



20 Oct 2016

Bay of Plenty Times, Tauranga Bay of Plenty

Author: Annemarie Quill • Section: General News • Article type : News Item  
Classification : Provincial • Audience : 14,113 • Page: 12 • Printed Size: 1866.00cm<sup>2</sup>  
Market: NZ • Country: New Zealand • Words: 2767 • Item ID: 674237505  
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PHOTO/  
ANDREW  
WARNER

## Tauranga's Kristin Dunne is trying to make a difference by helping prevent domestic violence. Annemarie Quill reports.

**“YOUR words are my words.”** It is this phrase that Kristin Dunne and Lesley Elliott hope will help women suffering domestic abuse.

The pair met following the tragic case of Elliott's daughter, Sophie.

It is a case well known. The 22-year-old was murdered in her own bedroom by an ex-boyfriend she had just ended a five-month relationship with.

The relationship had been punctuated with what are now known as the signs of typical partner abuse.

It was after Sophie's death that Dunne, now Tourism Bay of Plenty's chief executive, and Sophie's mother, Lesley Elliott,

began corresponding.

In 2009, Dunne stayed with Elliott at the time of the trial involving Sophie's case, in which Clayton Weatherston was convicted of her murder.

Dunne also attended his sentencing.

It was during this time the two women heard from a lot of women who had suffered domestic abuse.

The more Elliott and Dunne looked at these stories, they more they realised there was a real pattern, and thought if people can understand the pattern, then this will help.

“It really showed us the scale of the issue...they were not random events...[Partner abuse] is systematic and that is why it is preventable because there is a

pattern to it,” says Dunne.

They coined the phrase “your words are my words”.

“We realised how much it would help women to share stories, for women to realise it wasn't just them, they weren't alone.”

New Zealand has the worst rate of family violence in the developed world. One in three women will be subjected to physical or sexual violence from a partner at some point in their lives.

Prime Minister John Key last month announced more than 50 sweeping changes to domestic violence laws in a strongly worded speech directed at family violence perpetrators.

Back in 2010, says Dunne, although there were great



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support services around domestic violence, such as Women's Refuge, they were "the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff but there was not a lot upstream".

"Prevention was a new notion but that was our whole goal, violence prevention through education and awareness."

So the pair co-founded the Sophie Elliott Foundation, with Dunne as deputy chair.

The foundation aims to prevent domestic violence through education and awareness.

It has created a programme in schools, called Loves Me Not — a one-day workshop local police and family violence experts teach to Year 12 students.

This year, 72 schools across the country are doing the workshop, including Bay schools.

Dunne says the foundation chose to focus on young women in relationships.

"Statistically they are hugely at risk. The 16- to 25-year-old

women in dating relationships can experience everything from verbal abuse to sexual right through to violence," she says.

"Because they're new to dating, they feel it is the norm, the traits of abuse are common but if you are young and impressionable and want to be dating someone, some young women may just go along with it. It is important to learn about safe dating and how to recognise signs of an abuser or an abusive relationship... what love is — and what love isn't."

The programme covers both how to recognise if someone is in an abusive relationship and step in, and how to recognise if your own relationship is abusive.

Another part of raising awareness is educating women about a safe exit strategy.

Statistics and research show that leaving a relationship is the most dangerous time. Half of all cases referred to as intimate partner deaths occur at the time of separation.

This is something Sophie

Elliott did not know. Nor Emily Longley. Nor Helen Meads. All three were murdered by their partner when trying to leave the relationship.

"Having a safe exit is key, but it can be so hard when you have children, shared property... it is again why we focus on young women. If young women know the signs of these relationships it is much easier and safer for them to exit safely, before they are married, and have children."

Signs may be more evident to others.

The abuser can also make it hard to leave.

"It is a purposeful strategy to have power and control over them, and it does definitely build up and you are trapped by the spider's web before you even realise what is going on if you are not aware of some of the signs and symptoms."

The spider's web, the wheel of power and control, is why many women leave abusive relationships only to return. Research, says Dunne, shows it can take eight to 12 times to leave a violent relationship.

Dunne says this is because perpetrators have tactics too such as threatening to kill themselves and kill the children.

"People always ask why do



**ADVOCATE:** Lesley Elliott, whose daughter Sophie was murdered by her former partner.

PHOTO/FILE



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women stay? Why put up with it, and it is really complicated. It's partly because they are afraid, threatened. You believe it is your fault and if you change your behaviour they will change theirs."

Dunne says if women can learn the patterns of power and control, there is a chance to prevent an unhealthy relationship escalating to violence,

"It is never, ever a one-off. It escalates in severity," she says.

