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Must become more aware of the domestic violence all around us

By [BAY AREA NEWS GROUP](#) |

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Ariel Castro's house was demolished last week. This house has shocked the world: three women imprisoned, two since they were themselves children, and subjected to physical and psychological torture. The name 'Cleveland' has become an embodiment of violence, of captivity — and, for people like me who lived through years of abuse, a trigger of memories and pain we would prefer never to revisit.

Yet as livid as I have become every time I have thought of Castro and the horrors he inflicted upon Amanda Berry, Gina DeJesus and Michelle Knight, my sense of helplessness and rage at their tragedy has only been heightened by how little American society seems prepared to learn from their case and take preventive action.

As a journalist, I am familiar with the vagaries of news cycles, but was shocked at how quickly the case faded from the public consciousness after their brave May escape. Within days, the case had disappeared from the major national headlines (after plentiful attention paid to a foul-mouthed neighbor who helped the women call the police).



The heinousness of Castro's case makes it easier to write off: That wouldn't happen here. That man was crazy. This is a good neighborhood.

Wanting to forget Ariel Castro existed is a natural reaction. But that response will do nothing to protect other women and children from similar nightmares — an occurrence so common that, in Cleveland as elsewhere, special medical centers have been set up to treat vulnerable patients once held captive.

Society's failure to pay attention and stop Castro ultimately allowed him to create a much larger web of abuse, one which will not only infect generations of the families of the three women, but also generations of his own family.

Nine years before Castro kidnapped Michelle Knight, he was arrested for abusing his then-wife: breaking her nose multiple times, cracking her ribs, dislocating both her shoulders, and causing brain injury that left her with a cerebral blood clot. When they divorced, his wife was given full custody of their children. Yet a grand jury failed to indict him. Years later, one of Castro's daughters is herself in prison now after slashing her infant daughter's throat.

This story of abhorrent violence ignored is not one unique to Cleveland. Nor is a story solely about inevitable social decay of crime-stricken, impoverished neighborhoods.

It is also a story about upper-middle-class university towns, and homes lined with curlicues of night jasmine and yellow-blush rosebushes. It was in such a house in Berkeley — a hidden prison — that my father terrorized his family for decades.

One night when I was a teenager, after the police had come because my father was beating my mother, I lay in my grandmother's bed for comfort. My father's mother, she whispered to me, ashamed, "I don't know how he turned out this way."

I was the one who called the police that night. Next door to us lived an elementary teacher, a lawyer, and a pediatrician. I do not know whether they knew about the abuse. With the screams and loud crashes, it would be hard not to. But they never spoke to me about it, never offered help.



Whenever the police came, they only stayed a few minutes. Never arrested my father. I do not remember a female officer ever responding. Often the officers did not separate my parents to talk to my mother alone. They never asked my siblings and me if we were OK or felt safe — although a parent committing domestic violence in a child’s presence is now grounds for intervention by child protective services in California.

Twenty years later, American society should have learned more about the insidiousness of domestic violence.

When a neighbor in Cleveland called to report a sighting of a naked woman crawling in Ariel Castro’s backyard on hands and knees, the police did not take the call seriously. When another neighbor reported hearing someone pounding on the doors from the inside, the police knocked on the front door, but left when no one answered.

The kind of violence Castro, and my father, displayed does not go away. It comes from somewhere, including childhood abuse or mental illness, and persists across future generations exposed to unspeakable terrors in their homes — the place where they should be most safe.

Changing stigmas around violence and abuse begins in our communities, and this takes conscious effort.

We must all become those worried Cleveland neighbors. Look around you. Pay attention to signs of domestic violence and child abuse. Talk to family, friends and neighbors, and speak up if you are worried about their safety. Show abusers like Castro that you will not accept their behavior. Show survivors like Michelle, Amanda and Gina that you are a safe haven.

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