DVIP: Unconditional Shelter?

Introduction

On December 14, 1991, thirty-six-year-old Beth George had just finished mopping her kitchen floor, tired after her all-night shift as a counselor at the battered women’s shelter (the Domestic Violence Intervention Program, or DVIP), but looking forward to decorating the Christmas tree with her two boys, aged six and seven. FBI agents stormed her trailer, arrested her, took her to jail in handcuffs, and sent her two boys back to their father in Arkansas. Her ‘friend,’ Barb Larpenter, a volunteer at the shelter, had recently phoned Beth’s ex-husband, Jess George, and told him that Beth was living in Iowa City under the assumed name Kathleen Ruddell. Beth claimed Jess beat her. While Beth did have temporary custody of her children pending divorce proceedings in Arkansas, ten days after her husband filed for divorce, she had failed to show up for his visitation with the boys. In March of 1989, a criminal complaint against Beth was filed in federal court charging her with interference with a custody order, a felony. Beth had been on the run with the children using an alias for the last three years, while Jess searched for them, flying at a moment’s notice to California, Louisiana, Missouri, and Illinois or wherever there was a credible tip.

Beth had confided in Barb when they were roommates who both sought shelter at DVIP. Both women had moved on, securing housing, Beth more quickly than Barb, yet both had stayed connected to the shelter that had helped them get on their feet. Their friendship soured when the shelter hired Beth instead of Barb, the 1990 volunteer of the year, when it had an opening for a counselor. Furious, Barb found work as a maid at the Holiday Inn and severed her ties with the shelter. Beth shone as a counselor. Barb phoned Jess George who hopped on a private plane with his Arkansas attorney, Bunny Bullock. Bullock and George contacted a local family law attorney, Lori Klockau, to help them with the process of verifying the custody order and felony...
warrant with the local county attorney and FBI. Jess gave Barb $100 for her trouble, and paid another woman, Phoebe Kessler, $100 to go into the shelter and verify that Beth was there.1

Armed with Barb’s affidavit claiming that shelter director Pat Meyer knew Beth’s true identity, Dan Bray (Klockau’s law partner) was demanding action far beyond returning Beth’s children to their father in Arkansas and putting Beth behind bars. He wanted “to clean up” the shelter. Bray accused the executive director and the shelter (DVIP) of knowingly harboring a felon (see Appendix A). Moreover, he alleged that DVIP was “part of a national underground for women hiding children from their fathers,” and called for an investigation of the small non-profit organization. He wrote to the superintendent of schools, calling for an examination of the Iowa City School District’s procedures that allowed Beth to enroll her children in Longfellow Elementary School under false names (see Appendix B). Bray took the position that abducting a child constituted child abuse and therefore demanded the Mental Health Center release its records in case any therapist there had known Beth George’s real identity (see Appendix C). He wrote to the head of Johnson County Department of Social Services alleging child neglect at DVIP (see Appendix D). And he wrote to the State Attorney General, calling for a change in the “loophole” that put the mandatory reporters for child abuse allegedly in conflict with those who aided battered women. He called for the state to regularly inspect shelters.

Chair of the DVIP board of directors, Barbara Xakellis, called the news “a lightning bolt out of the blue.” One of DVIP’s staff members was in jail and had lost custody of her children. A longtime volunteer was working with lawyers accusing the organization of everything from child neglect, to knowingly harboring fugitives, to making threats against her, to food stamp fraud, to bad housekeeping. The schools were coming under pressure to not enroll shelter students whose parents might be fugitives. A vocal attorney was demanding the shelter respond to his demands. The County Attorney, J. Patrick White, was investigating the shelter and agents of the Division of Criminal Investigation were issuing subpoenas to shelter employees. The local media carried headlines such as “DVP Accused of Sheltering Felon,” leading to articles that gave Dan Bray free rein to repeat Barb’s charges, and report on the happy reunion of Beth’s husband with his children while not reporting a response from the DVIP and feminist community. (The

1 From that point on, the legal relationships between the parties are more difficult to discern. Klockau stated that as a family lawyer, her work for Jess George ended after he regained custody; she did not assist him in his civil suit against the shelter. Klockau also stated that Barb Larpenter never hired her or her partner, Dan Bray, but that they did provide her a great deal of advice and assistance. A letter from Bray and Klockau to the Director of the Community Mental Health Center says “I represent Barbara Larpenter.” It was never clear what, if any, legal claim Barb made and against whom. Pat Meyer’s attorney, Davis Foster, questioned whether Bray and Klockau were representing Jess George or Barbara Larpenter and, if both, whether that represented a conflict of interest. Newspaper accounts quoted Dan Bray and Barb Larpenter rather than Klockau.
media rarely quoted Barbara Xakellis’s press statements, such as the DVIP board’s February 15th statement calling Larpenter’s accusations vague, February 17th statement condemning the attack on it by the media, February 18th resolution statement saying that anyone harassing someone coming forward with information would be removed from the staff or board (see Appendix E), and February 19th statement saying Bray’s charge of harboring a fugitive was baseless.) In the midst of this circus-like atmosphere, the crowded and understaffed shelter was doing its best to carry on, preparing for its annual fundraising auction. For the last four years, the DVIP had increasingly relied on the auction for operating expenses and this year they hoped to raise $21,000.