"Those relationships, every abusive relationship I have had described to me, has started in a highly intense way, the relationship goes quickly. They feel like they are soulmates, and that is part of the starting platform, and then it falls into kind of emotional abuse issues, or straight into the physical. The

biggest thing is that the relationship feels unstable, up and down all over place.

"His communication could be erratic, he might continually test you how far you will go and come back, name calling and physical are red flags. And it gets worse, then they are sorry, won't do it again, and then if the person threatens to leave they threaten to hurt themselves, and all of a sudden you are trapped in this cycle — that is the spider's web."

## Educating men

DUNNE is not just passionate about raising awareness amongst women but men too.

The Loves Me Not programme is open to Year 12 boys too, so that they learn not just about their own

relationships, but to become "ethical bystanders" to step in in other relationships.

As a mother of a 3-year-old boy, Dunne says she is focused on what she can do to grow him into "a great man".

"I am no expert but what I try to do with him is say, 'It is okay for to you to be angry or frustrated, you can go and hit the pillow or the couch, but it is not okay to hit me, or anyone'.

"The 'it's not okay' message even at that age works quite well... Once you have a tool that you can use it becomes helpful. I try to be emotional with him, let him see me cry, give him lots of cuddles, lots of attention and at the same time allow him to rough play with the boys in our family, be active, let out energy... challenge him positively... but draw a line of course on violence.

Dunne says some of the macho Kiwi culture, telling boys to "harden up" can be endemic in our discourse without people realising.

"Until you have it pointed out to you, about the language you use, or belief systems, you might not even realise that is why education is important to make people think."

She believes high-profile figures in sport do have a role to play.

"Machismo is endemic in our culture. You can't blame that entirely on sport but high-profile people are held to extra account. They can be awesome role models, and lately as we have seen ones who are not are more held to account."

Dunne believes more men need to step up and speak out about domestic violence.

She has seen what this can achieve positively during her

charity work with the White Ribbon Campaign, spending time in hui on marae with former abusers, including men who had raped or murdered their partners.

These men, she believes, are powerful role models with much to teach society about family violence because they take responsibility for what they have done.

"Responsibility has to absolutely be a starting point. When I met these abusers, I did not feel angry. They became my heroes in lots of ways. They have taken total responsibility for what they have done, what they need to do to change, and they not going to blame anyone else," she says.

"There are no excuses and the other men running the meetings won't allow that. They have done in their past atrocious things... there were horrific crimes committed... but they have atoned truly for those things. I fully respect them, I consider many of them good friends. I would go to them for help for guidance."

Dunne says these men can be powerful role models for other men

"We need men as role models, for men to say it is not okay is much more powerful. For men to hold other men to account, to step in, but also to say to men, it is okay to ask for help. And for men who have committed abuse to take responsibility."

It is key, she says, for the women being abused not to try to change the man, it has to come from him,

"You can't help change them. They must take responsibility for themselves, to change themselves and they have avenues to do that."

## More funding

DUNNE says there should be more funding for family violence prevention, and for support agencies such as Women's Refuge and Shine to be "properly funded for the work they do".



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She would like programmes such as Loves Me Not to be rolled out across more ages of development in schools.

The programme, she says, is just one part, and there needs to be more funding for family violence awareness on a national basis.

“Policy changes that National has just announced, that is a big step forward. To have the prime minister come out and say this is not okay, this needs to stop, people need to be safe in their own homes — that kind of leadership is critical.”

Dunne hopes that people’s thinking about domestic violence is gradually changing.

“I think things have changed. There has been some learning. And particularly public cases like ... Sophie’s, and Emily Longley, Helen Meads, they have helped to evolve thinking. As painful though it is, because these families have lost someone, it has helped with the evolution of thinking about partnership violence.”

And for women, a final message, firstly from Lesley Elliott: “If you think you are unsafe, then you probably are.”

From Dunne: “It doesn’t need to be that way. There are lovely men out there, lots of good men — and you don’t need to have [domestic violence] in your life.”

## Domestic violence in NZ

- New Zealand has the worst rate of family violence in the developed world.
- One in three women will be subjected to physical or sexual violence from a partner at some point in their lives
- Family harm isn’t confined to any particular socio-economic group or any particular communities. It occurs in every demographic
- Each year, about 3500 convictions are recorded against men for assaults on women and on average, 14 women a year are killed by

their partners. Police attend over 100,000 events of family harm a year. Police attend around 300 family harm events each day; that is one approximately every 5 minutes

- About half of all homicides in New Zealand are committed by an offender who is identified as family.
- 50 per cent of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) deaths occurred at the time of actual or intended separation. (9)
- 76 per cent of recorded assaults against females are committed by an offender that is identified as family.

