Welcome back. This is Jen Lee, the creator, and hosts of, I Need Blue. **www.ineedblue.net**

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Please note: I Need Blue does contain stories which feature graphic content and could be triggering. Please seek help if needed. Remember, you always come first.

February is Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Month. Through a national effort, young people, their loved ones, and local organizations like Serene Harbor in Brevard County, create awareness surrounding this issue. Dating Violence is more common than you think. 1 in 3 teens in the US will experience physical, sexual, or emotional abuse from someone they're in a relationship with, and that is just one of the sad statistics.

Joining me today to discuss this topic is Michelle Garcia, Program Director for Serene Harbor. Serene Harbor has served Brevard County for 30 years and offers more than 15 services and programs to assist survivors of domestic violence, including counseling and relocation services. They serve all survivors of domestic violence with their center services, their emergency shelter which houses women, children, and pets. It is their passion and job to ensure every individual has a safe place they can go to, whether that safe place is with them or somewhere else.

Visit, [www.SereneHarbor.org](http://www.SereneHarbor.org) for full details. You will also find them listed under the “Get Help” tab on my website, [www.INeedBlue.net](http://www.INeedBlue.net).

Michelle, thank you for being my guest today. Can you take a minute and share with the audience your experiences and your passion for being a domestic violence advocate?

Michele

Thank you so much for such a great introduction and allowing me to be on your podcast today. My passion is always to help anyone who needs assistance, always help someone find their voice, and to be that voice when they're not ready. I’ve had that passion forever, my entire life.

I started with Serene Harbor in 2012. Since then, I've been in domestic violence, child welfare, and case management, focused on ways to bring it all together and saying, “what we can we do better? What can we do differently?” Through that, we’ve been able to work together with the survivor and say, we’re not here to control you. We're here to say how can we help you? You've been doing this your entire life, you've been the expert of your home, how can we help you with that? What do you need from us?

Because of that experience we have been able to grow as an agency. I've been able to see someone completely lost and feeling like there's no way out of the harm, watching them go through the worst of the worst for themselves, their kiddos, and their pets, not knowing if they're going to live the next day. To be able to help them say, I am worth something, I'm worth better than this and I can have a life. For me to be able to help them safely plan through that and get to safety is why I do this. The experience of hearing them say, “I've never seen my kids be able to be kids.” It allows the survivor time to think about themselves and say, what do I want? Who am I? Because I've been told to be someone else forever.

Jen

Where do you see yourself in 5 years?

Michele

Still at Serene Harbor and continually growing. We're currently celebrating our 30th anniversary of being here in the same location in Brevard County. The past two years, we have a plethora of services. Five years from now, I would love to see us with additional housing options in Brevard County. We have a difficult time with housing and transportation. Also, I see us being able to combat additional barriers which survivors have a tough time with. We will still be fighting for survivors, advocating, and making sure all our staff and the whole community is doing the same.

Jen

What is the greatest resource you need?

Michele

Housing and transportation. We have immediate housing, but it's extensive for a survivor to start on their own. We have relocation advocates who assist with the entire process, but it's still being able to have something or someplace that's affordable for them to live in, be self-sufficient, and sustain it. So affordable housing would be huge. The transportation piece would be ideal as well. It gives them the opportunity to find a place near a job that they want to have and to be able to get their kiddos back and forth to school. Housing and transportation would remove many limitations that they have during the rebuild to self-sufficiency.

Jen

Can you tell me how Serene Harbor is different from other Domestic Violence shelters?

Michele

* We are 1 of 41 certified centers in the state of Florida. We're bound by privilege and confidentiality, and it's a Florida State law that we can't disclose information from any communication with that survivor.

 They have that safe place with us, and they don't have to worry about manipulation, or someone finding out that they're trying to get help.

* All our services are empowerment based; we're not here to do anything to mirror an abusive partners behavior and that is already completely different and new.
* We have an injunction protection attorney. Not every certified center has that. Within Brevard County we are the only center with an injunction protection attorney. They provide legal advice, legal representation for protection orders *at no cost* to survivors who have experience domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking.
* We have a pet kennel on site. No one else in Brevard County has a pet kennel on site at their emergency shelter. Now someone can flee with their kiddos and their pets.
* Survivors who participate in our programs can get connected to a mentor who will help them with every step of getting their college education. College would be at no cost. It covers books and classes with Eastern Florida

Jen

What is the difference between domestic violence and teen dating violence?

Michele

There are many similarities, however I'd say the difference is the living arrangements. With domestic violence cases you typically live together as far as the intimate relationship goes and the other person that's abusing you can have more financial control over what you can and cannot do and can and cannot spend. When you reside with that person, they can confine you within those four walls.

