

A woman who survived a bullet to the head describes the abuse her husband used to break her spirit, and how she survived his attempt to kill her.

‘I just remember the fear’



GRACE BEAHM/STAFF

Therese D'Encarnacao endured years of emotional and physical abuse from her husband, Keith Eddinger. In 2010, after she told him she wanted a divorce, he pulled out a gun, aimed it between her eyes and fired. He then shot and killed himself. She survived and is now an advocate against domestic violence. At the Charleston County Detention Center, she shows inmates a video about her life and marriage.

For 13 years, Therese D'Encarnacao stayed with her husband through the biting insults and accusations: You're fat. You're ugly. *Nobody else will want you.*

She stayed through the times he hit her. She stayed through his chronic health problems and depression and unemployment.

She stayed until the day Keith Eddinger walked into their long, narrow master bathroom and pointed a gun at her head. He calmly shot her between the eyes. Then he killed himself.

At first, Keith was a gentleman, a welder who shared her love of fishing and camping. He took an interest in her young son. And an interest in her.

Fresh from a failed marriage to her high school sweetheart, Therese desperately wanted someone to love her. So for 13 years, she endured the abuse, partly out of hope, largely out of fear.

When she finally told her husband she wanted out, Keith got his gun.



PROVIDED

Therese D'Encarnacao as she fought for her life at Medical University Hospital after her husband shot her.

Very real fear

Why do women stay in — and return to — abusive relationships, even until their deaths?

The question is central to helping them.

And the fact that women do stay so often provides a convenient excuse to blame victims rather than the men who pull triggers (or knives or fists). A lack of understanding prompts many, law-

makers included, to turn their backs on the pervasive, deadly problem.

It's not a simple question to answer.

Experts and survivors both describe an all-ensnaring web of hope, culture, dependence, fear, religion and even love that binds women to their abusers. But mostly it comes down to what he controls — which often is everything, even her life.

The late state Rep. John Graham Altman sparked a furor in 2005 when he told a reporter that domestic violence victims are at fault if they return to their abusers.

He had just been asked why the House Judiciary Committee wanted to make cockfighting a felony but tabled a bill that would have done the same for domestic violence.

“The woman ought to not be around the man,” Altman said. “I mean you women want it one way and not another. Women want to punish the men, and I do not understand why women continue to go back around men who abuse them. And I’ve asked women that and they all tell me the same answer, ‘John Graham, you don’t understand.’ And I say, ‘You’re right, I don’t understand.’”

He’s not alone.

Many people don’t realize that when a woman tries to leave, or press charges, she is in the most danger she will face.

For 25 years, Elmiere Raven, a domestic violence survivor herself, has led the charge at Charleston’s shelter for abused women, My Sister’s House.

The shelter includes this warning on its website: “The most dangerous time for a victim is when leaving the relationship. Fifty percent of injuries and 75 percent of domestic homicides occur after the relationship ends.”

“It’s a very real fear,” Raven said.

That day in 2010, when Keith got his gun and shot her, Therese had just told him she wanted a divorce. Keith didn’t want anyone else to have her.

After he fired a bullet into his wife’s head, Keith walked a few feet away and took his life. Little could he know that Therese would survive.

Cultivating fear

The first time Keith became violent, he slapped her with an open palm, damaging her ear drum. Her son, then about 9 years old, was in the house.

Another time, he punched her in the stomach. She was pregnant and, later, miscarried.

After that, she called her first husband, with whom she remained friends, to come get their son and keep him safe. He offered to take Therese with him, too, until she could find her own place.

Therese stayed.

While many abused women stay out of fear of violence, Therese’s fear drew from a different well. Hers was a deep and unrelenting fear of being alone, fear of what Keith threatened: *Nobody will want you but me.*

Raised Catholic, she also was devoted to preserving her vows.

For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health...

Early in their marriage, Keith nearly died from a respiratory disorder. He suffered arthritis and spent long spells not working, in pain and depressed.

And Therese was a nurse, not someone who abandoned the sick. She wanted to help Keith heal and return to the man she loved.

