



Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh

SPRING 2023



Trigger Warning: substance use, violence

Survivor Story: Safe and Protected

Rachel and her husband were married for five years. They had been in a loving relationship, raised two older children from prior relationships together, had a son together, and supported each other while they each went into recovery for opiate use disorder. Rachel was doing great, and over the years, had opened and grown a small business.

But as Rachel continued to improve, her husband struggled. He found it difficult to stay clean and would disappear from their home without notice for long stretches of time. Whether he was clean or using, however, he was never abusive to Rachel. That changed when she became pregnant with their second child.

"He really started to fall apart. The way he treated me changed a lot," said Rachel. "At first it was just like verbal type of abuse, financial abuse, stuff that I could write off or rationalize or think that it was temporary."

But by Rachel's third trimester, the abuse had escalated.

"He was not well; he needed treatment," Rachel said. "I felt like when I married him, I made that commitment to stay with him while he figured things out. But it got worse and worse. The abuse got physical and the verbal abuse really escalated to a frightening point as well."

Rachel was no longer allowed to have any privacy. Her husband would rifle through her cell phone and put a tracking device on her car to monitor her whereabouts. Rachel knew that his behavior had crossed a line.

"I was very pregnant and that's a scary place to be. It's not a time when you want to uproot your entire life," Rachel said. "I started thinking in the background like, okay, I have to start putting together some kind of plan to leave. I was hoping to just save up money or figure something out and not need to go get help. And I tried that for a few months."

When Rachel gave birth, she thought long and hard about leaving the hospital and going straight into Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh's (WC&S) emergency shelter. She was afraid to go home, where she wasn't sure she could keep herself and their four children safe, but she was even more afraid of the unknown.

"I chickened out. I wasn't ready. That's a scary thing to do with a new baby," Rachel said.

Rachel went home, but never stopped thinking about making her escape. After three months, her husband disappeared again. She packed up as quickly as she could, sent her older children to stay with family, and, with her young son and newborn, made her way to WC&S' emergency shelter.

"I was super scared to go. I think we all maybe have an idea in our head of what a shelter might be like and it's maybe not the best place to go visit. I was nervous to leave my home and commit to staying at this place that I knew nothing about, but oh man, once I got in there and felt safe and protected... just the relief in those few days was massive." ●



Join us at Celebrating Survivors on Friday, April 21 to hear the incredible ending to Rachel's story, or find her story on WC&S' YouTube channel starting April 26.

Visit CelebrateSurvivors.org to register, and search YouTube for "pghwomenscenter" to subscribe to the WC&S YouTube channel.

We are excited to host another Celebrating Survivors!



Every year, we gather with our community of supporters to celebrate survivors of domestic violence, remember those who have lost their lives to DV, and honor a deserving individual or group with the Sherley and Ted Craig Humanitarian Award. We are thrilled to announce that the recipient of this year's award is **Alina's Light**, a charitable organization established in honor of Alina Sheykhet, whose life was tragically taken in a senseless act of violence in October 2017. Alina's parents, Yan and Elly Sheykhet, along with Alina's family and friends, keep her memory alive by raising awareness of domestic violence and promoting domestic violence education through outreach, scholarships, and donations.

Nicole Molinaro, President/CEO of WC&S, said, "Alina's Light is special for so many different reasons. They are the kindest, strongest, most caring people who are always willing to go the extra mile to help those in need. Their impact on Women's Center & Shelter is beyond what we could have imagined."

Each year, Alina's Light provides joy to children staying in the Shelter by throwing holiday parties, complete with gifts, treats, games, arts and crafts, and most importantly, fun and laughter. They also provide support in the form of financial donations towards WC&S' programs and services, and are always eager for opportunities to raise awareness about domestic violence and connect those experiencing domestic violence with our services.

"It makes my heart smile and it helps my heart heal," said Elly. "We couldn't save our own daughter, but witnessing and acknowledging and realizing that we are able to help the residents of Women's Center, it helps me personally as I go through the grieving process."

We are also excited to announce that we will be awarding a SUCCESS Award to longtime WC&S friend, **Kathy Marecic**. Kathy has been connected to WC&S as an intern, employee, and volunteer since 2011. Kathy was the WC&S Grants Specialist in the Development Department before transitioning to a volunteer role as the RUSafe Coordinator. She contributed tirelessly to the development, improvement, maintenance, and promotion of the RUSafe app. Thanks to her work, RUSafe has grown and evolved to become Bright Sky, an international safety app and website for those affected by domestic violence now available in the U.S.