Generally, with dating violence, they don’t reside together. It could be a situation where they are classmates. Someone in a dating violence situation may have a little bit of a leeway in being able to get more help than the person who has been confined to their home and completely isolated by that abusive partner.

The lethality in the amount of abuse that we see in teen dating violence, versus domestic violence, if you didn't know the age of the person that was being abusive, you would think it was somebody that had been abusing people for many, many years. And then you find out that as a 14-year-old, 15-year-old 16-year-old, who's doing this.

Jen

Serene Harbor values community outreach, you go into the schools, elementary schools, and you talk about what a healthy behavior looks like. Can you share the details of this program?

Michele

Yes. We go into the schools from 2nd grade to 7th grade and certainly up to teens and seniors. Those discussions are modified based on the age group.

The behaviors discussed surround interactions with each other; the interactions outside of violence, outside of that intimate relationship. We want to plant those seeds of the youth learning what healthy behaviors look like. When it comes to sharing, when it comes to your personal space, and when it comes to your emotions. How do you react if you're angry or upset? What does that look? How does someone else react when they're feeling that way towards you? Making sure they have a healthy adult who they can speak with, A non-judgmental, healthy adult. More often, youth will speak to other youth about trauma that they've endured before they even speak to an adult about it. That’s why planting a seed is so essential because it's aids in the prevention of the youth experiencing teen dating violence, which also works towards preventing domestic violence.

Jen

For somebody who is not familiar with domestic violence, what behaviors should they look for?

Michele

You may find this friend or family member is not participating in different kinds of social events or family affairs which they normally were a part of. They may not show up for yearly traditions say for example, going to the fair together as a family or with all your group of friends. Suddenly, there's always a reason or excuse why that person can't attend.

Most often the abusive partner is working towards isolation and keeping them from family and friends. An abusive partner doesn't want that individual they're victimizing to have any connection to someone that can tell them, you don't deserve this, and you deserve better. Someone that's being abused may not feel as highly of themselves as they once did before. They might question themselves more often because the abusive partner is planting seeds in their head on a constant basis, telling them they're not worthy. They're not worth enough.

Jen

Many relationships, whether adult or teenage, go through what is referred to as a “honeymoon stage.” Can you explain what this stage looks like?

Michele

Absolutely. Keep in mind, at the beginning of the relationship, that abusive partner is doing everything to manipulate you as they are trying to have power and control over you.

They can use different tactics of making you feel guilty or shamed for missing their phone call. Because they've called you several times, they'll try to make you feel as though you missing their call caused them to be so upset and worried. Then the next time you miss their call, it's “you are with someone else, how could you do this? Are you cheating on me?” So, you can see the escalation happening.

They do this to make sure you always have your phone around to answer their call. They are gaining control over you. They’re always going to make you feel bad and make you feel like you deserve that hurt. They turn everything around, twist all your words to make it seem as though you're the reason for that pain, you're the reason for the abuse.

At the beginning of that relationship, it seems so sweet for them to bring you lunch or take you out for lunch on your first day of your new job. It seems like a sweet gesture to give you flowers or roses. Then suddenly, they're doing it all the time. So when you want to go out and have lunch with their friends, it's a problem. The abusive partner can react like, well you don’t want to spend time with me when I scheduled this out or made an appointment/reservation with you. If it’s a healthy relationship, someone's not going to make you feel bad about something that supposed to be a gift, right?

An abuser always does things which are purposeful toward gaining power and control, and they're going to mask it to appear as it is in your best interest. Everything is going to be for your best interest and for you; they're putting you ahead of themselves. As the power and control escalate, it's not about you, it's completely about them, and what they want.

The survivor was perfectly self-sufficient with your finances prior to meeting this individual. But then they were able to convince you they've got a better grip on finances and give you reasons as to why they should control the money.

Jen

What do you find is most prevalent when it comes to teenage dating violence? Physical, mental, emotional, sexual, etc abuse?

Michele

The psychological abuse coupled with the emotional abuse because it plays the same effect on you. It's the same with domestic violence. It starts with that person playing games with your mind. With teen dating violence, especially the youth, they're going through those ages and stages of learning themselves to begin with. As they're learning themselves, they're not even at a point to be fully confident in that part yet. If you think back to your youth, especially as you get closer to ages 16 and 17, you think you are grown. So, as you're getting “mature” thought processes as you learn yourself, imagine you have an unhealthy person that's a part of your life. Whose purpose is to have power and control over you because that's what they've learned from the people around them. They're going to continue to plant those negative seeds within you.

The teen will question, “why would you want to go do that? That's rude.” Or “You shouldn't want to go do that. That's not cool. I thought you wanted to spend time with me.”

