

The Enterprise

FALMOUTH • MASHPEE • BOURNE • SANDWICH
SERVING CAPE COD COMMUNITIES SINCE 1895

The Clothesline Project Calls For Action Against Domestic Violence: Women's 'Silent Killer'

• By KELLY BRODER July 25, 2024

The Clothesline Project started with one jarring statistic. In 1990, members of the Cape Cod Women's Defense Agenda were shocked to learn that during the same timeframe in which 58,000 soldiers were killed in the Vietnam War, 51,000 US women were killed by intimate partner violence.

Women who were part of that defense group, led by Rachel Carey-Harper, recorded statistics about violence against women, along with their own accounts of such violence, and wrote messages of hope on T-shirts that were then displayed on the Hyannis Village Green.



Carol Chichetto, Co-Founder of The Clothesline Project

The optics of the clothesline are used to acknowledge the domestic, private and often taboo nature of intimate partner violence, and the written statements are compelling challenges to the generalized assumptions regarding survivors and their choice to remain silent on such topics.

“So many [survivors] don’t disclose their domestic violence issues,” said Margot Churchill, a retired domestic violence social worker from Yarmouth. “It’s far more prevalent than any of us know. It’s sort of a silent killer for women.”

Now, more than three decades after the first clothesline was hung on Cape Cod, organizers have spread The Clothesline Project to numerous countries, highlighting the need for uninhibited access to local resources and increased global awareness.

The message of The Clothesline Project, however, is not spread only by women.

Dave Doolittle of Sandwich continues adding photos to The Clothesline Project website as projects take place, even after the website’s creator and national Clothesline coordinator, Carol Chichetto of Brewster, passed away last year.

“The day before she died, I promised her that I would keep her website going,” Mr. Doolittle said. “People all over the country and the world continue to contribute photos of their local projects. I just keep adding them to the photos page.”

Mr. Doolittle was a radio announcer for 43 years, but was working at Sears when he met Ms. Chichetto, who had been looking to purchase a new computer from him. “We became friends there; I helped her with a computer and later, when I learned about the website, I offered to help with that,” Mr. Doolittle explained.

At the time of her death last July, Mr. Doolittle had known Ms. Chichetto and her mission for The Clothesline Project for more than 20 years.

"My hope is to certainly spread the word of the message of The Clothesline Project—to raise awareness of violence against women," Mr. Doolittle said. "The good news is that the word is getting out there. The bad news and sad news, obviously, is that this problem is not just on Cape Cod, but around the world."

In Massachusetts, nearly one in three women has experienced rape, physical violence and/or stalking by an intimate partner, as reported by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

"We're all in this life together. Men should be aware of these dangers that women have faced over the years and men need to better behave themselves," Mr. Doolittle said. "Hopefully some men will hear that message and behave better."

Carol's sister, Mary Chichetto of Yarmouthport, shares this sentiment. "Men have been allowed not to have any responsibility for many years, but as the clotheslines went on, some men felt brave enough to come and create shirts themselves," Mary said, pointing out that men can and do play roles in the cycle of violence, whether that be as perpetrators, bystanders or victims themselves.

"We have to remember that domestic violence in particular is not limited just to women, and that sexual assault also is not limited just to women," she said.

Mary Chichetto, who is 11 years her sister's junior, helped to organize the shirts that were hung at Ms. Chichetto's speaking engagements, where she spoke about accessing local domestic violence support prevention resources, as well as the relevance of The Clothesline Project.

"Once people started to put themselves out there with their shirts, more people started coming out of the woodwork and saying, 'Yes, I see that. That happened to me,'" Mary Chichetto said of her sister. "When she started, women would come up, sometimes crying and saying, 'I read that shirt over there. That's me. That happened to me.' Carol goes, 'Put yourself on a shirt. Let other people know you don't have to keep it inside.'"

While Mary Chichetto does not actively work with the Clothesline Project's management, she does keep her sister's goals in mind on a frequent basis.

"She helped people understand that women could expand their roles beyond what a typical woman's career was," Mary said. "Carol was very strident. I remember one of the last conversations I had with her. She said, 'I hope that we don't fall backwards.' And I said, 'As long as people keep asking questions, as long as people keep remembering the work that you did and the work that other people did—and continue to do that work— then we keep it at the forefront. We must.'"

Margot Churchill of Yarmouth was a social worker in the field of domestic violence prevention for 25 years, and previously worked in an OB-GYN high-risk perinatal unit in Worcester before recently retiring.

Ms. Churchill most recently worked with the Cape Cod Cultural Center at the Barnstable County Correctional Facility as part of the Women's Therapeutic Treatment Program, engaging with incarcerated women, many of whom experienced domestic violence and intersecting issues of drug abuse and addiction.

"[Domestic violence] potentially can be a threat on their life, it can potentially be a loss of their income and a loss of their housing," Ms. Churchill said. "Men often have control over the household and the income, and [women] are sort of silent prisoners."

From a February 2021 briefing about the murder of Mashpee resident Danielle Taylor, Executive Director Lysetta Hurge-Putnam of Independence House said, "Cape Cod is reflective of the United States of America, and as such our community is not immune to domestic violence which impacts individuals from every race, class, culture, sexual orientation, gender identity and socioeconomic status. We are also mindful that people of color, LGBTQ individuals and individuals with different disabilities have the worst outcomes and least access to support and services. Cape Cod is composed of people from all these groups."

“The thought going forward is, please keep speaking. Don’t stop, don’t let the world’s chaos stop you from speaking,” Mary said. “There are people who want to make sure women’s rights go forward, and those are the people you want to pay attention to. It’s easy to think that everything was solved way back when, but it wasn’t.”

Hotline: Independence House’s 24/7 domestic and sexual violence hotline for domestic violence and sexual assault victims and survivors is available by calling their live-monitored hotline at **800-439-6507**. All services are free for residents of Cape Cod’s 15 towns. Other available resources and services are also found at www.independencehouse.org.

Website: The Clothesline Project website is: www.TheClotheslineProject.org