"When I was marketing the RUSafe app, which is now Bright Sky, I never realized how much of a personal connection I would make with so many people," said Kathy. "They were curious. They found it an interesting job that I was marketing an app, but the thing that touched me the most was bringing it to the attention of the people who didn't understand domestic violence."

During her time as RUSafe Coordinator, Kathy called and emailed various programs throughout the United States, made presentations to local universities and partners, created social media pages for the app, and did whatever she could to spread the word to promote the app and spread awareness.

Kristin Brown, WC&S Chief Development Officer, said, "I've had the pleasure of knowing Kathy for ten years, working together in the Development department and then on the RUSafe app together. She always does everything at 100%. She takes on any task that's asked of her, and then just does even more. But she's also just an incredible person who has helped her coworkers, those served by Women's Center & Shelter, and who has a real overall compassion for people. That's why she is well-deserving of this award, and why we're all so grateful to know her."

We hope you will join us, UPMC Health Plan, and our many sponsors and friends, to celebrate these amazing people and hear the incredible story of a survivor who has used WC&S' programs and services. ●

Celebrating Survivors
SPONSORED BY: UPMC HEALTH PLAN

FRIDAY APRIL 21
6:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.

**The Circuit Center and Ballroom
at Southside Works**
5 Hot Metal Street • Pittsburgh, PA 15203

Cocktail Attire

Visit
CelebrateSurvivors.org
for more information.

PROGRAM UPDATE:

Systems Response Manager

Between 50 and 75% of domestic violence homicides happen at the point of separation or after the victim has already left the abuser. Additionally, locally and across the globe, we have seen an increase in complexity, severity, and frequency of domestic abuse situations since the pandemic began. Many of our current clients have needed more help and support than ever before because of escalating violence; new clients have reached out experiencing severe abuse; and, we have even had former clients whose abusive ex-partners began using violence again during custody exchanges that had been peaceful for some time. In a dramatic demonstration of this increase in intensity, unfortunately, the number of IPV-related homicides in Allegheny County increased by 33% over pre-pandemic levels in 2022, including several that were horrifically violent.

Bright Sky is here!

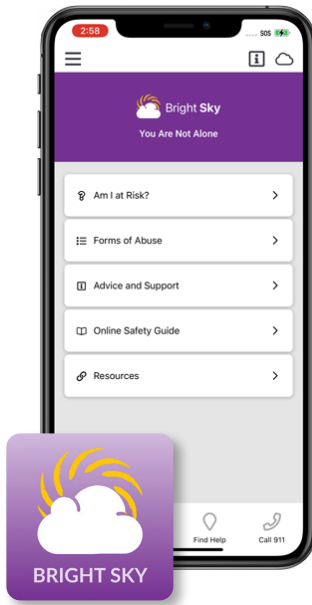
Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh is excited to announce the launch of Bright Sky.

Bright Sky is a safe, free, easy-to-use app and website that provides practical support and information on how to respond to domestic violence. It is for anyone experiencing domestic violence, or for those worried about someone else.

Bright Sky can help you:

- Understand what domestic violence can look like
- Spot the warning signs of domestic violence
- Evaluate the safety of a relationship
- Locate the nearest support services across the United States
- Learn how to help a friend, loved one, or colleague that may be affected

Bright Sky is being presented in the U.S. by WC&S and the Vodafone Americas Foundation in partnership with Aspirant, NO MORE, DomesticShelters.org, and Thames Valley Partnership. It was officially launched on March 9th in conjunction with NO MORE's panel session titled *"The Role of Technology in Ending Gender-Based Violence"* at the Church Center for the United Nations in New York. With the addition of the U.S. launch, Vodafone Group Foundation has now expanded the app to 13 countries, including Albania, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Portugal, Romania, South Africa, and the United Kingdom.



One anonymous survivor said of Bright Sky, "Having experienced partner violence myself, I tended to minimize my experience. This educational section helped to explain and validate different types of abuse and how it presents. Sometimes, we don't want to admit that we were abused so this puts things into perspective."

Bright Sky is the successor to RUSafe, a similar app that was created by Aspirant in collaboration with WC&S more than 10 years ago. It is our hope that the transition of RUSafe into Bright Sky will continue to encourage victims and survivors, as well as their friends, family, or colleagues, to seek resources and education on the issue of domestic violence while connecting our community to a larger, global network.

