



National Council of Jewish Women  
Essex County Section

## **Retired New Jersey Teacher Finds Joy and Purpose in Volunteer Work to Help Teenagers Avoid Abusive Relationships**

*Teen Dating Abuse Prevention Program Travels to Schools in Essex County*

### ***Dating Abuse Prevention Curriculum is now the Law in New Jersey***

Livingston, N.J., May 6, 2011—Marylu Valenzano understood the value of the message on teen dating abuse. Over the years, the former Livingston High School health teacher listened on the sidelines as experts from a local volunteer group on teen dating abuse presented their powerful educational program to her students—two days a year, five times a day for 11 years. When she retired, in 2006, Marylu seized the opportunity to volunteer with the program she had observed so many times.

Marylu is now completing her fifth year as a teen dating abuse educator for the Teen Dating Abuse (TDA) prevention and awareness program developed and run by the National Council of Jewish Women, Essex County Section.

“It was a natural fit,” said Marylu, who lives in Fairfield, New Jersey. “I knew it was a great program with important information, so I took the training and started going into high schools all over the area.”

TDA volunteers, who go through a comprehensive instructional and field training, present the two-day curriculum in local high schools throughout Essex County and beyond. The program teaches teens how to recognize signs of abuse, how to end abusive relationships, and how to develop healthy dating relationships.

“I like interacting with the students, and I knew I would miss that when I retired,” Marylu said about her teaching career at Livingston High School. “Over the years, I had gotten to know so many of the volunteers who presented the program in my classroom, and I thought the information was so vital for teens. This gives me a way to continue that part of my profession, but as a volunteer.”

### **Teen Dating Abuse is Prevalent and Pervasive**

NCJW developed the TDA program in response to the growing body of evidence that teen dating abuse is prevalent and pervasive. The numbers paint a disturbing picture. Studies\* have found that:

- One in three adolescents who has been in a dating relationship has experienced verbal or physical abuse from a dating partner.
- Nearly 80% of girls who have been physically abused continue to date their abusive partner.
- 19% of teens in a 2010 survey confessed to committing violence against a dating partner
- 15% of teens who have been in a relationship report having been hit, slapped, or pushed by their dating partner.
- 21% of teens who have been in a relationship say their partner tried to prevent them from seeing family or friends.
- 43% of those in a “serious” relationship say that it’s “good” or “okay” for a dating partner to behave in a jealous or controlling manner.

[\*References available upon request.]

### **Marylu’s TDA Journey**

After taking the TDA training in 2006, Marylu, who is now 56, began as an assistant presenter, then as a lead presenter of the program. She also served one year as the school liaison, contacting area high schools to schedule classroom dates for the volunteers. Marylu became the chairperson of the TDA program in 2008 and served in that position until 2010. Currently, she holds the position of TDA recording secretary.

She has presented the TDA program more than 40 times, in many Essex County high schools, including those in Caldwell, West Essex, Montclair, West Orange, Millburn, Livingston, and Columbia High School. She’s also been in such private schools as Montclair Kimberly Academy, Mt. Saint Dominic, and Seton Hall Prep. In all, Marylu and the 60 other trained volunteers have presented the program to about 3,000 teenagers so far this school year and more than 50,000 since the program began in 1992.

“I see the impact it has on the students. That’s why I wanted to be involved,” Marylu said.

The subject of teen dating abuse is more talked-about now than it was when she first heard the program presented 16 years ago.

“I think the current high schoolers really understand that it *can* happen and it *does* happen. It wasn’t in the news as much 10 or 15 years ago—it’s in the news a lot more now. We collect articles and share some of those with the students about

situations that have occurred in local areas—and the students know it can happen anywhere, in any town. Teens understand the reality more now. Not only have there been a few high profile cases, but the students actually know of some instances within their own group of friends where there have been unhealthy behaviors,” said Marylu.

In the early years, the TDA program was designated for high school juniors. Now it’s primarily presented to freshman classes because teens are maturing earlier and the problem is happening at younger ages.

Marylu explained that in recent years the curriculum has been updated to include information about the use of texting, social networking sites, and other digital technologies in dating abuse.

“We stay on the forefront of what’s going on,” she said.

### **New Jersey “Safe Dating Bill” Signed into Law on May 5, 2011**

TDA is receiving an increasing number of calls for presentations as teachers and administrators become more aware of the problem. What’s more, the state of New Jersey just enacted a law that would require schools to educate students about dating abuse. Known as the New Jersey Safe Dating Law (S.2114/A.2920), the law directs the Department of Education to develop a school district dating violence policy and requires districts to provide dating violence education as part of the health curriculum. The NCJW Teen Dating Abuse program is available to fulfill the requirements.

In addition to working directly with kids in schools, TDA runs a program for parent and community groups—such as PTAs, churches, and synagogues—called *Teen Dating: the Untold Story*.

Marylu says that volunteering for TDA is rewarding. She would welcome the day when the program is no longer needed.

For information about how to have a TDA presentation in your school or for your parent group, or if you are interested in becoming a TDA volunteer, please call the NCJW office at 973-740-0588. Please visit [http://www.centerforwomennj.org/teen\\_dating\\_abuse](http://www.centerforwomennj.org/teen_dating_abuse) for additional information.

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