

VICTIM SERVICES

Board of Directors

Susan Solomon
Chair

Anita Bakal
Wendy Banks
Bertram M. Beck
Arthur Chang
Mindy Fullilove
Joseph S. Iseman, Esq.
Joann Lang
Brooke McMurray
Thomas J. Mitchell
Martin D. Newman, Esq.
John M. Perkins
Eugene Pickens
Kenneth A. Powell
Alan C. Stephenson, Esq.
Most Reverend
Joseph M. Sullivan
Ann Tripp

Executive Director

Gordon J. Campbell

September 16, 1997

David Gonzalez, columnist
The New York Times
Fax No. 212-556-5990

Mr. Gonzalez:

Thank you again for returning my call so quickly. As I stated before, we are interested in having an article or column written in *The New York Times* about **Project SAFE**, an extremely well-received Victim Services program in which our own staff of experienced locksmiths drive to the homes of victims of domestic violence, muggings, burglary, sexual assault, elder abuse and other crimes.

I recently had the eye-opening experience of riding along for a day with the program's most senior locksmith Paul Haber, who changed the locks of four most grateful women -- all victims of domestic violence, all mothers of young children and all scared to death of their abusive partners. When Paul and I arrived, one woman was applying ice to a fresh black and blue bruise on her jaw.

Words fail to translate just how relieved each woman felt when Paul appeared smiling at their door. They couldn't believe how quickly Victim Services responded to their crisis, nor could they believe the service, usually arranged around the victim's schedule, was free. But Paul did more than change their locks. With every new set of special, high-security keys he handed out, each woman received some small measure of control in their lives.

Cases are referred by the police, district attorney's offices, court orders, concerned neighbors and other sources. Of course, each case is different, and some cases are potentially volatile. Locksmiths are forewarned about whether to proceed with extra caution or even whether, in rare cases, a police escort is necessary. But the locksmiths say they if they worried about the potential danger, they couldn't effectively do their jobs.

Mr. Gonzalez, we believe visiting and writing about **Project SAFE** would be worth your time as well as that of your readers. I have also included on the next page copies of our HelpCards on the project in English and Spanish. Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,



Nichell Taylor Bryant, Communications Division

The Metro Section

The New York Times

VICTIM SERVICES

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 1997

DAVID GONZALEZ
About New York

For Victims, Peace of Mind In a House Call

JOHN POWELL rang the lobby buzzer in a Bronx building. Nothing. He pressed the button again and cupped his hand over the door's smudged window. Soon, a woman padded downstairs and shot him a look that was as weary as it was wary.

"I'm the locksmith," he said. She opened the door and silently led him to her apartment. She must be careful, since her intercom and telephone are broken. She is worried that her children's father may have gotten out of jail two days after she had him arrested for violating an order of protection. She has not left her home since, not even to take her ailing 3-week-old baby to the hospital down the block.

Until the woman can move, Mr. Powell is her only bet for peace of mind. He is one of four locksmiths working for the Victim Services Agency, which sends them out to change hundreds of locks each month, at no charge. As long as an old set of keys jangles in the pocket of a batterer or burglar, a

**A sturdy lock can
provide more security
than a court order.**

dresser pushed against the door probably offers more security than a court order.

"I'll feel better knowing he doesn't have a key," said the woman, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "You hear about women who get killed and murdered and the order of protection meant nothing."

The agency has employed locksmiths since 1979, and in an average month handles 270 cases, nearly two-thirds involving domestic violence. Safety is more than just having a lock, so Mr. Powell and his colleagues have to be more than just locksmiths. Shuva Paul, who directs the service, said they received training in spotting the signs of abuse and in crisis intervention. They often talk with the victim while changing the locks, advising them of counseling, help with food and other assistance.

"Since they work directly with the client, they can see things the phone counselors would never be able to observe," Mr. Paul said. "They could see when the people are not taking care of themselves or when an elderly person has a mental health issue."

MR. POWELL, comfortable in camouflage pants, a baseball cap and a sweatshirt that read "Hero," has seen a lot. He once arrived at a woman's apartment after her husband had beaten her bloody. Most difficult, he said, are immigrant women who are trying to free themselves from abusive spouses.

"The women don't speak any English because the husband was the one who relayed everything to them," he said. "Now they're in a spot where they can't talk with anyone, her husband has left or is in jail. You know she wants to take him back because he's their connection to the world."

He has also visited some homes two or three times, each time seeing more black eyes and bruised faces. Gently, he suggests they should seek out support groups for battered women. "I don't like to speak in absolutes," he explained. "When you tell a person that somebody is no good, you don't know how they're going to react."

What he can't tell is how another man might react when he shows up. Although counselors ask clients if any men will be present when the locksmith arrives or if a police escort is needed, surprises occur. Mr. Powell said his usual reaction when he encounters an unexpected male is to act as if he had knocked on the wrong door.

A FEW DAYS ago he started to work in one woman's apartment when he spotted a man sitting quietly in the corner. Mr. Powell glanced at the woman, who appeared calm, and made a quick decision to continue.

"If there is a violence problem, she would not be happy," he said later. "If she feels comfortable with the situation, then I feel comfortable. If she's not, or wants to meet me outside, that's not good."

Despite encountering people during vulnerable and fearful moments, he remains optimistic about his work. "This is the point when they're taking their lives back," he said. "They're saying to someone, 'No, you can't do this to me anymore.'"

A baby-faced girl answered the door at a housing project, then returned to watch television in her barely furnished room. "An all new musical," said a commercial announcer. "Why do good girls like bad boys?" Mr. Powell went to work, stopping to ask if she needed someone to go to court with her the next day. She agreed to look up a counselor at the courthouse.

"Grace and peace," he said as he left. In the hallway, he whispered, "I hope she calls."

As he walked to the elevator, he could hear the sharp clack of a new lock closing.