

Relationship Violence Strikes Campuses

Experts say “scarcity”
of Black men as well as
Black women’s
achievements could
fuel incidents.

By Pearl Stewart

CRIME SCENE

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Kira Johnson still becomes tearful when she recalls the incident eight years ago when her college boyfriend held a gun to her head threatening to end her life because he feared she was about to leave him.

"I think the only reason he didn't kill me was because I told him to go ahead and do it. I didn't beg him not to kill me. I was so tired and so physically and emotionally exhausted that I just said, 'if you're going to do it, go ahead.' And he just walked away."

That near-death episode was the turning point for Johnson, who, after enduring nearly four years in the relationship while she pursued her undergraduate degree, finally ended it with the help of supportive family and friends. Johnson said "the pressure to be the ideal couple" and the shame of admitting she was a victim prevented her from discussing the abuse until after the gun incident.

Last December, when Jackson State University undergrad Latasha Norman was found dead and her former boyfriend was charged with her murder, Johnson realized that she, too, could have been a fatal victim of relationship violence.

"I felt I needed to do something personally, to tell my story so that other people could get help," says Johnson, now a licensed social worker pursuing her doctorate at JSU and working as a policy analyst and advocate for victims of domestic abuse.

Johnson helped plan a recent town hall meeting on relationship violence organized in part to help launch the Latasha Norman Center for Social and Clinical Counseling. After Norman's death, JSU president Ron Mason announced the new center as a tribute to the slain student.

Educating Both Sexes

Similar projects have been initiated at colleges and universities around the country as administrators begin to acknowledge the problem as critical. Just as schools have responded to mass shootings on campuses by strengthening their emergency notifica-

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— Dr. Carolyn West, Associate Professor of Psychology, University of Washington, Tacoma

tion systems, increasing reports of relationship violence are resulting in more programs like the one at JSU.

Dr. Carolyn West, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Washington, Tacoma, who has researched causes of relationship violence, says the issue is not being addressed as aggressively as it should be by college administrators.

"I think there is concern because of the Clery Act. If the incidents are documented, that can affect enrollment," West says, referring to the federal Jeanne Clery Act, which requires all colleges to report major crimes on their campuses annually. The reports are made public and are available on the Internet.

West believes it is important not only to educate women about behavioral signs that may portend violence, but to have "men educating other men about sexual assault and dating violence and holding other men accountable."

Overall, West says the recent tragedies "reflect what's going on in the larger soci-

ety" and strongly indicate a need for more research. She cites an August 2007 Bureau of Justice Statistics study by Dr. Erika Harrell, which found that African-Americans account for 49 percent of homicide victims nationally while making up only 12 to 13 percent of the population. The study also

found that 35 percent of the female homicide victims and more than half of the male victims were Black.

"Most of the research focuses on a narrow slice of African-American life, people who are marginalized. We haven't done as good of a job of researching violence among higher functioning African-American families," West says.

West wrote part of her dissertation on dating violence among African-American youth from low-income families. "There were a lot of adversarial, antagonistic beliefs, not trusting each other, homes with a history of domestic violence," West says. She adds that as colleges accept more students from diverse backgrounds, the problems afflicting those students will arrive on the campuses with them.

In addition to the colleges becoming more open in addressing the issue, West believes the faith communities need to do more. "They have not done well in this area and that is regrettable," West says.

As a result of studies such as hers, a U.S.

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PHOTO BY J.D. SCHWALM

Senate resolution established Feb. 4-8, 2008, as "National Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Week" with programs developed through the Department of Justice and carried out at state and local levels.

During that week, Spelman College hosted R.A.P., a relationship abuse prevention summit on Feb. 8, described by its organizers as a seminar to "raise awareness and identify issues and solutions" to youth relationship violence.

"The purpose of the summit is to address the alarming rise in dating and relationship violence among young people in Georgia and all over the nation," Spelman explains on its Web site. Although the historically

Black women's college hosted the event, the Fulton County sheriff's office sponsored it under the title "Relationships Gone Wild!"

During these programs, women are warned to remove themselves from potentially dangerous involvements by hearing the experiences of victims like Johnson and the litanies of recent cases that have made headlines nationally.

Last fall Spelman women staged demonstrations because of persistent reports of sexual assaults of Spelman women by neighboring Morehouse College men. Dr. Robert Franklin, Morehouse president, addressed the issue in an interview seven weeks after beginning his presidency.

"I think the standards of our overall cul-

Kira Johnson, a graduate of Jackson State University, had been reluctant to speak out about her own relationship abuse until the death of fellow JSU student Latasha Norman who was murdered by her boyfriend last December.

ture have fallen, so it's somewhat unremarkable when the bad behavior modeled by some businesses, religious leaders and politicians trickles down to young people," Franklin told *The Maroon Tiger*, Morehouse's student newspaper. Although there

Domestic Violence Facts

- One in every four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime.
- An estimated 1.3 million women are victims of physical assault by an intimate partner each year.
- The majority of family violence victims, 73%, are female. Females were 84% of spousal abuse victims and 86% of abuse victims at the hands of a boyfriend.
- Historically, females have been most often victimized by someone they knew.
- Females who are 20-24 years of age are at the greatest risk for intimate partner violence.

