

Questions and Answers with Sonia Melara

Why and how did you get involved in responding to and preventing gender-based violence?

In the early 1970's, I had a roommate who told me about her mother being abused by her stepfather. She said that during one incident, he stabbed her in the heart and threw her out of a window. As we spoke, we realized this type of abuse continued in our society, and there was little help for women who wanted to leave abusive relationships, especially when children were involved. So, we decided that we needed to do something about it. We brought in other women to discuss the issue and ways that we could help those who were being abused. Several of the women who became involved in the project had experienced violence in their own families. At the time, we believed this may only be a problem in the Latino community. However during our discussions, we soon realized that domestic violence affected every sector of our society, and we knew that we had to start a shelter specifically for survivors of violence. When we found out about the first domestic violence shelter in St. Paul, Minnesota, we believed that we could develop one in San Francisco. One woman in the group had an available house, and that became the first site for the shelter, La Casa de las Madres, in 1976. In the beginning, volunteers ran the shelter using donated furniture and food.

What are some challenges and successes you've experienced in doing this type of work?

The challenges the founders experienced during the establishment of La Casa de las Madres continue today. There are women being abused who do not see an alternative to their situations. In addition, the most affected communities continue to believe that families face more pressing problems than "women's issues" like gender-based violence and rape. As a result, people continue to ignore these problems within their own communities.

The primary success I have experienced is seeing La Casa thriving today. Seeing similar shelters that currently exist around the country, as well as programs addressing prevention and after care is also an achievement. It is great to see that domestic violence is an issue that cannot be ignored today; the state and federal governments now help fund domestic violence prevention programs.

What do you consider the most important aspect of your work/advocacy?

The most important aspects of my advocacy are saving lives and preventing children from repeating the cycle of violence!

What would a violence-free world look like to you?

A violence free-world would be a place where women feel secure at home and in the street, and a place where children live a life free from trauma.

How can others get involved in preventing gender-based violence?

Everyone can get involved in preventing gender-based violence by taking responsibility for their own experiences with violence. People need to ensure that violence does not exist in their own lives or the lives of others by speaking against it, and contributing to a world free of violence.