Honor and rage

Tradition, pride, religion and patriarchy are a dangerous mix for Bible Belt women in their relationships.

SENECA — Her arms windmill with passion as her country twang resounds from behind a lec-
tern like the revival preacher she has, in many ways, become.

She has dreamed of this moment for a decade since her husband of 18 years beat her for the last time.

Jenna Henson Black is here in the state's western-most county on this steamy July morning to open Safe Harbor, a shelter for abused women and their children. She's raised money for the Oconee County shelter since 2004 when her ex-husband slapped her until she thought her teeth were falling out.

She fled while he slept.

Black prays this new shelter will provide safety for other women trapped in destructive relationships that leave them beaten, bloodied and broken. But she knows how difficult it is to escape the hold of these perilous unions, despite their dysfunction and danger.

Part of the problem is rooted in the culture of South Carolina, where men have long dominated the halls of power, setting an agenda that clings to tradition and conservative Christian tenets about the subservient role of women.

This has bred a tolerance of domestic violence that has passed through so many generations, behind so many closed doors, that today South Carolina ranks No. 1 nationwide in the rate of men killing women.

For a special multimedia presentation, go to postandcourier.com/TillDeath
Oconee County, where six people died in domestic killings within six months in 2012, embodies many of the cultural traits that have made South Carolina the most dangerous state in the nation for women. Unlike the state as a whole, which has done next to nothing, Oconee took the killings as a call to action, galvanizing law enforcement, religious leaders and residents to confront the problem.

Yet old ways die slowly in rural corners like Oconee County, where God and traditional family values have long forged the backbones of life. Here, deep notions linger about the hallowed institution of marriage and a woman’s place in the home.

“There is a belief that men are totally dominant and women are supposed to be in the bedroom and the kitchen,” Black says. Like many in the Bible Belt, she considered divorce a sin and a source of shame, despite the beatings she endured.

“You can die, but you can’t get divorced.”

**Women as chattel**

South Carolina has been a patriarchal society from its very inception, and women have long been relegated to a secondary status. They lacked the right to serve on juries here until 1967, and the Palmetto State didn’t formally ratify the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote until two years later. Women couldn’t file for divorce in South Carolina until 1949. Marital rape wasn’t criminalized until 1991.

Progress has been made, but the state still struggles with challenges that impede women’s ability to advance. Only seven states have higher rates of women living in poverty. Just two states have lower per capita incomes. And only eight have worse rates of high school graduation.

South Carolina now has its first female governor, but the state ranks 49th in the nation for the number of women elected to its legislature, according to the Center for American Women and Politics. And that’s an improvement. For the decade until 2012, it ranked dead last every year. Against this backdrop, it’s easy to see why domestic violence hasn’t garnered more attention in the Statehouse. When legislation goes before the state Senate, a lone woman sits among the men casting votes.

Carol Sears Botsch, associate professor of political...
science at the University of South Carolina in Aiken, explored the role of women in South Carolina politics in a 2003 report. She found a male-dominated power structure that often failed to see problems from the perspective of women. As a result, public policies were rooted in traditional notions that “simply reinforced women’s subordinate status.”

Brian Rawl, a Charleston County magistrate who handles domestic violence cases, puts it more bluntly: “We’re transforming from a social acceptance of a woman being chattel.”

The late political scientist Daniel Elazar described South Carolina as the “most traditionalist state in the union,” with a political culture geared toward preserving a status quo that often benefits the values of personal liberty.

Most Southern states share this model. They also share a propensity for violence. Four of the 10 states with the most shameful rates of men killing women are in the South: Tennessee, West Virginia, Louisiana — and, at No. 1, South Carolina.

Too close to home

Nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, with rolling hills, quaint small towns and a trio of crystal blue lakes, Oconee County looks like a place people might go to escape the perils of modern society.

Drawing its name from a Cherokee word meaning “land beside the water,” Oconee is home to wild rivers and cascading waterfalls. It’s a picturesque place that bears the nickname “South Carolina’s Golden Corner.”

But Mike Crenshaw, the county’s sheriff, has seen a darker side as well.

In 2012, the year before Crenshaw took office, six county residents died in a trio of domestic killings. A 70-year-old Walhalla man fatally shot his wife on his July birthday, and then turned the gun on himself. A day later, a 34-year-old Westminster man committed suicide after gunning down his 11-year-old stepdaughter and critically wounding his wife. Four months after that, an 86-year-old Westminster man beat and stabbed an 86-year-old Westminster man beat and stabbed his girlfriend to death, then killed the woman’s granddaughter.