DVIP faced the most serious crisis since its founding. Staff had to decide first whether to cooperate with the investigation by agreeing to be interviewed. Iowa law extends to shelter counselors the same privilege as priests, lawyers, or psychotherapists, although it was less clear to participants whether that privilege extended to shelter volunteers and board members. After putting down the phone from talking with investigators looking for DVIP’s Executive Director, Pat Meyer, her seventeen-year-old son was convinced that his Mom, who was out of town, was headed for jail. Her longtime partner, Susan, burned all her journals. The journals contained nothing about the incident under investigation, but she loathed the idea of police reading her private thoughts. Staff, too, feared they might go to jail. All worried that the shelter would go under just as they were beginning a capital campaign for a new building. What would happen to women seeking shelter if they closed their doors?

The board had to decide whether to continue to employ its accused counselor, Beth George, once she was out on bail, and what to do with its executive director, Pat Meyer. Could either continue to work effectively while under investigation? What message did their continuing employment send to the community, the community from which they were seeking major financial support? How should board members cope with their own fear of being investigated and charged? How should they manage the public relations of the issue? Should board members speak to the press while they as individuals and the organization and its staff were under investigation? And how should they deal with their funding crisis? As soon as the newspaper articles started appearing, financial donations stopped. The shelter faced a crisis in confidence just as it was trying to expand.

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2 The Federal Family Violence Prevention and Services Act of 1984 provides that States receiving Federal funding for their domestic violence prevention programs must develop and implement procedures for protecting the confidentiality of shelter clients. No exception is provided for reports to law enforcement. In general the only legal exceptions to domestic violence shelter confidentiality tend to be if a shelter client is abusing or neglecting a child within a shelter or commits a crime against another shelter client or staff member (Takas and Bass 1996, 15).
Background: The River City

With nearly 30,000 students, the University of Iowa spans the Iowa River in Iowa City, a town with 62,000 year-round residents. The capital of the state is Des Moines, 120 miles away. The University of Iowa prides itself on being more liberal and cosmopolitan than Iowa State University, the land grant university in Ames, where the schools of agriculture and veterinary medicine are located and famous for being satirized by Jane Smiley in her novel, Moo. Smiley, like many famous writers before her including Flannery O’Connor and Kurt Vonnegut, participated in the University of Iowa’s prestigious Writers Workshop, and her novel, A Thousand Acres, is set in rural Iowa. Iowa’s appearances in popular culture include the popular films Field of Dreams (the field is about 80 miles outside of Iowa City), The Bridges of Madison County (about 30 miles west of Des Moines), and Country. The University of Iowa’s Medical School is part of one of the world’s largest teaching hospitals, attracting researchers and students internationally. With the law school, medical school, and arts programs, the University of Iowa and Iowa City have always been seen either as the progressive, artsy center of the state or as wacky radicals, depending on your point of view. In the 1960s, for example, Iowa City was the seat of the state’s anti-war movement and, fearing serious unrest in the shadow of Kent State’s student killings, officials sent students home before finals one spring semester as National Guardsmen stood atop high-rise dormitories.

Iowa City is in Johnson County, known within Democratic circles, as “The People’s Republic of Johnson County” because of its progressive politics. It long had a socialist, Karen Kubby, on its City Council. The ethos of the town is egalitarian and virtually everyone sends their children to the public schools. Since Iowa holds the first presidential caucuses, party activists can expect to have close personal relations with presidential candidates. In 1976 “the peanut brigade”—Jimmy Carter’s field workers and volunteers—launched Carter’s campaign in a surprise upset in the Iowa Caucuses. At least since then, Iowa, like New Hampshire, has been a bellwether state for presidential politics. Perhaps because they dominate, Democrats mostly fight with themselves rather than Republicans. Students who provide the bulk of labor for political campaigns and presidential caucus workers come and go, but the long term residents who are actively involved in Democratic politics comprise a minefield of fragmented progressive alliances. At the time of the Iowa Caucuses, the field of hopefuls is the largest, and people have long memories as to which activist was in the Babbitt or Jackson or Kucinich camp way back when.
Second Wave Feminism

Second wave feminism thrived in the Midwest. The great movement of the 1960s and 1970s that attempted to further the unfulfilled agenda of the first wave of feminism, which won the vote, was not confined to large coastal cities. Iowa vied with Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Ohio for many important feminist firsts. The Emma Goldman Clinic for Women was the first independent women’s reproductive health clinic in the country, and Iowa City’s shelter for battered women (DVIP) began shortly after Women’s Advocates opened its doors in St. Paul in 1972.

The vibrant feminist movement and the University were symbiotic. The University’s Women’s Resource and Action Center (WRAC), a house across from the student union, connected town and gown. WRAC was more than a University Women’s Center; it was a nexus for the wider women’s community and an umbrella organization for many other activities. U of I student Kristy Kissel began researching domestic violence for a class paper. She approached WRAC to house a CETA (Comprehensive Education and Training) grant to study whether sufficient need existed for a shelter, and the executive director, Linda McGuire, agreed. Kissel put an ad in the local paper to find out about the extent of domestic violence and was quickly inundated with urgent pleas for women trying to escape terrible violence. The WRAC basement housed the belongings of women in transition and Kissel pulled together a group of 12-15 women to operate safe houses, intervening in the most dangerous cases. But the situation was too dangerous for both the women and those sheltering them as they tried to elude batterers. Kissel went to the Iowa City City Council, showed that violence was happening right here in the river city, and demanded $10,000 to open the first shelter. She recruited the first board for the Domestic Violence Project. The first shelter was always overflowing and unable to meet the demand. Staff were under enormous pressure, coping with overcrowding, women in crisis, serious threats of danger, and never sure their paychecks would clear the bank from week to week.

