The Alma Center takes on domestic violence by addressing the root causes of abuse.

When Floyd Rowell got out of prison in 2007, he had one overwhelming reason for not wanting to go back: his son. Rowell had grown up without a father and didn’t want his little boy to do the same.

By Michael Jahr

Wisdom Walk to Self Mastery program facilitator Floyd Rowell hugs a program participant at the Alma Center in Milwaukee.

Jeffrey Phelps photo
His probation officer directed him to a program at the Alma Center, a research-based agency at 2821 N. 4th St. in Milwaukee that was founded in 2004 to serve men who generally don’t elicit much sympathy: perpetrators of domestic violence.

The center’s 10-person staff addresses the trauma experienced by men who grow up in the midst of abuse and violence, incorporating “trauma-informed healing,” education, social services and peer relationships to help end the cycle of violence in their families.

More than 2,000 men have participated in Alma Center programs. The results appear dramatic.

According to an annual internal evaluation, there is an 86 percent reduction in the recidivism rate for men who complete the center’s Men Ending Violence program.

“Check it out,” Rowell’s probation officer told him. “I’ve been hearing good things about the place.”

Rowell had his doubts.

“I’m from Chicago, Illinois, the projects area,” says Rowell, 33. “I’m like, ‘That sounds cool and nice, but this ain’t no ‘Brady Bunch’ stuff right here. This is the concrete jungle.’ ”

Terri Strodthoff, the founder of the Alma Center, was once just as dubious.

Unlike most domestic violence-related programs, the center focuses primarily on the men committing the violence. Tasked with evaluating a similar “batterer intervention” program as part of her graduate dissertation, she was incensed that such an option even existed.

“I just went in kicking and screaming,” says Strodthoff, who was pursuing a master’s degree in political science at the University of Michigan at the time. “I’m like, ‘That sounds cool and nice, but this ain’t no ‘Brady Bunch’ stuff right here. This is the concrete jungle.’ ”

Her perspective began to shift as the evaluation got underway. During interviews with the men, she realized that their experiences and the root causes of their behavior were at odds with the prevailing theories put forth in the classroom and in academic literature.

“In the field of domestic violence, the approach was, ‘This is bad behavior, you’re doing it, stop it,’” says Strodthoff, the center’s president. “It just didn’t make any sense to create a program to punish, shame or talk them into changing their behavior because that’s not the way that people change. It was clear that we needed to do something different.”

Twenty years later, Strodthoff, 50, sits in the rambling, eclectically furnished offices of the organization she created to provide that different approach. Her voice rises with passion — and softens with compassion — as she talks about the men who participate in Alma Center programs.

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‘It’s all about the children’

“We work with men who have a background of mess,” she says. “They’ve come from mess; they created mess. They have moved so far away from the truth of who they are and are just living to make it to the next minute.”

More than half of them have not lived with or had a relationship with their father. “And that,” she says, “is a profound and deep trauma.”

Nearly 90 percent of the men who come to the center are fathers themselves, she says.

“It’s all about the children,” she adds. “There are great programs that work with kids in the community, but at the end of the day, children go home. So if we are not restoring their parents to be nurturing and effective, we’re missing something really, really huge.”

Restorative Fatherhood is a center program that helps fathers develop compassion, forgiveness, responsibility and positive fathering skills. It reminds men that their decisions and behavior have consequences beyond themselves.

“There might be criminal consequences,” says Strodthoff, “but there are also consequences like what’s going to happen to your children?”

This focus on men has clear benefits for their children as well as their spouses or partners, she says.

Most women who have been victimized go back to the abuser at some point, says Eloise Anderson, secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. And incarceration alone does nothing to prepare him for healthy relationships with his partner or children, she adds.

“We should be concerned about their trauma because we should be concerned about their children,” says Anderson. “Ninety-six percent of people in Wisconsin prisons come out. We need to question if they are going to come out better, more equipped to be functioning fathers, partners and community members than when they went in.”

“The reality is, if we don’t help people come out and restore themselves, and heal, and be functioning in their family and their community, then we might as well figure out how to lock them up for the rest of their lives because that’s what they’re going back to.”

The Alma Center’s emphasis on getting to the core issues of the abuse helps the offender redefine who he is and re-engage with his children, say DCF officials. This produces a long-term, generational benefit.

So, not only is the center dealing with particular individuals and trying to prevent further abuse, it is helping to provide a better role model to children who will be less likely to become the next perpetrators.
How it works

Men come to the center in three ways: as part of a probationary requirement after conviction of a domestic violence-related crime, upon release from prison or, increasingly, as self-referrals.