Crenshaw, then a sheriff’s deputy, questioned why law enforcement didn’t do more to stop the bloodshed. He
made the issue part of his campaign for sheriff, vowing to do more. Then, five days after he took office in January 2013, a 58-year-old Seneca woman was shot to death by her live-in boyfriend, who later committed suicide. The bloody scene shook Crenshaw to the core.

“I left that morning feeling helpless because with all of these cases, there was no call history to law enforcement at all. We had not been aware of any problems within those families,” he says. “It got me thinking that we have to get to these folks somehow. It made me realize this is not just a law enforcement issue: it’s a community issue.”

But getting people to talk about the issue can prove a challenge in itself.

It’s not easy to overcome a culture of abuse that became “somewhat of an accepted behavior” in South Carolina, Crenshaw says. “It’s going to take some time to change that mindset.”

‘Back into a burning house’

Family violence has long lingered in the shadows in Oconee — and across South Carolina. That’s because it’s largely been viewed as a family issue, something to be dealt with in the home.

“The culture does not see domestic violence as a public health issue, which is what it really is,” says Mindi Spencer, an assistant professor of Southern Studies and Public Health at the University of South Carolina in Columbia.

Ninth Circuit Solicitor Scarlett Wilson, who oversees prosecutions in Charleston and Berkeley counties, agrees: “Even if we had unlimited shelters all over the place, I think culturally we don’t offer that support to victims. Nobody wants to hear about it.”

Crenshaw and representatives from Greenville-based Safe Harbor, which runs the new Oconee shelter, set out to break through that reticence. They met with community leaders, business people and representatives from the schools. They sat down with judges to push for stricter sentences for domestic violence, a crime that had been treated like “a traffic ticket, just a slap on the wrist.”

They also talked with clergy to challenge age-old beliefs that domestic unrest was best resolved in the home — an approach that many times made the situation worse.

“The ministers told us, ‘It’s really a family issue. They need to work that out,’” Crenshaw says. “But in some cases that’s like telling a victim to go running back into a burning house.”

What pastors communicate to their flocks also can fuel the problem, if inadvertently: Scripture says women are to be submissive. Suffering is part of life, as Jesus suffered for your sins, on the path to salvation. Divorce is a sin.

The Rev. Mark Bagwell of Golden Corner, a contemporary Baptist church in Oconee’s small town of Walhalla, concedes that religious vows and teachings have kept women from leaving their abusers. Churches have played a major role in making women feel that “God would be disappointed in them if they left their husband,” he says. “The church has not always been a place of refuge.”

Turning a blind eye

Oconee County is certainly not alone in dealing with that issue. A few years ago, when community activist Marlvis “Butch” Kennedy first tried to train Charleston-area pastors about domestic violence, he’d hear things like: “That doesn’t happen in my church.”

“The church believes marriage is a godly institution. Nothing should come between a man and wife,” Ken-
nedy says. “It’s a very slippery slope.”

In churches that did acknowledge abuse, Kenne-
dy says, pastors often compounded the problem by
counseling abusers and victims together — and then
sending them home with the sting of their shared
grievances still fresh. Back behind closed doors, the
abuser would take out his frustrations on his partner
all over again.

Today, pastors seem far more receptive to training
from a local group he founded, Real MAD (Real Men
Against Domestic Violence/Abuse). “The mentality is
changing over time,” Kennedy says.

Bagwell agrees. He now takes a broader view of the
dynamics involved in domestic violence and warns
others of the potential dangers. He’s seen other pas-
tors do the same.

“I’m grateful that ‘till death do us part’ is changing,”
he says.

How far this awakening has spread is open to de-
bate. A nationwide survey conducted in May by Life-
Way Research found that 42 percent of pastors never
or rarely speak about domestic violence. Less than a
quarter speak about the issue once a year.

Among pastors who do preach about it? Only 25 per-
cent say it’s a problem in their own pews.

Answering prayers

Before escaping her husband, long before the open-
ing of the new Oconee County women’s shelter, Jenna
Henson Black prayed to God that her husband would
change.

For 18 years, she prayed he would stop beating her.
She was praying for the wrong thing.

“It didn’t work. But it taught me that God will provide
a way to escape,” she says. “God didn’t change him. He
changed me.”

In the 10 years since she fled, Black has remarried and
become a minister with her second husband at Grace
Family, a non-denominational Protestant church in
Seneca.

Now 66, Black realizes the problem wasn’t God or
faith or commitment to her marriage. The problem
was her ex-husband.

“I had a commitment to marriage, for better or worse,
‘till death do us part,’” Black says. “But when the death
part came too close, I knew the Lord didn’t want me
to be killed by my husband.”