 During that age bullying already happens. You have the popular kids, the unpopular kids etc. Bullying is already prevalent. When you have an abuser who has manipulated their way into your life and leading you to believe you can trust them, you open up, become vulnerable and share your secrets. Now that person in the teen dating relationship is going to threaten to expose to the whole school, or to your family or to your friends. As a teen, you really don't have a whole lot of life experience in front of you.

Jen

How has Covid effected teen dating violence?

Michele

Without them being in school, and if they're at home with family and friends, it's more opportunity for that abusive teen partner, to want to monopolize even more of the teens time. They are not going out because of being home schooled. The family of that survivor isn’t letting them out because they are extremely COVID conscious or whatever the reasons, the abusive team is going to try to convince them to sneak out and go against what their family rules are.

 When the teen doesn’t, the abuser makes it seem like it's because they don't love them, because they don't care enough for that abusive partner. They twist it. We've seen teens on the brink of suicide because of what that other teen, that abusive teen partner, has been telling them. The shame, the guilt they enforce upon this other individual. The kind of things we see when it comes to teens and adults, it's been more lethal and more dangerous during COVID, especially during the lockdown times because they couldn’t get out.

For the teens who don't live in that home, they're getting escalated threats. What can happen if they don't sneak out? What can happen if they don't use social media and inappropriate ways to send pictures that they don't want to send? Abusive teens are using social media more and the virtual platforms to try to get what they want, which they're going to use against that person.

Jen

Did you have more/less people come to your shelter during Covid?

Michele

We have continued to stay full and at capacity. We're constantly bringing individuals in and seeing what services are available for them. Yes, you have that fear of being in a communal environment during COVID, but then it's that safety planning that we do to help that individual be ready to leave when they're ready because they must feel comfortable and safe no matter what. If that threat at home is much stronger than the community platform during COVID then they opened and were able to come in. The survivors coming in during Covid, especially during the lockdown times, are more near death when they first call us to come in then prior to COVID.

Jen

Have you ever had a teenager come to the domestic violence shelter on their own without their parent?

Michele

We haven't had them come on site, but we have had them call our hotline. We wouldn't be able to just bring a teen into shelter because of the laws themselves. For them to be treated here directly, the teen would have to be emancipated and have the document for that.

What we do is always be there 24 hours a day via the hotline itself and being able to point them in the right directions for additional support which can help them with what's going on.

We have assisted teens with being able to find that healthy adult they could speak with.

We've been able to provide counseling for the adults to help them understand what the teens are going through. We have had great success and have been able to watch these teens, their lives just completely turn around from all the abuse, the breakdowns, and the psychological and emotional games their abusive partner has played. We’ve been able to see those teens go from the darkest place ever, to being full of light and full of life again. They understand that this person has been saying things to them which are not true. Think about this, if someone is taking so much time to fill your head with negative things about you, it's more than likely not true because they've got to try so hard getting you to believe something which is wrong.

Nobody deserves abuse.

**HOTLINE NUMBER: 321-726-8282.**

You can reach our hotline advocates by text, call or TTY, as well as on our website, which is [www.SereneHarbor.org](http://www.SereneHarbor.org). We have a live chat. All the platforms to get you to the hotline advocate who is a certified and trained advocate 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, holidays, hurricanes, it doesn't matter. Our advocates are trained and certified, and they're there to answer every call, regardless of how it comes through. They are trained to assist right then and there.

Jen

It doesn't matter what age you are, you can always call that hotline, and somebody will be there to direct you to the appropriate resource.

Michele

First the advocate is thanking them for calling the line because it takes a lot to make the call for help. Next is to make sure they are safe. We build from there because they're doing safety planning with them, listening to what they need, and going from there.

Jen

When someone comes to your shelter, what happens?

Michele

It is based on the person. During the initial phone call, they’re finding out information over the phone before they even come in, they're creating a safety plan with them right on the hotline before they even get so shelter to ensure a solid plan so they can safely get there. The most dangerous time is when someone decides to leave because it severs that power and control. And then when they come in, we add to that safety plan with them as we're getting to know more about what they've experienced and what's going on. We identify their goals, their needs, their wants for themselves, for their children, for their pets, and being able to help connect them to our staff. We have an adult case manager, a child case manager, a relocation advocate, basically an expert in every seat to help them along their journey with whatever goals are identified.

Jen

By sharing the process, hopefully it will give some comfort to those people who are on the edge of making that final step.

Michele

[www.sereneharbor.org](http://www.sereneharbor.org) has a video virtual tour of our shelter. The unknown is scary. Prior to me ever being in the field, I thought the shelter was what you see on TV, a huge room with tons of beds. But that's not us. When you look at our video, you'll see we have shared rooms, we have bunk beds. They're rooms. We have a playroom, we have an outdoor area, we have an animal park area playground, all on site.

Jen

What is the percentage of people that come to looking for help and end up then going back to the abuser?