Parole and probation officers have a list of Wisconsin Department of Corrections-approved vendors, such as the Alma Center, where they can direct offenders based on the conviction and identified treatment needs, according to Tristan Cook, communications director for the DOC.

Prosecutors and judges who handle domestic abuse cases also can recommend or require offenders to participate in such programs.

County Circuit Judge Jeffrey Kremers has been aware of the center’s work since it was founded and describes its programs as "laudable."

“We require that batterers get treatment, and (the center is) one of the primary resources," he says. "Many victims have relationships with the batterer, so they prefer that they get help that changes their behavior. The hope and expectation is they will unlearn the use of violence in their intimate partner relationships."

The focus on trauma, or adverse childhood experiences, is at the heart of the Alma Center’s programs and philosophy. Strodthoff points to a growing body of brain science research that finds adverse childhood experiences have a profound and lasting impact on a child’s emotional, cognitive, psychological and even physical development.

Prolonged exposure to repeated and unpredictable violence can create in children responses similar to post-traumatic stress syndrome experienced by war combatants. Boys typically respond with outward manifestations like rage, while girls tend to internalize their feelings.

“We know from neuroscience that what happens to people affects their emotional, psychological and physical development because they are human, not because they are bad people," says Anderson, who once ran a perpetrator-focused nonprofit organization in California.

Both she and Strodthoff have observed the tendency of many domestic violence programs to treat child victims differently according to their sex. Girls receive empathy, compassion and thoughtful interventions that help them heal and cope. Boys, however, tend to be medicated, isolated and eventually incarcerated.

The theory of social learning assumes that men act out in rage and abuse because that’s what was modeled for them during their formative years. This mindset leads to interventions that are punitive and rarely address root issues, says Strodthoff.

“The center was founded to provide more holistic programming for men, taking seriously the experiences that they had (as children)," she says. Of the first several men to come through the Alma Center doors, "every single person was a survivor of childhood sexual abuse that they really hadn’t talked about, had never been treated. They’d only been kicked out, punished and incarcerated.

“We began to understand that our program had to take an even deeper approach to help people recover and heal from what happened to them, so that hurting another person doesn’t make sense to them,” she adds. "The Alma Center works to support men in the criminal justice system to heal from hurt they have experienced, make amends for the hurt they have caused and restore themselves to their purpose and the truth of who they are."

This approach is what makes the center successful and stand out from the rest, Anderson says.

“The Alma Center is so different," she says. "They listen to men. They try to figure out what men need. What they do is allow men who are perpetrators to be free and liberated because they become
independent, responsible people. When they enter the Alma Center, they get a kind of respect that they’ve never had.”

‘It changed my life’

One of those men was Jason Bennett.

In 2011, Bennett was nearing the end of a prison sentence for a probation revocation related to the battery of his then-wife. When a caseworker asked him what he planned to do upon release, he said he only knew that he didn’t want to return to the dysfunction of his outside life.

She handed him a pamphlet for the Alma Center. Though he already had participated in several state and private programs, he thought the center looked more promising than the alternative, so he signed up.

“It changed my life,” says Bennett, a 43-year-old Native American. “I’ve probably been in trouble most of my life, all my adult life. The Alma Center changed my perspective on everything.”

Bennett said the center’s focus on identifying intergenerational trauma helped him better understand his relationship with his father, a Vietnam War veteran, as well as the trauma his grandparents’ and great-grandparents’ experienced as Native Americans, all of which shaped his childhood experiences.

“They put me in touch with the history and traditional teachings of my heritage,” says Bennett about the Alma Center team. “It really grounded me. They are an essential part of my life. I never felt that way in a state-run program.”

In addition to its existing trauma- and healing-focused programs, the center once provided employment services. Now it partners with Milwaukee JobsWork, a workforce and small-business development program that helps the chronically unemployed find — and keep — jobs. (See related story on Page 30.)

The decision to hand off the employment program was an easy one, says Strodthoff. The two organizations, which operate out of the same building, were philosophically aligned and could focus on their respective strengths.

“They do (workforce development) really, really well,” she says. “We’re very close in our understanding of people.”

Funding for the center is provided by state grants, foundations, individual donors and fundraising events. Grants are provided by both the Wisconsin DCF and DOC.

The center has a purchase of service contract with the DOC to provide domestic violence intervention programming in Milwaukee, Washington and Ozaukee counties, and offer services through the Milwaukee County domestic violence courts. The Division of Milwaukee Child Protective Services in the Children and Family Court, and its associated service providers, also work with the center.