The presence of the University bolstered the movement in many other ways. The first women’s studies classes drew heavily upon community activists’ expertise. Women’s studies professors and students participated actively in local activities, staffing rape crisis lines, campaigning for the Equal Rights Amendment, marching for gay pride or rallying against the Supreme Court’s Webster decision restricting abortion. Feminist law students worked for the county attorney and feminist law professors in the law clinics provided legal services to feminist organizations and women in need. And University people—undergraduate and graduate students
from Iowa as well as the far corners of the world, staff, faculty, and their partners—sought shelter or, as policy developed, orders of protection.

As a movement of the 1960s, the student wing of second wave feminism differed from the older, more mainstream women’s organizations in not just the age of its members, but the way it chose to organize and in its thoroughgoing critique of patriarchy, capitalism, racism, and imperialism. Consciousness raising encouraged women to explore the most intimate details of their lives, such as their sexuality, to develop new politics and theory. Many women explored sexual relationships with other women, spurred sometimes by political ideology, sometimes by short-term emotional needs, and sometimes by a deep-felt identification as lesbians that they felt possible to express for the first time. Feminist politics mandated that all organizational work be done by consensus rather than through a division of labor with leaders at the top of a hierarchy, branding such organizational models male. Long, intense meetings resulted. Movement work was all consuming. Feminism was a core identity. And feminists felt deep personal ownership of “their” institutions, particularly the battered women’s shelters and rape crisis centers.

The younger more radical feminism grew out of the New Left and had some of the rigidities associated with emulating the Marxist quest for a single, all-encompassing theory of women’s oppression. Third Wave feminists have been particularly vocal in criticizing the policing of appearance and behavior for political correctness. At the time, strict rules governed—no lipstick, no shaving, no pantyhose—and a dogmatic certainty about the rightness of the rules and a harshness against violators. Professional and married women were suspect. What Latin American feminists call a feminímetro (a feminist yardstick) produced a Cultural Revolution-like fear, anxiety, and mean-spiritedness concealed under a thin veneer of the official story of the joys of sisterhood. Sometimes it seemed that feminism did not need enemies because feminists were already fully occupied devouring each other.

Shelter work was very much at the time identified with radical feminism, although the distinction between radical and liberal feminists often obscures as much as it illuminates and women did not easily define themselves as one or the other. Radical feminists had developed a critique of sexism that saw patterns between many forms of violence against women and used terms like patriarchy to denote a deep structure of oppression that permeated all aspects of life. Where liberal feminists such as Betty Friedan focused on rights of citizenship and employment, radical feminists such as Adrienne Rich and Mary Daly addressed the so-called private sphere of

Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards define Third Wave Feminism as an evolution of the Second Wave by women who have grown up with the privileges of feminism, but also taking to heart the critiques of feminism from women of color, poor women, gay women, and women with disabilities (205, 21). Third Wave Feminism is influenced by postmodernism and is anti-essentialist.
sexuality and the family. Rather than seeking to appease men and hold up heterosexual women as role models to gain more mainstream legitimacy for feminist causes like the ERA, radical feminists wanted feminism to challenge the heterosexual imperative and talk about rape, battering, and sexual slavery. Radical feminists were skeptical of working within the system for change, preferring direct action on behalf of women. Many women who worked at shelters were either drawn to the work because they shared radical feminism’s critique of patriarchy or developed a radical edge after their experience of working with battered women. Their clients would come to experience the shortcomings of the police and criminal justice system. Volunteers and staff were, however, often more radical than either the women who sought shelter, the boards, or the donors.

Feminists did not operate all battered women’s shelters (Reinelt 1995). Most emerged from other kinds of institutions whose relationships with the feminist movement were more distant and complex, such as the YWCA or churches. Since its inception, social work has always included both those who operate on a model of experts helping the downtrodden as well as radicals who seek to empower the disadvantaged to be agents of systemic change.

**Domestic Violence**

The extent of domestic violence in this country is shocking. Approximately 95% of the victims of domestic violence are women. The American Medical Association estimates that between 2 and 4 million women are beaten each year in the United States. Violence by intimates is the largest cause of injury to women in the United States. Homicide is a major cause of death among pregnant and post-partum women, second only to car accidents and well above the risks of dying from complications resulting from pregnancy or childbirth. Between one-fifth and one-third of all women in the United States will be beaten by a partner or ex-partner in their lifetime. Forty-two per cent of the women killed in the U.S. are murdered by an intimate or former partner. In Iowa, more than 40 women have been killed by abusive partners since 1990. Iowa police respond to more than 6,000 incidents of domestic violence a year.

In 1992, researchers estimated that there were 30,500 parental abduction cases. Only 15% ended in arrest, and “cases in which the complainant had a history of committing domestic violence were less likely to result in the perpetrator’s arrest” (Grasso 2001, 7). In 1999, it was estimated that 203,900 children were abducted by family members. Fifty-three per cent of the perpetrators were the child’s biological fathers, while 25% were the biological mothers. Overall, 30% of abduction cases involve allegations of both child abuse and domestic violence. In about 25% of the cases, the abductors made allegations of abuse.
Former DVIP Executive Director Pat Meyer explained that Barb Larpenter’s disclosure of Beth’s identity was not unheard of. Conventional wisdom within the shelter movement was that men on the run tended to be caught because someone noticed that they did not seem to know how to care for children—change a diaper or feed them the appropriate food. Women on the run tended to be discovered only because someone betrayed them.

