

Three Determined and Dedicated Women Advocates Against Domestic Violence



Lambert



Gardner



Ahrensfield

By Michelle Miller Allen

New Mexico is blessed with gifted women who have dedicated their careers to victim advocacy. This year, Governor Bill Richardson has made three important moves to ensure that New Mexico stays in the forefront on victims' rights and empowerment issues:

First, in order to implement the 1994 New Mexico Victims of Crime Act, he established the office of Director of Victim Advocacy, and appointed Tammi Lambert to the position. Second, he appointed Sandra Gardner as Domestic Violence Coordinator. And third, APD Officer Trish Ahrensfield was inducted into the Governor's New Mexico Hall of Fame. I was curious about these women, what drove them to these career choices, and what qualifications led to their selection for the positions and honors.

My first meeting was with Tammi M. Lambert, formerly an attorney specializing in domestic violence and family law. "My directive is to enforce the Victims of Crime Act, a state constitutional provision in the Bill of Rights that says that victims have certain rights," says Lambert. "The Governor's Office of Victim Advocacy works with other state agencies to protect victims as they proceed through the criminal justice system. We enforce their constitutional and statutory rights, take on specific cases, and record and investigate complaints. We are legislatively active, and provide public awareness and training."

Tammi Lambert's path to domestic rela-

tions and domestic violence law was through an unexpected and difficult door. She says, "I was drawn to this area because of a background of personal abuse, as a victim. I did not have the information or knowledge about how to protect myself, to report the abuse, nor was I aware that there was anyone around to address the situation."

"After that incident, I realized that there was something inside of me, an absolute conviction that I would never allow myself to be battered or powerless again. I changed my college major to prepare for law school, where I forged the tools to fight for women who had been powerless."

My favorite question of women who have achieved great things is what kinds of hurdles have they had to overcome as a woman? Tammi says, "There have been times when I felt oppressed by the world. As a woman of color, I had to prove my worth. While I still face sexism, racism, and other 'isms,' I am able to view proponents with compassion, and not accept their view as truth."

Beginning to feel that I had been given a clue as to why Governor Richardson selected Tammi for the job, I checked in next door with Sandra Gardner, recently appointed New Mexico's first Domestic Violence Coordinator. Her job is to be a policy advisor to the governor as far as domestic violence is concerned. She will work on issues, proposals, and recommendations for the legislature and state domestic violence

funding issues. "The governor has some pretty innovative ideas in this area. We intend to work with a coordinated community response. That includes police, courts, D.A.s, law enforcement, advocate groups, liaisons, hospitals, shelters—everyone working on domestic violence issues will pool their efforts and resources."

Gardner's path to this appointment has been by way of a career as a domestic relations attorney in Albuquerque. The human aspect of law turned out to be the most interesting to her, having started with a bachelor's degree in psychology. Gardner strikes me as a down-to-earth, practical woman with a great sense of humor who could take on a lot. I ask her what she feels are the qualities necessary for a woman to be a successful attorney and balance her personal life.

"Not to say men can't be compassionate, I think there is an aspect of a woman's personality that is very nurturing. Compassion, empathy, and a certain level of being ourselves seem to work very well in the field of law."

Gardner's advice to women who find themselves in an abusive relationship:

"There are options and people who can help you get out of a situation. Please get out before you die and before it affects your children. Staying in an abusive household hurts your kids. They grow up to be abusers or abused."

So now I had a sense of the women working at the top of the victim's rights/domestic

violence services, what about our woman on the street? At the downtown APD station I sat down with the 2004 Hall of Famer.

Call her attractive, highly energetic, and charismatic. But whatever you call her, call her Officer Trish Ahrensfield. Her experience as the victim of a stalker was the deciding factor in her career choice. Before anti-stalking laws were enacted, Ahrensfield lived through a four-year ordeal in Arizona at the hands of a man she had dated while in college. When police couldn't help, she started carrying a gun and finally drove to Albuquerque in the night with her mom and her cat to hide out. She later tested for a job with the state police.

"Domestic violence prevention is my mission." Ahrensfield has initiated an outreach education program through APD, called Women Against Crime. As the program's founder and coordinator, she teaches a nine-week personal safety course on how not to be a victim. Her classes are booked four months ahead of time. She also gives presentations to hundreds of groups, from Kirtland A.F.B., senior centers, to Girl Scouts, Masonic lodges, doctors' offices, teachers, churches, etc.

Ahrensfield's work has been featured on a television show on the Oxygen channel, "Women and the Badge," backed by Oprah. "A girl wrote to me from South Carolina after that show. Her aunt was in a terrible abusive relationship and left that relationship because of what I did.

It was great to hear, because you always wonder if you are making a difference."

This year Trish was one of 20 statewide recipients of the Governor's Award for Woman of the Year, and one of two inducted into the Hall of Fame. Her receipt of this honor was largely due to her dedication to the Women Against Crime program.

Ahrensfield's husband is also an APD offi-

cer. Does this work for her?

"I don't think it would work with anybody else. Many men would not be able to handle their wives being a cop. We have been there, done that, have the same stuff on our belt, the same uniform, and worked together."

The working environment at APD feels good to Trish. The number of women graduating from the police academy is increasing annually—her department is 12 percent women, whereas twenty years ago it was less than one percent. Trish describes her job as physically challenging and

If you are a victim of domestic violence

make a safety plan. Here are simple but critical steps you can take to increase your safety while you deal with violence in your personal life.

In case you have to flee, have the following available:

- Important personal papers—birth certificates, social security cards, insurance, school and health records, welfare and immigration documents, and divorce or other court documents
- Some cash, credit cards, bank account number, and/or ATM cards.
- Extra set of keys
- Medications and prescriptions
- Phone numbers and addresses for family, friends, doctors, lawyers, and community agencies.
- Clothing for you and your children.

If you are in a violent relationship and need help, call 1-800-799-SAFE.

Victim's Assistance Unit
(505) 768-2104

To help stop domestic violence in your community, call 1-800-END-ABUSE.

applauds APD for providing the option to work in a wide range of areas. Ahrensfield encourages young women to stay out of trouble, finish their education, and consider law enforcement as a career. "We can do the job; our responsibilities are no different than those of a male police officer."

Our chat drew to a close as Trish Ahrensfield began to check her phone messages (many arrived during our interview) and pushed back her chair. "I need to get information to every woman in New Mexico. I work Monday through Friday, and I'm on call on weekends, because my passion is to prevent women from going through what I did. If I can provide information that reduces or stops domestic violence in any way, I have SO done my job!"

I didn't see her put on a Super Woman cape as she left the building, but there was a phone booth around the corner. As I drove home, my head spinning with the words of these three power women, it felt very good to know that they are working on our side. I'd say we are in good hands.

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