But as he got sicker, the psychological abuse and control grew more intense, the violence replaced by a barrage of insults, demands and suspicions. A friend urged: “You’ve got to leave him. He’s making you crazy.”

And she did leave, multiples times.

But Keith had this way of badgering, of cajoling and

promising, until she returned.

In 2006, she moved out and lived in another state. After avoiding him for six months, he found her number. She answered the phone.

“I should have hung up on him. But I didn’t,” she recalled. “He had done a lot of changing again, and I did let him come back. I did love him.”

Besides, to hear Keith tell it, without him she would remain alone and unwanted forever.

“I just remember the fear. It’s always an abuser’s main weapon – fear,” she said. “They beat you down so much verbally that you lose yourself. It’s toxic.”

Other women fear becoming homeless, lost to the streets with their children in tow.

Only 35 percent of victims arriving at My Sister’s House have jobs. “They are in survival mode,” Raven said.

It’s especially tough for stay-at-home moms with limited workplace skills and no independent income, said Alison Piepmeier, director of the College of Charleston’s Women’s and Gender Study Program.

“There’s not even a choice. There’s no way out,” Piepmeier said.

Love, absolutely

Survivors often describe falling in love with charming men whose abuse began well into their relationships. Therein lies the hope. If only that man would come back.

Raven has seen it over and over: “Love, absolutely.”

Instead, many victims find themselves stuck in cycles of building tension — over dinners not prepared right, homes not cleaned just right, bills not paid, mouths not kept shut — much like a rubber band stretching and tightening with every sidestepped conflict. Until it snaps.

After the violence comes the so-called “honeymoon phase,” a time when he goes back to being the man she loves.

The seesaw of violence and passion “is like a Harlequin romance on steroids,” said Patricia Warner, project manager of the Domestic Violence Homicide Prevention Initiative at MUSC’s National Crime Victims Center.

The woman thinks: “It’s over now. He says he loves me and he’ll not do it again,” said Warner, who also directs the Tri-County Domestic Violence Coordinating Council.

Yet, Mr. Hyde still lurks.

Verbal beat-downs

As Keith’s health worsened, the abuse and control worsened, too, especially behind closed doors. He became obsessed with the belief Therese was cheating on him.

“As he lost control over his life, he tried to take control of mine,” Therese recalled. “He was a master manipulator.”

A chatty and outgoing woman, Therese recalled increasingly harsh “verbal beat-downs.”

Once, Keith was a patient on her hospital floor. When she arrived at work one day, he accused her of sleeping with someone while she was gone.

He demanded she pull down her pants so he could check. She complied, caught up as she’d become in the insanity, the insecurity of his abuse.

Searching for a way out

In 2010, Keith had just come home from visiting his family in Arkansas. With him gone, Therese’s days in their North Charleston home had turned peaceful and quiet.

She realized what life could be like without him.

“It was like being tortured 24/7. I couldn’t live that way anymore,” she said.

She told him she was done. She wanted a divorce.

As usual, he chased her around the house, launching a tirade of pleas and insults. Stressed, Therese finally sank into a hot bath to relax.

Before she faced him again, she got out, dried off and sat down on the toilet of their master bathroom.

She didn’t know her husband had a new handgun.

When Keith walked in, she turned to him. “If I can’t

have you, nobody can,” he said calmly. From about 5 feet away, she watched him fire.

Victim, survivor

Of females killed with a firearm, almost two-thirds are killed by their intimate partners. Therese nearly joined that Violence Policy Center statistic.

But as Keith walked a few feet away, shot himself and died, Therese fought to live.

She spent three weeks in the hospital and remains blind in one eye. The bullet penetrated a facial nerve and damaged her inner ear. She lost hearing and suffers excruciating migraines. Now 48, her short-term memory isn’t great. She wears dark glasses and a hearing aid.

“There is a .25-caliber bullet in back of my brain, courtesy of him,” she said.

But Therese also is a survivor.

She survived to become a grandma and to realize the peace of independence. Today, she shares her story with other women and even jail inmates to prevent the ceaseless tally of deaths from domestic violence, to encourage abused women to escape before it’s too late.