WC&S President/CEO, Nicole Molinaro, is proud to have worked with the WC&S team and our many partners on this project, knowing how much of a difference it will make in the lives of survivors and those who love them. "The Bright Sky app will be instrumental in offering a safe path to support those impacted by domestic violence and those who may be concerned that a loved one, friend or colleague may be experiencing abuse. Offering a range of accessible risk assessment tools, life-saving safety and planning resources, and connections to help and hope, Bright Sky will positively impact the lives of many." ●

Please download the Bright Sky app for **free** today or visit the Bright Sky website at **us.bright-sky.org**. To learn more, visit **brightskyus.org**. Become an advocate and help spread the word!



These factors led Women's Center & Shelter to re-think the way we work with survivors who are at the highest risk of being killed by their partner or ex-partner. These are survivors who are in the most lethal and immediate danger; survivors for whom even shelter is a potentially dangerous option. Our response was to create a new identification, referral, and emergency case management system that combines the efforts of several of our departments into one team, who jump into action to work with external partners such as the Allegheny County's District Attorney's DV Unit, Pittsburgh Police DV Unit, Allegheny County's PFA Unit and other specialized court systems, the Fugitive Task Force, and other partners as needed to work with the survivor on extensive, creative, and individualized safety planning and follow-up. The survivor is empowered to stay in the driver's seat, but receives proactive, coordinated help navigating this new and dangerous landscape. In 2022, WC&S identified almost 20 women out of the 7,700+ survivors we serve who we believe needed — and all of whom, indeed, welcomed — this intensified focus.

Coordinating this activity is our Systems Response Manager, a position made possible from grant funding provided by the Audrey Hillman Fisher Foundation. This role is key in the management of the team, as she oversees the clients' case management system, maintains positive relationships with external partners in law enforcement, the courts and social services agencies, and participates in systems advocacy to improve the justice system response to victims of DV/IPV. All of these efforts reflect on WC&S' mission of keeping survivors at the center of our attention.

"The Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh has been a trusted and compassionate part of our community for nearly 50 years, and I'm thrilled that it continues to innovate to meet the needs of survivors," said Audrey Hillman Fisher, board president of the Audrey Hillman Fisher Foundation. "I wish we lived in a world where the Center's work wasn't necessary, but with high-danger domestic violence cases rising in

Allegheny County sadly their work is more important than ever. It is a privilege to support this pilot initiative which will allow their team to take fast action to help survivors in immediate danger get the critical services they need."

"This initiative proves the importance of focusing on our value of survivor-centered advocacy, which we define as prioritizing the needs and wishes of survivors on their healing journeys by creating a supportive, affirming environment that treats all survivors with dignity and respect," says Maggie Prescott, Chief of Mission Integration.

WC&S is proud to have created this new way of identifying and working with individuals who are in extremely high danger of being killed by their partners or ex-partners. By involving our partners in this important work, we are further able to strengthen our dedication to survivor-centered advocacy and provide the intensity of services that our extremely high-danger clients need to survive. ●



Women's Center & Shelter
of Greater Pittsburgh

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WCSCanHelp.org

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Available 9am-5pm, Monday - Friday

United Way Contributor Choice **#110**



**Saturday,
May 13, 2023**

Stage AE
Walk begins at 9:00 a.m.

Visit bit.ly/walkforalex
to learn more and register

Walking in Memory of Alex

This year, we will be joining with our dear friends at the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank to walk in memory of Alex Karaczun, beloved husband of WC&S President/CEO, Nicole Molinaro and proud father to their daughter. Before Alex's untimely and sudden passing on September 22, 2022, he served as the IT Coordinator at the Food Bank and was vocal in supporting a number of social justice causes, including our work at WC&S. Alex was kind-hearted and funny, easily bringing a smile to the faces of those around him. To know him was to love him and that is why we are using this opportunity to walk in his memory, while raising funds and awareness for two organizations near and dear to his heart. While the details are still in the works, our plan is to walk together with Alex's friends, family, and colleagues, along with WC&S and Food Bank supporters, in specially designed t-shirts honoring Alex. ●



Our mission is to strengthen our ability to meet the individual and evolving needs of those affected by domestic violence by investing in the growth of our people, deepening community engagement, and amplifying the voices of all survivors.

Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization — donations to which are tax-deductible to the fullest extent permitted by law. The official registration and financial information of Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling toll free, within Pennsylvania, 1-800-732-0999. Registration does not imply endorsement.