obsolete to is the mulling over around a table for hours and hours and hours about the benefits and the cons of any of the actions that we take in our work, because we know that what we're doing is impacting people's lives and we want to make sure we address that with as much thought as possible. So it absolutely made me chuckle when you said that, because that is still the true way that we approach our work today, because we're dealing with humans. It's so important.

Christine Matson :

Yeah. Because they would suggest different scenarios and I didn't even think about it at the time and here are these two adults, but what if this happens and that's what they did.

Tim Dentry:

That is terrific. What a great example. You had a leader and a mentor and someone you could, talk about learning, that's learning at the table like that. That's wonderful. And thank you, Amanda also for sharing your perspective on that. So Amanda, before we begin to wrap up, if our listeners would like to help or to take action in domestic violence or anything else want to get engaged, what can they do?

Amanda Cost:

Well, first of all, I want to take it back to something you said earlier, which is October's domestic violence awareness month. If you're someone who's interested in learning more about the issue of domestic violence, or what our organization does, or how you can be helpful, you can go visit our website, Partnersforpeaceme.org, you can visit any of our social media sites. You can learn a lot more about what we're doing throughout the month and get engaged in activities like that. We will be holding a volunteer orientation, if you're interested in volunteering for our organization. Our helpline is staffed by volunteer on a pretty regular basis. And so that's one way that you could give back, if that's something you're interested in doing.

Amanda Cost:

If you're trying to figure out how to help, because abuse is something that's present in the life of somebody that you care about, or you're working with, consider reaching out to our helpline, we could talk to you about the strategies in being helpful to them and also support you through it, because it can be really hard to watch someone you care about go through this. And similar to what I said earlier about what the hospital system can do with regards to dealing with workplace violence, if you think there's somebody in your life who's going through this, don't ignore it. Try to find ways, subtle and maybe not so subtle ways to be helpful to them. Let them know that you believe them, that you're there no matter what the choices are that they make, even if you don't agree with them, that you're there for them.

Amanda Cost:

There are a lot of those strategies that are really about being humane, making a human connection, helping somebody to feel like they belong, that can really go a long way in helping someone who's experiencing abuse and violence to get through what it is that they're getting through. Don't make assumptions. Don't put them in a box, all the things that you were saying earlier. And remember that domestic violence is something that can happen to anybody. It certainly happens disproportionately in marginalized communities. And that is an issue that we across our nation need to address pretty holistically, and that our organization is something that we're working on. Also, keep in mind that this will never stop in our world if we don't start looking at the folks who are perpetrating the crimes of domestic violence. So think about that too. Have you ever seen somebody be abusive or know somebody who was, and did you ever consider talking to them about stopping that behavior versus automatically jumping to the victim's aide to ask them to change what they're doing?

Tim Dentry:

Thank you so much. That is so many resources that you touched on, that you offer and Partners for Peace and ways that people can connect. So Amanda, thank you for all that you have done and are doing to address domestic violence. And thank you, my friend and colleague, Christine, for your courage, for your courage sharing your very personal story with our audience. Thank you.

Christine Matson :

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You're welcome.

Tim Dentry:

It was my honor and privilege to have both on our show. And so thank you our podcast listeners too. I encourage you to listen to this twice. There's a lot that we could learn from. Until next time, I'm Tim Dentry, encouraging you to listen and act to promote our Northern Light Health culture of caring, diversity and inclusion that starts with caring for one another. Thank you.

Announcer:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Tim Talk. If you enjoy this podcast, please join us next month when we will discuss the prevalence of mental health stigma in our society and the importance of de-stigmatizing mental illness.