Silence from the pulpit?

In mid-July, The Post and Courier contacted
more than 30 diverse Lowcountry ministers by
email and asked two questions:

Have you ever preached about domestic vio-
lence?

Have you ever heard a sermon about it?

One, a Mormon, said he’d heard a sermon
tackling the pervasive problem. Four respond-
ed that they had at least mentioned it.

The rest either didn’t respond or said no to
both questions.

That informal poll was in a line with the re-
sults of a nationwide study commissionned
this summer by Sojourners and IMA World
Health, whose leaders wanted to gauge the
views of Protestant Christians (who make up
the vast majority of South Carolinians).

Results showed “an overwhelming majority of
the faith leaders surveyed (74%) underestimate
the level of sexual and domestic violence ex-
perienced within their congregations, leading
to infrequent discussions of the issue from the
pulpit as well as a lack of appropriate support
for victims,” the study’s authors wrote.

Some pastors are battling against the trend.

Just last month, the Rev. Jeremy Rutledge
stood before his flock in the Circular Con-
gregational Church in Charleston and tried
to dispel theologies that have kept victims
trapped.

“Suffering is just suffering. It hurts and it is dif-
ficult,” Rutledge preached. “Our job is to take
care of each other when suffering comes: to
do what we can to ameliorate it and to address
its underlying causes, and to be careful never
to romanticize it or paper over it with strange
religious ideas.”
Second Amendment stronghold

South Carolina is a state that fiercely defends its Second Amendment gun rights, though firearms have clearly been the weapon of choice for men who kill their intimate partners.

Guns were used in 65 percent of all killings of women in domestic violence over the last 10 years in the state, a Post and Courier analysis shows. The state also has the sixth-highest rate of gun violence in the country, according to a study by the American Center for Progress.

Still, guns remain an integral part of the Palmetto State’s culture. Hunting is a favored pastime and a rite of passage for many children. It’s anyone’s guess just how many guns are floating around South Carolina, but more than 900,000 hunting licenses are in circulation and nearly 241,000 people hold concealed weapons permits from the state.

Southern states have some of the nation’s highest per capita homicide rates (Louisiana, South Carolina, Mississippi and Tennessee all rank in the top 10) and share higher gun ownership rates with rural Western states, according to 2010 data from the U.S. Census Bureau and FBI.

‘Culture of honor’

Surprisingly little research has examined the role South Carolina’s culture plays in domestic abuse and homicides, considering the state’s rate of men killing women is more than twice the national average.

One often-cited study about violent tendencies in Southern men came from Richard E. Nisbett, distinguished professor of psychology at the University of Michigan.

His research revealed a Southern “culture of honor,” one in which for generations a man’s reputation has been central to his economic survival — and in which insults to that justify a violent response.

“We have very good evidence that Southerners and Northerners react differently to insults,” Nisbett said. “In the South, if someone insults you, you should respond. If the grievance is enough, you react with violence or the threat of violence.”

In a clinical study, Nisbett subjected Northern and Southern men to a test. Someone bumped into them and called them a profane term. The reaction: stress hormones and testosterone levels elevated far more in Southern men.

“He gets ready to fight,” said Nisbett, coauthor of “Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in The South.”

How does it apply to domestic violence? Men who perceive their women have insulted them — by not keeping up the house, by talking back or flirting with someone else — launch into attack mode to preserve their power.

“That’s what is behind a lot of men hitting women,” Nisbett said. “It’s the woman’s faithlessness, or perceived faithlessness.”

Dolly Ritchie

Faces of domestic violence

Stories of witnesses and survivors

The man told Dolly Ritchie everything she wanted to hear. Her marriage had broken up and she had no job and no money. She felt alone and vulnerable as a single mother with a 4-year-old son.

Ritchie soaked up the attention. “I clung to him,” she said, especially when he told her not to worry about a job or money or anything because he would take care of everything.

They moved in together, planned a wedding. “We were very happy,” she said. Then they moved out of South Carolina for a job he wanted, but it fell through.

He started drinking and forcing her to have sex. He did it roughly, very roughly and intensely, sometimes several times in one day. “He would rip me, I couldn’t walk.” He threatened her, cursed her, and took money she had saved, she said.

She wanted to leave but was afraid and didn’t know where to go or how. Then a church helped her get into a shelter.

Now, she lives in the Charleston area and is studying to earn a paralegal certificate.

She wants other women to know “that with love and support they can fight overwhelming odds to survive domestic violence. They can get help and they can get away and start a new life.”

Till death do us part