



## 'Y' is the answer

Sunday, Jan 16, 2005

She was gathering research to open a new program for survivors of sexual assault when Carla Blinkhorn realized rape statistics were chillingly real.

As she reviewed the cases of rape in West Michigan, she came across the story of a mother assaulted in her home by an intruder who came in through the window while her husband and children were home.

The calm, confident director of the Grand Rapids YWCA suddenly was just like any woman who had heard a bone-chilling story of rape.

She was terrified.

"I ran around the house locking all the windows," she says. "I went a little crazy. For a while, I drove my husband nuts.

"Every assumption I had that made me feel safe was suddenly shattered," Blinkhorn says, sitting by the fire at the YWCA on a snowy afternoon.

"That if I was a mom, I was safe. That if I was home, I was safe."

Suddenly, she knew too much.

Then Blinkhorn did what she's known for. She took the information and her commitment to helping women and created a groundbreaking program for sexual assault survivors that has gained national respect.

In her 20 years at the YWCA of Grand Rapids, Blinkhorn, 53, has developed cutting-edge programs to help women and children who have suffered unspeakable trauma. The kind of programs other agencies copy.

Humble, modest and a pro at dodging the spotlight, Blinkhorn will tell you all the YWCA has achieved is due to collaboration -- many people, many hands.

She likes to blend in, in a white turtleneck and blue blazer sort of way.

But those who know Blinkhorn and her work say it's time she took some credit.

"Your YWCA in Grand Rapids is a shining star in the state of Michigan -- and in the nation -- and you can attribute that to Carla," says Mary Keefe, executive director of the Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, a nonprofit group in Okemos working to end violence against women.

"She's a role model across the state of Michigan. When they want to start something innovative and important, people look to Carla."

### **'She's Superwoman'**

Keefe's organization was in crisis in the early '90s, ready to fold after it lost major funding.

On the coalition's volunteer executive board at the time, Blinkhorn shepherded the coalition through the crisis, negotiated debt settlements, helped sell off assets and searched for new funding sources.

"All while she was launching visionary programs at the YWCA," Keefe says.

The coalition had closed its doors when Blinkhorn found a new funding source, Keefe says, in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Blinkhorn wrote the grant proposal while sitting in Blodgett Memorial Medical Center, where she was a birth coach for her sister-in-law, Theresa.

She helped deliver baby Kelsey, wrote the grant and left the hospital in time to visit her son Chris for parent night at camp.

"She's Superwoman," Keefe says. "She can do it all, stretching herself beyond all womanly limits."

The list of YWCA programs and services is staggering, and Blinkhorn had a hand in developing most of them. A quick look:

-- The Child Sexual Abuse Treatment Program was one of the first in the country. It serves 180 families annually.

-- The Sexual Assault Program is one of the most comprehensive programs of its type in Michigan. It served more than 700 women and children last year.

-- The Nurse Examiner Program was the first nurse-based forensic sexual assault program in Michigan. The 24-hour service offers a private place for sexual assault victims to talk to police, undergo an examination by a specially trained nurse and receive counseling.

-- Girls Inc., a support program for girls who have experienced violence, serves 400 girls a year.

-- Project H.E.A.L. (Housing, Employment, Advocacy, Legal Services) helps survivors of domestic violence get back on their feet with two years of assistance with housing, child care, transportation and employment training.

-- Nurturing a New Start, a collaborative pilot project with three other agencies, focuses on the needs of women in jail.

-- Domestic Violence Residential Services provided shelter for 250 women and children last year and referred another 200 to Holland and Muskegon because they were out of room here.

Blinkhorn's next big thing: a collaboration with the Hispanic Center of Western Michigan to reach Latino survivors of domestic violence.

She knows it's not party conversation.

"You can kill a party by saying you work in child sexual abuse and domestic violence," Blinkhorn says. "One of two things seem to happen. Either people are dumbfounded and speechless and walk away, or they start spilling out their stories. Many women were victims. Once they discover you're a safe person to talk to about it, they tell you.

"Part of the challenge of this job is that people don't necessarily want to hear about it. Until it happens to you personally, it's hard to identify with these issues. It's easier to not talk about it, and I can appreciate that.

"But part of our obligation is to make sure people in the community know about it."

### **Finding her niche**

She hasn't experienced abuse or assault but seems born to this job, a masterful administrator who cares about people and their problems.

It took her a while to find her niche. First came a dismal attempt at teaching, a stint in counseling that taught her she didn't have the patience and a six-month stay at a kibbutz in Israel. (Her 30th birthday was looming, and she was looking for an adventure.)

She read about the YWCA job in the newspaper. The organization needed someone to direct its counseling center. It would mean dealing with child sexual abuse and domestic violence.