SOURCE: NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

have been no arrests, the rape allegations have not been denied by school officials. In fact, Franklin admonished his students to behave.

"If I have to bump into a headline that says another Morehouse man is misbehaving, it makes my job harder. So I'm asking the brothers — with respect — to help me do my job. Help me help you," Franklin told *The Maroon Tiger*.

In 2006, before Franklin arrived, four current and former Morehouse students were charged in the murder of another Morehouse student over a \$3,000 insurance check.

Excelling Women, Trailing Men

West concurs with the view that society's ills are befalling college campuses and that women have been the frequent victims at historically Black colleges and universities. She says women should be wary of partners who are controlling, jealous and who frequently exhibit anger. She says unemployment and poor academic performance, particularly if the women are faring better, can also lead to abuse.

In Johnson's case, and Norman's as well,

the men were also college students, but while the women were excelling in their classes, the men were trailing. "We both started out doing well, but as the relationship went on, he fell behind and I don't even think he graduated," Johnson recalls.

After Latasha Norman's body was found, Norman's ex-boyfriend, Stanley Cole, was arrested and is awaiting trial in Mississippi. Cole, a 24-year-old sophomore criminal justice major, had a troubled academic history and was a suspect in a previous criminal case. Norman, on the other hand, was described by one of her professors as an excellent student with a strong work ethic.

"A very nice young lady, very hard working, very caring, very respectful. Just an ideal student," Dr. Joann White told *Black College Wire*. Norman was well known on the JSU campus because of her involvement in numerous campus activities including the yearbook and campus newspaper.

Nefertiti Williams, another student journalist and news editor of Florida A&M University's student newspaper, was killed by a male roommate in November 2006. Her colleagues on *The Famuan* staff didn't describe Shundavian Marquis Brooks as Williams' boyfriend, but said the two had been friends since high school. He was not a student and was not employed.

Brooks' body was found along with that of Williams' in the home they shared with several other roommates, who had left for the Thanksgiving holiday. Police called it a murder-suicide.

A few months later, domestic violence touched the FAMU campus again. Dr. Sheryl Shivers-Blackwell, 36, an associate professor of management in the School of Business and Industry, was found strangled

in her home in July 2007. Her husband, Baron Blackwell, who had bachelor's and master's degrees from Clark Atlanta University but was unemployed at the time, shot himself and died later at a hospital. Police said there was evidence of domestic violence in the home. The couple had two small children.

In Durham, N.C., a relationship triangle appeared to be an underlying factor in the



Dr. Carolyn West of the University of Washington, Tacoma, left, says poor academic performance or unemployment among men can lead to the abuse of women, particularly if the women are faring better. Jackson State University student Latasha Norman, right, was described as an excellent student, while her ex-boyfriend, who is being charged with her murder, had a troubled academic history.

death of Denita Smith, a 25-year-old graduate student, who, like Williams and Norman, had worked on the school newspaper. Smith had recently become engaged to a police officer. On Jan. 4, 2007, Shannon Crawley, 27, drove onto the North Carolina Central University campus and shot Smith to death, according to police reports. While an actual relationship between Crawley and Smith's fiancé, Jermier Stroud, was not established, Stroud did tell authorities that Crawley had "stalked" him prior to the shooting. Crawley was later released on bail and is awaiting trial for Smith's murder.

West says incidents of violence against perceived rivals also appear to be on the rise in society and, as with other crimes, is also showing up on campuses. She points to the "scarcity ideal" that is common in Black communities and on HBCU campuses, where women typically outnumber men.

"A lot of that is lacking a sense of identity, so that the thought of being left is too much to bear. And some women are being

socialized to fight and compete for men," West says. "Unfortunately, men may fuel that thinking."

She also suggests that misogynistic depictions of Black women in popular culture contribute to the behavior, as numerous academics and social activists have proclaimed. The proclaimers include Spelman women, who several years ago challenged rapper Nelly about his notoriously degrad-

Did You Know?

- Domestic violence is one of the most chronically underreported crimes.
- Thirty percent of Americans say they know a woman who has been physically abused by her husband or boyfriend in the past year.
- Women of all races are about equally vulnerable to violence by an intimate.
- On average, more than three women are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends in this country every day.
- In 2000, 1,247 women were killed by an intimate partner. The same year, 440 men were killed by an intimate partner. Women are much more likely than men to be killed by an intimate partner.
- In 2000, intimate partner homicides accounted for 33.5% of the murders of women and less than 4 percent of the murders of men.

SOURCE: FAMILY VIOLENCE PREVENTION FUND

ing — and wildly popular — hip-hop video "Tip Drill," which portrayed a Black man swiping a credit card through a Black woman's buttocks.

Services such as those at JSU and Spelman are also being developed on other HBCU campuses. For example, North Carolina Central's law school has a domestic violence clinic among its pro bono programs. Tougaloo College has established the Stop Now! violence prevention program through its office of student affairs.

At FAMU, Dr. Yolanda Bogan, director of counseling services, says her office has ongoing sessions with students in residence halls and classrooms "to educate them on the front end so that they can recognize the warning signs and get out of abusive relationships. We want to take away the stigma, so they will be more likely to ask for assistance." ■

>> E-MAIL THE EDITOR: editor@diverseeducation.com