Sources: *New Zealand Police, areyouokay.org.nz, Sophie Elliott Foundation*

## How to get help

- Police: Dial 111 in an emergency, if you feel threatened or unsafe.
- If not a current emergency: make an appointment with the family violence team in your local community.
- If you are being abused, remember it’s not your fault. Violence is never okay
- Women’s Refuge: Free national crisisline operates 24/7 - 0800 REFUGE or 0800 733 843 [www.womensrefuge.org.nz](http://www.womensrefuge.org.nz)
- ShineFree national helpline 9am- 11pm every day - 0508 744 633 [www.2shine.org.nz](http://www.2shine.org.nz)
- It’s Not Ok: Information line 0800 456 450 [www.areyouok.org.nz](http://www.areyouok.org.nz)
- Shakti: Providing specialist cultural services for African, Asian and Middle Eastern women and their children. Crisisline 24/7 0800 742 584
- Ministry of Justice: [www.justice.govt.nz/family-justice/domestic-violence](http://www.justice.govt.nz/family-justice/domestic-violence)
- National Network of

Stopping Violence:  
[www.nnsvs.org.nz](http://www.nnsvs.org.nz)

- White Ribbon: Aiming to eliminate men’s violence towards women, focusing this year on sexual violence and the issue of consent. [www.whiteribbon.org.nz](http://www.whiteribbon.org.nz)

## Signs someone is in an abusive relationship

- Low self-esteem
- Withdrawn or guarded
- Anxious or panicky
- Have sick days, be away alot
- Cancel appointments
- Self blame, perception that things always their fault, apologise alot
- Body image issues
- Repeated physical illnesses
- Physical signs of abuse
- Relationship sounds complicated, they break up alot, and get back together, quite intense, and they are always confused as to where it is at

## Early signs of an abusive relationship

### Power and control

Is obsessive. Tells you who you can see, what clothes to wear, how to have hair/makeup. Often says, “If you love me you will...”.

### Possessiveness

Wants to know where you going, who you are with, when you will be home, and so on. Displays stalking behaviours such as following you, accusing you of being unfaithful, flirting, and so on.

### Isolates you

Stops you or makes it difficult for you to see your family or friends. Sulks or is moody when your family or friends are around, and makes you feel uncomfortable until they are gone.

### Threats

Is abusive to you, or about your family, friends or pets. Indulges in name calling, and physical and emotional threats. Says things like, “I will leave you if ...”, “I will hurt you if ....”.

### Suicide threats

Says things like: “I need you.” “You’re the only one who understands me.” “I don’t know what I would do without you.” “If you leave me I will hurt myself.” “I need help; please help me.”

### Changeable/volatile behaviour

Is erratic – nice one minute or day, and abusive and nasty the



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next. Blames you for his behaviour. “You make me react that way”, “if you did this, or didn’t do that I wouldn’t get so angry.” You feel like you are walking on egg shells and constantly “trying to make him happy.”

#### **Sexual**

Is coercive, pressuring you to do things you don’t want to. Takes no responsibility for contraception, seeing it as “your problem”.

#### **Physical abuse**

Says he loves you but then physically abuses you, by hitting, punching, choking, or pushing. Often has a history of previous abuse.

#### **Communication**

Is haphazard and unreliable. Leaves you to do the contacting and keeps you dangling. You are left confused and don’t know what he wants. Doesn’t appear to be telling you the truth about what he is doing and says “it’s none of your business”. Makes you feel crazy, or jealous, or insecure when that is not how you usually feel.

— [www.sophieelliottfoundation.co.nz](http://www.sophieelliottfoundation.co.nz)

## About The Sophie Elliott Foundation

The Sophie Elliott Foundation is a legacy to 22-year-old, Sophie Elliott (**pictured**) who was murdered by her former partner after dating for just five months.

Following her death it became clear that she had been in a typically abusive relationship. It was also evident that neither Sophie nor her mother, Lesley, had been able to see where things were going wrong. The conclusion was that if these two intelligent adults couldn’t see the signs then many others would be in the same situation.

The Foundation aims to:

- Lower the levels of domestic violence through

education

- Cause a profound shift in New Zealand’s attitude towards relationship violence – one that has the next

generation recognise and reject all signs of abuse, power and control.

Loves-Me-Not programme is a one day workshop for Year 12 students which focuses on healthy (equal) relationships as opposed to unhealthy (controlling) ones. It is delivered by three facilitators trained by police. The facilitators comprise a teacher, a police officer and a representative of a non-governmental organisation working in the field of family violence prevention.

Contact your local police community officer to find out how your school can implement the Loves Me Not programme.