

# Take issue with this performance

A theater troupe tells the stories of domestic abuse victims to spread awareness

"He beat the tar out of me, with my two kids watching ... I was black and blue from the neck down," Sadie Chandler says. This experience doesn't belong to Chandler, but it does belong to someone. As Chandler sits on stage alone, she crosses her legs and looks intently at the crowd gathered at William Woods University to hear the stories of people who have been victims of domestic violence.

"We got a divorce, but he started coming over to the house and looking in with a flashlight," Chandler says. "He started to scare the kids." The audience sits in silence.

Chandler is one of approximately 20 performers for the Troubling Violence Performance Project that is based at MU. The group travels the nation to encourage discussion of intimate partner violence. Just last month the troupe performed for Florida Atlantic University.

The Troubling Violence Performance Project began in 2003 when two professors, Heather Carver and Elaine Lawless, met and discovered a shared interest for recording narratives, participating in social activism, studying ethnography and fighting domestic violence. Lawless volunteered at a shelter for abused women and children, and that experience sparked her passion for increasing awareness of domestic violence. Carver, an MU theater professor, suggested they create a performance group to vocalize the narratives recorded in Lawless' 2001 book, *Women Escaping Violence: Empowerment Through Narrative*. They named the nonprofit organization the Troubling Violence Performance Project and made their debut performing for the MU Council Against Violence in 2003.

The number of sources for narratives have expanded beyond Lawless' book since the group began performing them. Audience members sometimes contribute a tape recording of their stories for the troupe to perform. These narratives now originate not just from women but also from men, same-sex relationships and high school relationships.

Director Carver realizes many audience members have been affected by domestic violence. Because of this, all troupe members sit in the audience until it's their turn to perform. She says they want the audience to realize that "domestic violence can happen to anyone, even the person sitting next to you."

MU senior Trevor Wise is one of three men in the Troubling Violence Performance Project. When it is his turn, the audience flinches as he walks toward the stage. In the discussion that always follows a perfor-



Performers with the Troubling Violence Performance Project sit on stage following a performance. They always engage the audience in a discussion after the narratives.

mance, audience members often say they flinched because they feared Wise would perform his narrative from the perspective of the abuser.

However, the troupe never performs narratives told by the abuser. Those kinds of stories could jeopardize "the safe environment to talk about violence" that the troupe aims to foster, Carver says.

Wise performs a narrative from a man who grew up in an abusive household. In the performance Wise says, "My sister and I watched my dad throw plates all around my mom ... I'm afraid that one day I'll be the one throwing the plates."

Mary "Struby" Struble, an employee at MU's counseling center, offers a performance different from the rest. Head down, Struble wanders on stage and sits in the chair at the front, exactly like previous performers. She leans forward, places her elbows on her knees and clasps her hands. She looks up at the audience and says, "I can't." She then bounds down the stairs on the right side of the stage and exits through the back door of the auditorium.

Struble says she represents all the women who don't have the courage to tell their stories, and that it is "sadly, pretty common."

After the performers have finished, Lawless and the troupe members sit on the edge of the stage, shoulder to shoulder, to begin their discussion with the audience.

The audience inquires about Struble's unusual performance and the various reasons people stay in abusive relationships.

"Some questions get repeated over and over again like, 'Why does she stay?'" Shelley Ingram, a graduate student performer, says. She says usually someone in the audience admits to being abused or knowing someone in an abusive relationship. An audience member at this particular performance did just that when he told a story about his female friend's abusive relationship.

As if to remind the audience that domestic violence continues, some of the narratives told are without definitive endings. Chandler uses this lack of finality when she talks about how her character's ex-husband trespassed and used a flashlight to look in her house. He frightened her children, so she called the police. "The sheriff said I should change the locks and get a gun," Chandler says. "The sheriff also said I couldn't call him until I shot him and pulled him into the house. So I changed the locks. I got a gun, and I know how to use it."

The troupe doesn't intend to teach a lesson or preach about the issue. "We want people to finally start talking about [domestic violence]," Ingram says. The troupe also wants people to take an active role in violence prevention. "If we don't start talking about intimate partner violence, it's as if we're condoning it," Carver says.

Following Chandler's performance, a male audience member says, "People think that if I'm not an abusive male or I'm not an abused woman, it's not my problem." Wise agrees with him, saying, "You need to be an advocate yourself."

— NISA KORTE

## BREAKING THE SILENCE ABOUT VIOLENCE

October is National Domestic Violence Awareness Month. It was first observed in October 1987, the same year that the National Domestic Violence Hotline, a toll-free number to help victims through crisis intervention and agency referral, was established. The hotline receives more than 16,000 calls per month from victims, survivors, law-enforcement personnel, and friends and family of the abused. For more information, call 1-800-799-SAFE.

In honor of this month, MU has a few special events planned to help promote awareness and discussion.

### SUNDAY, OCT. 23

#### "Domestic Violence in Film: A Professional Social Work Perspective"

3 to 6 p.m., Gaines/Oldham Black Culture Center, MU campus. 882-6206. Free

The MU School of Social Work will co-sponsor a viewing and discussion of the 1984 film *The Burning Bed*. The movie tells the true story of Francine Hughes, a battered housewife who was prosecuted for setting her abusive husband on fire while he was sleeping.

### TUESDAY, OCT. 25

#### "Take a Stand Against Violence Art Show"

10:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., Stotter Lounge, Memorial Union, MU campus. 882-0788. Free

Individuals are invited to share their thoughts and feelings through art such as painting, drawing, photography and poetry. A microphone will be available for those who wish to perform.

### SATURDAY, OCT. 29

#### "Games of Love"

6 to 7 p.m., Rollins Group Lounge, MU campus. 882-0771. Free

Dr. Michael Adams will examine the common games that people play in new relationships and will help you find successful ways to avoid and resolve these games.