Among second-wave feminism’s most important projects was exposing the fact that many women were regularly beaten by male intimates, showing how neighbors, police, and clergy condoned the violence as “just life” through their actions or inaction, and changing laws and policies to express the community’s moral condemnation of such behavior. The first priority of activists was to secure women’s safety. Women survivors knew a police visit often resulted in a worse beating afterwards. Police would try to cool the batterer down, and then send him back in. Many wondered why women did not just leave—but where would they go? Women were most at risk of being killed when they left. Batterers would find them, and the police soon tired of repeated calls and failed to answer. Many women lacked the means to support themselves and their children. Feminists tried to change the question from “why doesn’t she leave,” to “why does he batter?” and “how can we keep women safe?” Shelters tried to keep women safe, help them get on their feet, find jobs, housing, and childcare, help them with their legal problems of divorce and custody, and help them begin to tackle the difficult psychological problems resulting from long-term abuse.

Feminist policy advocates sought state funding for shelters and counselors. They established hot lines. They publicized the high number of women beaten and killed each year by intimates, and defended and called for leniency for women who killed their violent partners as a last resort. They worked to secure legislation requiring judges to admit expert testimony about the nature of battering. They labored to obtain orders of protection, making the batterer leave the family home, rather than women and children, and attempting to secure for women a zone of safety around their homes and workplaces. They sued police departments that did not respond to calls of domestic violence. And they worked for mandatory arrest policies, making it more difficult for police offers to dismiss significant assaults after a cigarette and a talking to.

The domestic violence movement soon developed a reputation as one of the most contentious corners of the feminist movement. All of the most fundamental questions were at

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4 Others speculated about Beth’s poor judgment in confiding in Barb in retrospect, given that she had been cunning enough to successfully elude the FBI for three years. They wonder if, since her children were sharing a room at the shelter with Barb and Beth, Beth feared her children might disclose something and so preempted that risk by telling Barb.

5 In 2005, the U.S. Supreme Court decided in in Gonzales v. Castle Rock that local police departments were not liable if their officers failed to properly enforce domestic violence restraining orders.
issue: What should be the relationship of feminists to the state? Many were hostile to the police, recognizing that many police officers were themselves batterers, made more powerful by the state issuing them guns. Others thought that no progress would come without working closely with police officers who knew how dangerous domestic disturbances could be to them and were anxious for new approaches and solutions. What should be the relationship of women to men? Some women saw men as violent by nature and believed that women must separate from them in every way. Others saw no feminist contradiction in heterosexuality and argued that men were victims, too—conditioned to violence by cultural imperatives of masculinity and in need of help and support. Some saw a feminist organization as for women only, governed by consensus; others saw shelters as non-profit community organizations that needed sound management. And, as was the case with all feminist issues at the time, feminism intersected with other forms of oppression based on race, class, and sexual orientation. Many lesbians worked within the movement, few women of color did. Middle-class women often had more options—working class and poor women relied more heavily on shelters over time.

Veterans of the domestic violence movement knew the weaknesses of the system. They had seen at close view its many failures and shortcomings. They had seen police side with batterers and judges identify with them. They had watched women lose their children—their greatest fear—and become impoverished through divorce. They knew that police often failed to respond and that even their best efforts could not keep women safe from their abusers. Every year, thousands of women were killed by their partners. While they worked for systemic change, they did their best to help individual women and their children. They believed the legal system to be stacked against women, they feared for women’s safety, and harbored few illusions about justice. Women victims, too, distrusted the criminal justice system because of their direct experience and what others, including their batterers, had told them.

The DVIP Board

The Domestic Violence Project’s board predated the opening of the first shelter and the hiring of Pat Meyer as its executive director. The board, not the executive director, recruited new
members, largely through word-of-mouth and friendship networks, but staff, the executive
director, volunteers, and a board committee interviewed prospective board members, and the
board as a whole voted on nominees. Board Chair Barbara Xakellis recalls Pat having a great
deal of power with the board that admired and often deferred to her. Board Chair Harriet Logan
recalls a clearer division between board and staff, with board members aloof from the
management and operation of the shelter, but very active in the shelter itself. At one point,
shelter volunteer staff served on the board, but, according to Pat Meyer, that proved divisive as
they knew so much more about what was going on at the shelter.\(^7\) Pat Meyer remembers much
talk about establishing “a blue-ribbon board.” Such a board would include prominent people in
the community, not just shelter volunteers and activists, and would seek people of wealth who
were capable of making significant financial contributions and asking friends and business people
for contributions. Others felt the shelter needed to widen its circle of community support. The
board chair in 1991, Barbara Xakellis, was relatively new to Iowa City, recruited to the board by
the DVIP’s vice-chair, Elizabeth Burns, M.D., a professor of family medicine.\(^8\) Xakellis was the
administrator of the Psychology Department and had ties to the medical school through her
husband, a doctor. Xakellis, who has a background in social work, remembers board members
being very involved in the shelter, volunteering hundreds of hours. She disputes that they were
aloof rich “do-gooders.” Board chair Henrietta Logan, however, pointed out that being in and out
of the shelter and serving as an active board member was not the same thing as knowing how the
shelter was managed on a day-to-day basis.

