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## Newsroom: Defending the Defenseless, 5-26-2016

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# Newsroom

May 25, 2016

## Defending the Defenseless

Brook Ashley '08 spearheads a new program expanding access to legal services for domestic violence victims who can't afford lawyers.



When lower-income victims of domestic violence escape their abusive relationships, they can often face a secondary barrage of battles – legal proceedings involving divorce, visitation and custody – without adequate funds or professional resources.

What can be done?

Enter **Brook Ashley '08**, who has committed her professional life to the fight to end violence against women. In February, she launched a new program committed to expanding access to legal services for domestic violence victims who can't afford lawyers. It's called **Partners Overcoming Domestic Violence**.

"We wanted to create a program with a twofold purpose," Ashley says. "One, we wanted to increase access to justice for survivors; and two, we wanted to increase the number of attorneys who are willing to take these cases and feel comfortable doing it."

“*People want to get involved because they recognize there is a problem –*  
and they want to be part of the solution.”

Partners Overcoming Domestic Violence is a collaboration of the **Rhode Island Bar Association**, **RWU Law**, **Rhode Island Legal Services**, the **Rhode Island Commission Against Domestic Violence**, and the **Rhode Island Family Court**. According to Ashley, ideas about building a proper model had been percolating since her days as an evening division student at RWU Law. Longtime RWU Law lecturer Liz Tobin Tyler – now an assistant professor at Brown University's Albert Medical School and School of Public Health – headed a group to come up with ideas and, when she left in 2013, Ashley replaced her as chair.

In the end, she said, participants settled on a model that would effectively fuse the bar association's existing Volunteer Lawyer Program with a new mentoring program designed to pair experienced lawyers with younger attorneys seeking pro bono opportunities. Ashley's group came up with a screening tool for determining which cases to forward to the new program. Once identified, these cases are assigned to available legal teams consisting of two volunteer lawyers and one mentor. In addition, an advocate from the Commission Against Domestic Violence is made available to clients for counseling and other non-legal services.

The group received commitments from six mentors, and its initial roster of volunteer lawyers numbered 17. A series of training sessions were conducted in February, including role playing with contested hearings and mock negotiations, with work on the first actual cases starting in early March.

"The attorneys we've seen volunteer all have different backgrounds and are at different places in their legal careers," Ashley says. "For most of them, this is not the area of law in which they usually practice, but they want to either give back or expand their areas of practice – and this is a great opportunity to do that. But the majority, honestly, are people who want to get involved because they recognize there is a problem and want to be part of the solution."

That's why Ashley herself has become involved in domestic violence prevention. For some 15 years prior to law school, she worked in a variety of emergency shelters, court and advocacy programs – and she sought to apply her legal education expressly to the fight to end violence against women.

"One of the things I found so attractive about Roger Williams, and something I really appreciated, was the Feinstein Institute [now the Feinstein Center for Pro Bono & Experiential Education] and the school's commitment to teaching students the importance and value of service to others," she recalls.

Looking forward, Ashley is optimistic about Partners Against Domestic Violence.

"It's been a group effort and I'm very proud of what we've accomplished," she said. "I think it's going to grow and be a really great program that will impact survivors in our community