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Real Men Don't Hit

Tough times require gentle solutions

By Donna Brazile

THERE'S A HIDDEN, YET FREQUENT, SPIN-OFF TO hard financial times like the ones we're now suffering: increased domestic violence. As I write this, the media is filled with news of the alleged beating suffered by young megastar Rihanna at the hands of her boyfriend, fellow performer Chris Brown. The reports left me at a loss for words. But now, many epithets and unpublishable words later, I have found the right ones: poor Chris Brown.

These were not the words I started with; the journey from rage to compassion had many false starts. But here I am, because I realized that Brown turned into exactly what he feared he would become. Two years ago, he publicly discussed a childhood spent watching his stepfather regularly beat his mother: "He made me terrified all the time, terrified like I had to pee on myself. I remember one night he made her nose bleed. I was crying and thinking, 'I'm just gonna go crazy on him one day.'"

Tragically, like many children who witness or experience abuse, Brown seems to have become an abuser himself, repeating the behavior that was modeled for him. Tragic, however, should not be confused with excusable. Other men grow up in abusive households and don't smash their girlfriends' faces against a windshield. Intimate violence is never okay. There is nothing anyone can say or do to deserve being beaten. Real men don't hit. Neither do real women. It is that simple.

Sure, it takes two to tango, but it only takes one to hit, and whoever is on the throwing side of the punch is the one in the wrong. Yet many wanted to reserve judgment on Chris Brown. Why?

I think it's because we still think of domestic violence as a private matter. And perhaps because we can't fathom why someone would stay in an abusive relationship, we think that on some level maybe he or she deserves it, or shares the blame. We also think it will never happen to us or someone we love. Until it does.

Domestic violence happens everywhere, 24 hours a day. Nearly one in four women will be beaten or raped by a partner during adulthood, according to the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV). The stats are even higher for African American women. According to the University of Minnesota's Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community, black women comprised 22 percent of intimate-partner homicide victims in 2005, yet they're just 8 percent of the U.S. population.

"While celebrity domestic violence is sure to attract attention, thousands of serious domestic abuse cases occur every day [in] all walks of life," says NNEDV President Sue Else. "In a 24-hour snapshot, we found that domestic violence programs served nearly 61,000 victims and answered more than 21,000 crisis hotline calls. And, of course, that doesn't include those who couldn't or didn't reach out for help."

In 2006, more than 29,000 calls to the National Domestic Violence Hotline went unanswered because of insufficient resources. And that's just one hotline. We need more resources.

There are no simple answers to domestic violence. It is a generational disease that will take a long time to cure. The solution lies in how we raise our sons and our daughters, what we teach them and what they learn by watching us. So we must teach love and model compassion. We must teach—through words, example and public policy—that violence is the language of the weak, and that men (and women) who lift their hands in anger will have them lowered in handcuffs.

Only then can we break this cycle.

DONNA BRAZILE is adjunct assistant professor of women's studies at Georgetown University and chair of the Democratic National Committee's Voting Rights Institute. She is the author of *Cooking with Grease: Stirring the Pots in American Politics* (Simon & Schuster, 2004).

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