“DOC’s approach evolving”

The Department of Corrections hasn’t always taken an approach with which Strodthoff agreed.

“In my opinion, DOC wholeheartedly fell in line with the reigning tough-on-crime punitive and vindictive approach of the last four decades and believed their primary purpose was to lock up the criminals,” she says. “The hiring and training of DOC agents, officers, workers and staff followed this approach. Until very recently, revocation (of parole) was seen as a success.

Strodthoff says she has heard longtime DOC agents describe this training and philosophy as “trail them, nail them, jail them.”

“It seems pretty wrongheaded to me,” she adds. “Evidence would strongly indicate it’s also been ineffective and counterproductive.”

About 31 percent of inmates released in 2011 were reincarcerated in three years, according to DOC data. And approximately four of every 10 people entering a Wisconsin prison on any given day are not there for new crimes but for violating rules of supervision — an exceedingly costly phenomena.

Strodthoff believes that improvement can be made to supervision requirements that sometimes result in counterproductive reincarceration of low-risk defendants — an issue that needs more extensive research and one that the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute is helping to pursue.

Strodthoff adds that she is encouraged by changes she has seen at the DOC in recent years and welcomes “a more evidence-informed, supportive and less punitive model of supervision.”

“Collaboration across system players has been very helpful; enhanced and advanced training of agents and staff has been critical; and a willingness to take some risks has been important,” she says.

She applauds the DOC’s “positive, forward-thinking and engaged leadership in Milwaukee,” including Niel Thoreson, regional chief of the Milwaukee County Division of Community Corrections. “I have trust in (his) commitment to improving conditions for the success of people on probation and re-entering our community,” Strodthoff says.

Thoreson has worked with the Alma Center from its beginning, steering men to its programs when he was a Milwaukee probation and parole officer. He continued to interact with the center when he was promoted to field supervisor and does so now in his capacity as regional chief.

Programs like the Alma Center are a component of the DOC’s mission “to provide the men and women under our supervision with the life skills they need to repair the harm that they have done both to the people in their immediate family and to the community at large,” says Thoreson. “There has been a paradigm shift such that we recognize

“We should be concerned about their trauma because we should be concerned about their children.”

— Eloise Anderson, secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families
that if you really want someone to change their behavior, it can’t just all be a stick. You have to have a carrot as well."

This shift is underway throughout the DOC, affecting community supervision, prisons and juvenile corrections facilities, according to Cook. The initiative will incorporate tenets of trauma-informed care and adverse childhood experiences into their operations.

“Secretary (Jon) Litscher has really emphasized to staff the importance of focusing on rehabilitating offenders and inmates to the extent possible,” says Cook. “You want to create opportunities for inmates and offenders to change their behavior and really be able to make substantive life changes to successfully, safely reintegrate into the community.”

Cook adds that the department over the past few years has pursued “evidence-based” programming that uses “scientifically rigorous methods to learn what’s effective” in terms of helping offenders safely integrate into the community.

Both Cook and Thoreson emphasize that family and community safety will remain paramount throughout this process. But even as it holds people accountable for their actions, the department will work to “give them the skills necessary to keep them from coming back into the system,” says Thoreson. “It’s a different way of looking at our role.”

**Evaluation shows success**

The good news is that overall reincarceration rates have dropped steadily since 2005. Cook says that research-based, trauma-informed programs such as the Alma Center likely have contributed to the decline, adding that they are one part of a “very large and very complex equation.”

The center’s own numbers indicate that its approach is having an impact. An annual evaluation study conducted by the center over the past six years found that completion of its Men Ending Violence program reduces domestic violence recidivism by between 84 and 89 percent.

Strodthoff stresses that the study is an evaluation, not a research project. The evaluation compares the program graduates with those who were referred to the program but failed to show up or who dropped out along the way. The evaluation uses a broad definition of recidivism: if a man has been charged with a domestic violence-related incident (whether or not there is a conviction), if additional restraining orders are filed or if his probation is revoked for any reason.

The center is working with a Case Western Reserve University professor to provide an independent analysis, Strodthoff says.

In the meantime, the program is being testing where it counts —

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*“I knew right then and there that what they were talking about at the Alma Center does apply to us, too. I was like, ‘I just stopped a murder from happening!’”*

__— Floyd Rowell__,

*Alma Center staffer and former participant*

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Michael Jahr is co-founder of the Better Yes Network, which connects and strengthens nonprofits that focus on personal and community restoration.