

MEDIA

Garland Waller, producer of SMALL JUSTICE has written an important chapter for our new book about the failure of the media to expose the crisis in the custody court system. Many of us have had extensive discussions with reporters for major national media outlets about the pattern of extreme cases we are seeing. Most of the protective mothers I have worked with have all had the same brilliant idea. They should go on Oprah and tell their stories. They believe her concern about child abuse and tremendous influence would make a huge difference. In fact Oprah is someone who could probably stop these tragedies if she treated the problem of custody for abusers as an important issue. Although there have been stories about individual cases, repeatedly the national media has backed out of stories to expose the problem.

Lawyers afraid of offending rich and powerful interests killed many of the stories. Many media outlets were unwilling to spend the time and resources needed to understand the pattern of these cases. In some cases the refusal of abusers to be interviewed has caused the media to back out of a story on the bogus ground that they couldn't provide both sides of the story. There are people who still believe the world is flat or that the Holocaust never happened. Nevertheless the media does not consider it necessary to provide a false balance to such stories because the truth of the Holocaust is well established. Every state and every court system has determined domestic violence is a serious problem that must be prevented and yet the media seeks to "balance" coverage of domestic violence. In an individual case the media would need to consider both sides (i.e. an alleged Nazi prison guard denying his past identity), but there is no need to provide coverage that the Nazi positions were justified. The male supremacist agenda

involves reducing or eliminating child support, minimizing the response to domestic violence and tolerating incest. In a domestic violence case the media needs to give both sides an opportunity to give its side (i.e. the abuser could deny the abuse allegations), but should not be able to kill the story or require a response from organizations seeking to justify domestic violence.

At the same time, we have seen numerous articles with male supremacist propaganda where the reporter fails to speak with a domestic violence advocate or other expert to understand the context of the issue and how abusers use it to harm their victims. Stories about “shared parenting” Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) and friendly parent proposals are designed to promote the male supremacist agenda. In fairness to the media, I don’t think they have the training to understand how they are being manipulated. I believe journalists would benefit from training in domestic violence so they could recognize the issues and know what resources are available to investigate stories. They could also learn to avoid unaccountable language. When a man beats up a woman, it should not be referred to as a “domestic dispute.” Such language creates an impression that they are equally responsible.

The failure of the national media to expose the crisis in the court system has two important exceptions. PBS presented a powerful documentary **BREAKING THE SILENCE: CHILDREN’S STORIES**. The producers used interviews with members of the Courageous Kids Network to demonstrate the pattern of mistakes made by the courts in these cases. These were children forced to live with abusers because of bad court decisions who are now adults or almost adults, away from their abusers and able to speak

about their experiences. The male supremacist groups attacked the documentary before even seeing it and PBS failed to show the film as often as they should have.

In September of 2006, Newsweek Magazine wrote a story about the pattern of mishandled court cases that used PAS to force children to live with abusers. They used the infamous Shockome case to illustrate the kinds of mistakes made by the broken court system. The response to the Newsweek article was particularly enlightening. The male supremacists sent many letters attacking the reporter. Those of us working to end domestic violence wrote letters thanking the reporter for exposing the problem. The third group of letters came from neutral people and basically said they couldn't believe this was really happening. They couldn't believe it because the media had failed in its responsibility to expose a widespread scandal in the court system that is ruining the lives of thousands of children.

In her chapter, Professor Waller described what she called the "tipping point." This would occur when there were sufficient stories so that enough of the public would be aware of the problem to take action. Clearly the American public would not tolerate a scandal destroying the lives of so many children. The question is how do we reach the "tipping point?" I believe there is a Pulitzer Prize awaiting the media outlet that gets us there.