Michele

The past two years, with all the support that we've been able to provide for those who have walked through our doors or those who we help on an outreach basis, the chances have been less and less of that individual going back. Even if they're contemplating going back, because on average it’s 7 to 8 times that someone can go back to the abusive partner, we're safety planning with them. If they're going to go back, they can speak with us about that because we're not going to judge them either way. Instead, we're going to safety plan with them for it and let them know we're always going to be here. Our resources are always available to you. We're just one phone call, one text, one TTY message away. That's it, we're 24 hours no matter what your decision.

Always knowing every opportunity, we have with someone, it's an opportunity to educate, advocate and empower. Educate, advocate, empower. You don't ever want to see someone go back to the abuse or go back through that hurt that they've been going through. That's why it's so essential from that first call phone that we have with them, to always be how we are; non-judgmental, and we're going to actively always listen because what they say is important.

If they're going to go back that's okay, too. It doesn't mean that because you're going to decide that we don't want to work with you anymore. No, that is okay. Because it's when that person is ready, then they're ready. There are so many reasons why someone stays and why someone goes back, but no matter what the reason, we're always going to be here.

Jen

What advice do you give friends and family who suspect a loved one is being abused?

Michele

I would say, take a deep breath. Maybe 4 deep breaths. I always say that and even to a survivor that's going through something, 4 deep breaths. At first you are always rushed when you have a lot of emotion and things going on. Just take those deep breaths and remind yourself that you don't want to push that person away especially if they opened to you about it. Making sure not to push your opinions and your wants on that individual is essential. It's about their needs, their wants, their time, and what's right for them. Listen and then be able to tell them it’s okay they're speaking with you about it and thank them for that. Give them the hotline number, let them know there’s a local support area which is non-judgmental and who can’t sell your business to anyone. They have an advocate for 24 hours and you can call or text them and they won’t share your information, not even with you the family member or friend.

Making sure you're not mirroring any of the abusive partners behaviors. So if you're trying to put your wants for that person on them, you're not doing anything different than that abusive partner. You're trying to control what they do and what they don't do. They're going to shut down and that's not okay. Keep that door open. Let them know you don’t want them to hurt either. They're the expert of what they're going through and you're going to be a support no matter what.

Jen

What are the circumstances behind a case going to court?

M

Someone can file for an injunction for protection, (restraining order) whether it's for dating violence, stalking, sexual assault, or domestic violence. It is aligned with civil court. When this is filed within the court, the person's not going to be arrested just because you filed, or because the judge court orders it. Instead, the person gets arrested if they violate it.

When someone decides that they're going to file for this injunction for that no contact order, it's extremely traumatic. The survivor who is going to file for this injunction, must write down everything that has happened, all the harm that this abuser has caused, all the threat of harm that they've caused, or that they've done, as well as how it's affected me, and how it's affected my kids. I must write all this down and they get a copy of it.

If the judge approves it, or appends it into a court, that abusive partner gets a copy of everything that I wrote down of the history of the abuse. That's where our Injunction For Protection attorney comes in. She's able to assist with the filing process and can represent that individual in court. Now when going to court, not only did that abusive partner get everything written down; your worst best kept secrets that they coerced you into not telling anybody about, but then you must go in front of them in court.

If they've been restricting all the finances, to where now they have an attorney and you don’t, you feel even worse and more defeated before you even get to the courtroom. Our attorney can help file and represent as well so you're not alone. She's going to be that voice in the courtroom to stand up for you and make sure that you're heard.

J

Can we talk about sparkling ice?

Michele

Yes. So Sparkling Ice ran a nationwide sweepstakes, basically where all the customers of Sparkling Ice can write in stories to identify agencies that have assisted or have done great things in a community. Three stories got submitted to Sparkling Ice about Serene Harbor so out of the 6000 entries nationwide, our Serene Harbor was identified as one of three agencies to receive awards from Sparkling Ice. They wrote about how our staff and services have been able to assist with the family, and the greatness we were able to do to help keep someone safe. We've been here for 30 years, our little Serene Harbor, but we're strong and mighty team. It’s great to see how we made an impact, but for someone to write into a nationwide thing about the great impact and positive impact that we've had on a survivor, is simply amazing!

Orange is the color for the month of February that corresponds to Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention.

Upcoming events:

Paws for a Cause 5K Run/Walk Sunday May 22nd, 2022

<https://raceroster.com/events/2022/57007/3rd-annual-paws-for-a-cause-5k>

Headshots and Hairdos

Tues March 22nd, 2022

https://www.sereneharbor.org/events-1/headshots-and-hairdos-1

Hotline 321-726-8282 is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, where a certified trained advocate is always available to always answer.

<https://www.sereneharbor.org/>

https://ineedblue.net/