"I thought, 'Who would apply for that job?' " she recalls. "That's pretty depressing."

But Blinkhorn had enjoyed the two summers she worked as a lifeguard at the Grand Rapids YWCA. And stuck in the back of her mind was the woman she knew. The one whose husband beat her.

It was the early 1970s. There were no shelters, no programs. Her friend's husband lurked in the parking lot where she worked, always watching her. He had removed all the doors in the house so he always could see her.

He threatened her children, then her grandchildren if she left.

"After knowing her, I never thought about domestic violence as a simple issue, ever again," Blinkhorn says. "I never again thought, 'Why don't you just leave?' which we hear a lot around here."

She decided she wanted that job. And got it. The awakening began.

### **Quiet but passionate**

"Everyone knows a woman who has gone through domestic violence or child sexual abuse," Blinkhorn says. They just might not know it.

She tells of a former YWCA board member who spoke of how fortunate she was not to know anyone who faced these problems.

"Two weeks later, her best friend was killed by her husband," Blinkhorn says.

It's rare that she's talking about this.

Even her husband of 21 years, Scott Blinkhorn, says she doesn't talk much about the passion inside.

"She doesn't talk about it, but you can see it in her eyes," says Blinkhorn, director of development at Visiting Nurses Association and Foundation.

"When something happens that makes a difference for her, there's a light inside her that comes on," he says. "But I've never heard her say she felt she did a good job at something. Ever."

If she's had a bad day, she heads to the tub with a mystery novel, he says.

"She knows when she needs to step back from it all," Blinkhorn says. "There's still a bit of therapist in her."

Her staff members -- 84 in all -- see her as a compassionate boss, driven by the mission, but always mindful of the people who help her carry it out.

She's been known to send a dozen roses for a job well done.

When Human Resources Manager Dixie Stimson celebrated her 20th anniversary at the YWCA four years ago, Blinkhorn staged a "This is Your Life" surprise for her, with old photos and a long line of mystery guests. When Stimson's son, Dan, was born, Blinkhorn sewed him a Christmas stocking -- even though she had a newborn of her own.

"She practices what she preaches," Stimson says. "She treats people with kindness and respect, no matter their position, their level of education, the number of hours they work."

"She knows your kids' names, your husband's name," says Kelli Langan, YWCA director of development and marketing. "She'll start a meeting asking how your kid's first day of school went."

### **Coping with the stress**

Her staff saw the boss at her lowest last spring, when Blinkhorn announced they were closing the 82-year-old YWCA pool.

The underused pool was draining money from more vital YWCA services, she says. Those who used it were viciously vocal, bombarding Blinkhorn with hate calls.

"It was the most traumatic thing I've been through here," she says. "The phone calls were just horrible. I couldn't believe how nasty people were."

She sat at her desk, stunned and depressed.

"I've never seen Carla so upset," says longtime board member Jeannie Hosey. "She takes things like this right to heart."

She coped by focusing on happier times, happier clients.

She sees them all the time. Women healing through counseling, living in transitional housing, finding work, moving on.

"They've been in situations that are hard for me to even imagine," Blinkhorn says. "And they persevere."

It gives her hope, calm and purpose.

One of her favorite times is the YWCA annual Day of Nurturing in October, when nearly 200 clients come for a day of pampering massages and manicures.

Blinkhorn comes at the beginning at noon to help take coats and always vows to be home by 5. But 6 p.m. comes, then 7, and she's still there, talking to women about how far they've come, thankful to be healing. Often, thankful to be alive.

"It's so heartwarming," Blinkhorn says, "I have a hard time going home."

## **Home and hope**

When she does go home, it's to an empty nest. Son Chris, 18, is a freshman at Western Michigan University.

Her family archives are filled with photos of fun and travel -- whitewater rafting, a trip to Egypt, Ireland, Scotland, the Netherlands, visiting Kentucky horse farms. It's a world away from the lives most YWCA clients lead. But Blinkhorn is devoted to their cause.

"We offer opportunities for families to heal," Blinkhorn says, "a place where kids aren't penalized for disclosing the truth about their abuse."

She wants all survivors to be able to talk about their abuse openly -- to a society that won't judge them.

"Their abuse doesn't define their whole existence," she says. "It's just part of their life experience. Part of our goal is for everyone in the community to understand that."

When the child sexual abuse program began, all the clients were girls, she says. Now it treats treat an equal number of boys.

"It's not that boys just started being abused," Blinkhorn says. "It means somebody's learned to listen to those boys."

The low-key woman who keeps her passion to herself considers that a quiet victory.

"When you've been here a while, it isn't a depressing field," Blinkhorn says. "All I have to do is think about the experiences of a child -- before our program started."

She smiles.

"And there's a sense of hopefulness."

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