**Help without jeopardy: How Vivian Muzyk raises awareness — but not too much — about the Compass Center for Women and Families**

There are many reasons why domestic violence victims stay silent. One particular reason is fear of their abusers hurting others, which is a very real possibility. This can pose a unique challenge for employees at domestic violence nonprofits who work to raise awareness about their services.

Vivian Muzyk, the development and communications coordinator at the Compass Center for Women and Families, is one such employee. The Compass Center is Orange County’s designated domestic violence agency that provides, among other services, a support program for survivors to help them “navigate their journeys to safety, self-sufficiency and health.” This includes a 24-hour hotline, support groups, emergency shelter, safety plans and more.

In the past, Muzyk worked in journalism and public relations for health and education nonprofits. Now, she communicates with potential donors, clients and the public for the Compass Center.

Muzyk said working in communications at the Compass Center is extremely fulfilling but can raise a couple of major dilemmas.

For instance, the importance of anonymity in domestic abuse cases often conflicts with the role of storytelling as an authentic nonprofit communication tactic. Some domestic abusers will stop at nothing to get to their victims, hurting anyone who stands in their way. While awareness is useful for the Compass Center, too much can make its staff and volunteers a target, so Muzyk navigates the line between storytelling and volunteer endangerment with extreme caution. Photos of nonprofit staff in action tend to perform best on social media, but she must be mindful of the danger that an abuser will identify and attack them.

“We look for volunteers who are comfortable being public about the fact that they volunteer,” Muzyk said. “We have to be concerned about their safety, because when clients call, there’s someone who’s potentially violent and volatile in their lives. If they find out that they’re getting services from us, they may want to do harm to somebody in our building. For that reason, not just the clients, but even some of our volunteers really want to remain private. It is harder than in other places I’ve worked to find people who are willing to be photographed and share their story.”

Muzyk explained that learning from clients how the Compass Center changed their lives makes her job extremely rewarding. It also helps her demonstrate the Compass Center’s impact to potential donors and the public. Several survivors are eager to speak out.

“They’re proud of how far they’ve come, and they want others to know that it’s possible and that we have tools to help people,” Muzyk said.

But there are many who don’t want to share their abusive experiences; those who do run the risk of their stories being exploited, so Muzyk ensures they tell them on their own terms.

“We always go in with the intention of highlighting where people are now and that there is hope in the future instead of trying to be exploitative about the specifics of somebody’s abusive situation,” Muzyk said. “We take precautions that are in the best interests of clients. Domestic violence advocates talk with them about how far out they are from their abusive experience, how comfortable they are, whether they’ve thought about what’s going to happen when this goes public, whether they’re ready for that, whether they’re comfortable. We help them think through what it’s going to be like to have their story, and often their picture, be public, just to give everyone time to get used to the idea.”

In addition to individual client and volunteer storytelling on social media, Muzyk also works to obtain press coverage, which is another challenge in and of itself. She explained that because the nonprofit only serves Orange County, it can be difficult to get the media to pay attention. And when they do, it makes for a great day on the job.

“When reporters put our name and hotline number out there, we get more calls,” she said. “We know how pervasive domestic violence is, and we’ve seen an increase in calls over the years and serviced clients. And it’s not because it’s happening more often; it’s because people are finding out about us. We know it’s happening, so it’s great when our name and number get out there and people who need help can find us.”

While working at nonprofits with more sensitive subjects can be tough, Muzyk said it’s more than worth it. Above all, she said, it takes a knack for storytelling. She encourages those with an interest in philanthropy to work at a nonprofit, regardless of focus area.

“Do it,” she said. “It’s very rewarding. Any success you make, you’re really helping people.”