Was the board divided between radicals and liberals or between middle-class
professionals and wives and working class women? Or between lesbians and heterosexuals?
Understanding the conflicts as a simple class conflict between the more economically privileged
women on the board and the less affluent staff and often poor residents would be simplistic.
Class and sexual orientation were imperfect predictors of feminist ideology. A professional
woman who had served on the board previously, Carol Thompson, was then the Director of
Johnson County Social Services. A progressive feminist social worker, Thompson strongly
supported both Pat Meyer and the feminist model and smoothed the way for all relations with the

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\(^7\) According to former board chair Gwenne Hayes-Stewart, this division exists across non-profit
organizations. Volunteers and staff believe themselves to be doing the “real” work of the organization.
The staff operate at “the runway level” while the board is responsible for long-range planning, operating at
the “50,000 foot level.” The board tries to operate more like a business and is sullied in the eyes of staff
and volunteers by their focus on money rather than the noble work of serving women.

\(^8\) The DVIP board’s practice was to designate a chair-elect a year before that person took office. Thus, the
board would include the current chair, the past chair, and the chair elect, to secure a smooth transition. One
third of the board rotated off each year.
Department of Social Services. Another former board member, Loret Mast, was the ex-wife of a prominent ophthalmologist and herself a successful artist. Mast was a vocal critic of the system’s many shortcomings and a powerful voice for women to do whatever they needed to do to be safe. Just as you could not automatically know a person’s political position by her class or sexual orientation, you could not reliably discern it from her appearance. A board member who looked more like Betty Crocker than Andrea Dworkin was harshly criticized by radical feminists although she was one of Pat’s strongest supporters (Pat was closer to the Andrea Dworkin than Betty Crocker end of the continuum). She, apparently, did not look like a radical feminist, and one could judge feminist books by their covers. The archetypical feminist of the times, according to some board members, was an androgynous looking woman with cropped hair and no makeup. Those outside the stereotype were suspect.

But race and class did shape the perceptions of many board members toward the shelter. Pat Meyer reported many board members being appalled at the condition of the shelter and had to tell them that for many residents, the shelter was the most middle-class experience they had had. One board member was shocked that the children were eating Fruit Loops for breakfast. Another wanted to bring in a lamp and end table to really “bring a corner together.” Pat Meyer knew that with the number of preschoolers racing around, the lamp and table would be broken immediately. Board members volunteered to paint the interior to make it nicer, hoping to improve the shelter one room at a time. One board member painting upstairs was appalled to overhear an African-American boy say to another, “don’t go up there, that white bitch is up there.” That was not how one should speak about guests in one’s home! Misperceptions about who came to shelters and what they were like were widespread. Pat Meyer recalls David Morrell, the author of the books from which the Rambo movies emerged, calling her for research for a current project. He wanted to see some of the shelter’s menus, as if it had a five-star restaurant. Pat Meyer informed him the women did their own cooking. Sometimes, they did not clean up. Sometimes, food was left out and went bad. Although staff and residents felt like they vacuumed constantly, with so many adults and children crammed together, the shelter was often messy and chaotic.

Pat Meyer’s account of the chasm between middle-class board members and residents and board members’ failure to grasp the reality of shelter life contrasts sharply with Xakellis’s account of the mother of the children who called volunteers “white bitches.” Xakellis saw this resident as a huge problem for the shelter, not because her children offended volunteers or challenged their middle-class assumptions. She was abusive to her own children and she created problems among the other residents. Xakellis was skeptical as to whether this resident had been abused at all and was very unhappy that she disclosed the location of the shelter to her alleged
abuser who dropped her off after dates. She thought Pat too soft-hearted in her “pro-woman” line of “women helping women” and thought this problem client was taking advantage of the shelter. Moreover, it became increasingly clear to board members that women were not using the shelter for temporary shelter while seeking a transition to other forms of housing, but staying there for a long period of time or frequently returning.

Former board chair Hayes-Stewart thought “it was Pat who didn’t get it.” Other shelters, such as the one run by Pat’s successor, Cris Kinkead, had rules and enforced them. She felt the women had enough chaos in their lives and there was no reason for the shelter to be filthy. Another board member described Pat as a hero who “successfully created an organization of women of diverse life situations devoted to the protection of women and their children” but analyzed the situation as follows:

Arbitrary and unstable labels such as “middle class,” “lesbian,” “heterosexual,” “wealthy” only signify in order to obscure personal interests and perpetuate egotistic illusions. The bottom line is cleanliness is hygienic; smoke filled rooms (with babies and children coughing and wheezing) are unhealthy; feces lying about in the rooms other than the bathroom are unsanitary; unkindness and disrespect are hurtful; mismanagement is bad for an organization, and stress debilitates.

Despite a shortage of resources, DVIP enjoyed meteoric success as the grassroots organization evolved into a non-profit organization listed by the United Way—a transition many executive directors do not survive. By the 1990s, it provided support to 500-800 women and children a year and responded to more than 10,000 calls on its crisis line. It had been scored very highly under the United Way’s system for judging an agency’s effectiveness and need. From safe houses and the basement of the women’s center, the organization had secured a building, remodeled it, and had plans underway to build a new one. Pat Meyer worked well with police and was revered by the feminist community and recognized nationally as a leader and an innovator. Hayes-Stewart recalls that no one was as good an educator as Pat. “She taught us the right words,” and “how to re-evaluate tendencies we all have for victim blaming.” She communicated effectively across the board, from radical feminists to business leaders. “There was no one like her.”

But trouble was brewing. Demands on the shelter were growing and Pat Meyer could not keep up with the management tasks and take care of women in crisis. She failed to report on a federal grant DVIP held jointly with other agencies, imperiling the grant’s renewal, a significant source of money. Board members intervened and an overdue grant application to the county was, luckily, accepted late. In her embarrassment, Pat Meyer told the board chair that she had submitted the report and reapplied, going so far as to search file cabinets in the presence of the
board chair for non-existent documents. Hayes-Stewart mused that what likely happened was, “some woman came in in crisis and that always took priority over administration.” Vice-chair Elizabeth Burns observed that Pat far preferred phone counseling to organizational management, which she neglected.

The board felt some residents behaved intolerably toward Pat and other staff and volunteers. Contributions seemed to go into petty cash and out again for groceries for women in need without regular accounting. Some board members felt women took advantage of Pat and the shelter, and that Pat was too free with money. Others noted that the shelter was about the dignity of women, not just domestic violence, and that women in crisis should not be nickled and dimed. During the preceding years, board members were upset about the management of the shelter—some going so far as to want to fire Pat. Pat Meyer was the right person for executive director as the shelter began, but as its budget exceeded $150,000, she could no longer meet the demands of management. But there was no money to move her to a job as program director and hire a manager—no money to allow her to work with women and delegate to others the tasks of management and accounting. In 1990, Pat Meyer asked the board for a different role, leaving the board meeting in tears. Board members knew that the demands of the job were tearing her apart, but the wider feminist community felt she was indispensable and pressured her to remain with the organization, oblivious to the personal toll the work was taking on her. As she soldiered on, board members tried to fill the management void. Other board members remembered it differently. They saw Pat calling on external support as a trump card when the pressure from the board for better management became too intense.

The Crisis Unfolds

Board meetings were open to the public only for the new business component for members of the public who had something to report. Once Beth was arrested, board members and staff began to consult lawyers who advised them to say nothing publicly as individuals or to the press. The media rarely quoted Xakellis, preferring the salacious details of Beth’s fugitive existence and Dan Bray’s and Barb Larpenter’s allegations of lesbian undergrounds and midnight death threats. Dan Bray wrote to Xakellis demanding access to the board meetings and a list of all board members. He sent copies of Barbara Larpenter’s affidavit and a list of his concerns to those he believed to be on the board, although many no longer served. Moreover, he demanded that the board address his concerns over the next twelve months, and that board meetings be held in public (see Appendix A). The DVIP’s lawyer, Margaret Poepsel, repeatedly questioned whom he represented and on what authority he was making demands, suggesting that he set out his evidence and concerns in writing.
Although the negative publicity went largely unanswered in the media, much occurred behind the scenes. News traveled quickly among the close-knit feminist community of Iowa City. Linda McGuire wrote an open letter to Dan Bray and sought the services of a skilled mediator, but her offer was rejected. UI Business Professor Nancy Hauserman wrote a lengthy letter to J. Patrick White, long considered an ally of the domestic violence movement, requesting a meeting. Barbara Xakellis’s files contain more than 100 letters to the editor or to J. Patrick White from supporters of the DVIP in the community. An open meeting was called to rally support for Pat Meyer and the shelter at Wesley House. About thirty feminist activists who were neither board members nor staff showed up to get more information and find out what they could do to support the shelter. The mood was tense. The person who knew the most, Pat Meyer, was present but guarded in what she would say, clearly overwrought and fighting back tears. No one knew what the County Attorney, J. Patrick White, was going to do, what would happen to Beth, or what Dan Bray would do next. Without exchanging words, some of the women in the room assumed that Pat Meyer knew about Beth’s false identity, assumed that Pat Meyer believed Beth to have been in physical danger, assumed that Pat Meyer sheltered Beth with full knowledge, and approved of what Pat Meyer had done. Others thought she did not know, but was right to take what Beth George said at face value. Others thought Beth George’s lies to Pat Meyer were about to bring down the whole organization. Longtime Democratic stalwart and community leader, Gertrude McQueen said, “I just can’t stop thinking about that poor woman,” meaning Beth, then being held in jail while her children were back in Arkansas with their dad. The group was somber. What could be done to protect DVIP, Pat Meyer, Beth George, and the others, all under threat?

An open board meeting was then called in late February to discuss the crisis (see Appendix F). Longtime feminists pressed others to attend, even those who had had little to do with the shelter in the past. Some were told that the middle-class board was conspiring to get rid of Pat Meyer, because she was a lesbian, because she was a radical feminist, and because she unconditionally helped women in need. They knew little of the management difficulties. When Barbara Xakellis opened the meeting of more than fifty people, an iconoclastic former employment lawyer and labor organizer, Clara Oleson, made a remark audible to all: “I HATE middle class women,” clearly directed at Xakellis. Women broke into small group discussions

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9 Who knew what when remains a puzzle to this day. Whether staff at the DVIP knew about Beth’s identity rendered them potentially subject to criminal prosecution and liable in Jess George’s civil suit against the DVIP. Barbara Xakellis, under oath, said she knew nothing of Beth George’s identity, and that Pat Meyer told her she did not know either. Barbara Larpenter’s sworn affidavit alleges that Beth confided in Barb, and claims Pat knew everything.
that were tight-lipped. One could not help feeling that some people knew what was going on but they were not telling others. It was difficult to discern the fault lines, all of which were subterranean. It was also clear that the board legitimately feared for the future of the organization. Once board members were attacked as classist, liberal, and homophobic, to raise concerns about Pat’s management or to wonder whether harboring a fugitive jeopardized the organization would have been only to confirm that one was not a real feminist, as had been suspected all along. To criticize Pat while the organization was under attack from the outside seemed to be aligning oneself with Dan Bray.

Barbara Xakellis recalls being confronted on the street by women who felt she was not sufficiently supportive of Pat Meyer as well as by members of Dan Bray’s church who felt she was blameworthy for continuing to employ Pat. The interactions were face-to-face and personal in this small community where one lacks anonymity in the grocery store, restaurant, video rental store, or on one of the few downtown streets. Four board members were the spouses of doctors or medical school staff (see Appendix G). Xakellis’s husband, for example, was told to “rein in his wife” for fear that her association with DVIP might hurt his chances of tenure. It seemed the crisis “permeated everything.” Once Dan Bray began his crusade to “clean up the shelter,” however, board members who had raised such concern were framed as disloyal to Pat, middle-class, and aiding the enemy. Besieged board members, however, felt it was those on the outside who were aiding the enemy. As one board member recalls:

Some women took the easy way out and left for fear of losing face or popularity with certain ideological groups while others dug in their heels and fought to keep the shelter open regardless of criticism launched by those who weren’t or didn’t want to be informed or carry the decision-making responsibility for its existence. And women betraying/berating/beating up other women almost let the bad guys win.

DVIP Executive Director Pat Meyer’s good relationship with law enforcement and the county attorney’s office built up over many years of hard work was shattered. Law enforcement believed they had worked hard with DVIP as partners to make the system work. They knew if they called Pat Meyer and asked if so-and-so was in the shelter, she would not tell them, but that she would work with that resident to turn herself in or make herself right with the law. They had won training grants together to improve services; one current governmental grant paid for part of Beth’s salary. Police would return women who were drunk and disorderly to the shelter rather than arrest them, confident that Pat Meyer would deal effectively with the problem. Police

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10 Board members commented that the prohibition against drinking at the shelter or being hungover and unable to get one’s children properly prepared for school were rules Pat strictly enforced.
knew that when they were called to a scene of domestic violence, they could expect to be called again as the situation worsened. Yet when Pat Meyer intervened, everyone would calm down. She would develop a plan of where the woman and her children would go for the night and everyone could go to bed. Pat Meyer seemed to many to be an exceptionally gifted miracle worker, capable of calming and mediating even the most difficult situations.

Beth’s arrest ended that trust. Not only did law enforcement believe that Pat Meyer and Beth should have worked within the system and that no one is above the law, they felt duped. Here was a wanted person parading into the police station under their noses not just sheltered, but employed by the DVIP. They felt deceived and began to think the trusting relationship was a mistake, and that they had been fools. Pat Meyer tried to reach out to one of the officers with whom she had worked most closely, but he would not look her in the eye. Former board member Carol Thompson, on the other hand, reported that others in law enforcement called DVIP to see what they could do to help Pat Meyer and thought the relationship could have been repaired. But Pat Meyer and County Attorney J. Patrick White worried they could not reestablish trust.

Although journalists pursued Xakellis at home and at work, for the most part, staff and board members’ voices were not heard in the media. According to board member Henrietta Logan however, the wide community networks new board members enjoyed with the establishment were starting to pay off as they used them to rally support. After two months of one-sided press reports, Linda McGuire published a letter to the editor on February 25th, framing the issues for the feminist community rather than allowing the media to do so (see Appendix H). McGuire was a former coordinator of the Women’s Resource and Action Center as well as an attorney who had worked in the County Attorney’s Office for J. Patrick White. She was one of the most respected leaders of the Iowa City feminist community. McGuire questioned Bray’s motives and Barb’s truthfulness. She labeled preposterous Dan Bray’s allegations about a national underground of women on the run and called it part of the backlash Susan Faludi had

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11 Bray’s allegation of a national underground is not without foundation, although the underground is to help victims of child sexual abuse, an allegation that was NOT a part of Beth George’s case. One of the undergrounds was started by Faye Yager. A coal-miner’s daughter desperate to escape the poverty of Beckley, West Virginia, Billie Faye Wisen married Roger Jones, son of a department-store owner, at age 17. When she caught him manipulating his penis with the hands of their two-year-old daughter, he had her involuntarily committed to a psychiatric hospital where she received electric shock treatments. The evidence Faye presented later in a custody battle was enough to make the judge award custody of her daughter Michelle to her paternal grandparents, but not enough to prevent him from awarding Jones unsupervised visitation, even after two-year-old Michelle was diagnosed with gonorrhea. According to Michelle, the rape continued until she was twelve and threatened her father with exposure. Later, Jones made the FBI’s Most Wanted List for making video tapes of him having sex with a 10 and 14-year old Florida girls.
just documented in her new book. She praised Pat Meyer’s record and dedication and urged supporters not to try the case in the media.

Early in March, County Attorney J. Patrick White arrested Beth for perjury and tampering with records for obtaining a driver’s license under a false name, and suggested future arrests of shelter workers might be forthcoming if they had knowingly harbored Beth. The investigation dragged on. Early in May, a group called Women Against Violence Against Women called for a rally on the courthouse steps to “express our anger at the tactics being used against the battered women’s movement,” and to urge the county attorney to drop the investigation (see Appendix I). DVIP board chair Barbara Xakellis told the press DVIP was not involved. Board member Gwenne Hayes-Stewart could only hover on the edge because her five-year-old son was not welcome at the rally designated for women only. The banner headline on

Faye’s second husband shot himself in 1976 because he felt like a failure for not protecting Michelle, according to Faye. Faye then married a wealthy Atlanta pediatrician. In 1987, she read about a Mississippi woman jailed for hiding her abused daughter from the girl’s father. Another case in Mississippi also awarded custody to a father, despite medical and psychological evidence of abuse. After 43 days, and after keeping a well-publicized prison notebook, the jailed woman, Karen Newsome, told where her children were, disclosed the names of the families who had helped hide them, and the state handed her children over to her ex-husband. Faye reportedly screamed when she read the article and was galvanized into starting the underground, initially an organization called Mothers against Raping Children. She recruited a loose alliance of psychologists, lawyers, feminists, and children’s rights activists. Having watched families spend $50,000 to $90,000 to carefully document the sexual abuse, only to have the judge grant custody to the abuser, Yager declared, “I’m not going to spend another dime on the legal system. I’ll spend it on hotels [for fugitives] instead.”

Yager claims there were between five to ten known underground-railroad organizers in 1988. Many of the stations are operated by women and men whose children, grandchildren, or stepchildren have been sexually abused, or who are themselves survivors. A 1988 New York Times article quoted Faye as saying that up to 900 women were housed in battered women’s shelters. In 1992, Yager publicly claimed she had helped into hiding 1,000 of the 2,000 women she had counseled, and that she was not the only network in operation. Although she had appeared on television talk shows to draw attention to the problem (much to the chagrin of others, who thought the whole idea of an underground was that it was secret), she gained more notoriety in 1992 when Georgia charged her with kidnapping, cruelty to children, and interference with custody after she allegedly aggressively questioned the children of a woman who had sought her help. (Geraldo testified on her behalf.) The Cobb County jury acquitted her. The incident inspired lawyer and author Paula Sharpe to write her novel, Crows over a Wheatfield, and Anna Quinlan wrote her novel, Black and Blue, also about a woman on the run aided by an underground.

Attorney Dan Bray’s allegation of an underground network that may have included some battered women’s shelters was thus not as wild as it originally sounded to the Iowa City community. Beth George’s case did not involve allegations of the sexual abuse of her children, the raison d’être of the undergrounds. Board chair Barbara Xakellis did agree that there was a national network of shelters that tried to keep women safe from spouses who threatened them. To what extent the DVIP assisted Beth in assuming a false identity and to what extent it knew about her identity is disputed to this day. Ironically, members of the feminist community speculated that it was Dan Bray who was part of a network of fathers’ rights attorneys. Bray had won custody of his children in his own divorce because, as a board member reported his ex-wife told her, “he was the better parent.” He represented men who had become active parents and challenged the assumption that mothers should always win custody after divorce. He came to believe that women too easily could claim domestic abuse, thereby shifting the burden of proof on the husbands/fathers to prove their innocence.
the flyer for the event satirized the investigation saying, “Crime Wave Rocks Small Midwestern Town: Scores of Women Nabbed with ‘Phony’ Driver [sic] Licenses” (see appendix). Rather than portraying the dilemma Beth George faced as working within the legal system or protecting herself and her children, the flyer constructed her crime, not as violating a custody order and depriving an alleged batterer access to his children, but simply lying on her driver’s license, ostensibly something everyone does. The more than sixty women who gathered put on nametags that said Beth George. When the speaker asked the crowd of women, “Why is my name Beth George?” they replied, “Because it could happen to any of us!” A second speaker called Beth “a woman of courage,” and said that DVIP workers were being investigated for doing their jobs, offering shelter to women and children. One woman was dressed as a witch and likened the treatment of Beth George and DVIP staff to witch hunts. Speakers relayed the statistics about domestic violence and put on a skit where a battered woman went first to her minister, who told her to pray harder and obey her husband, and then to a police office, a lawyer, and a judge, all of whom blamed her for the abuse. Finally, she went to a woman who said, “I believe you, it happened to me.” In a second skit, Officer Richard Testosterone said, “We have arrested a woman for the heinous crime of putting false information on her driver’s license.” Two women went through the crowd, urging women to compare the weight listed on their driver’s licenses with their weight on a scale. Few women leapt onto the scale, but got the point nevertheless.

When County Attorney J. Patrick White came out of the courthouse during one of the skits, Gertrude McQueen belted out, “J. Patrick White, we’re heeeeeeeeeeee!” Looking back, White expressed disappointment that his friends, such as Gertrude McQueen and Linda McGuire, could not just come into his office and discuss the matter. He saw the two primary issues as the best interests of the George children and the fact that Beth George and perhaps others had taken the law into their own hands rather than coming to him. While the community rallied to their defense, wearing buttons that said “DVIP Unconditional Shelter,” Beth George had been arrested and lost custody of her children. Dan Bray was demanding action. J. Patrick White was investigating Pat Meyer, staff, and volunteers, including board members. As the board gathered for its meeting, the agenda items included whether to continue the employment of Beth George and Pat Meyer, how to respond to Dan Bray, whether to hire a lawyer for the board, how to complete the remaining tasks for the fall auction and ensure its success, how to respond to the press, and whether to approve newly-drafted practices and procedures.