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Down East

SAFE AT LAST



Photographed by Cig Harvey.

After decades of violence at the hands of her husband, Priscilla got out alive — with help from a Maine safe house that's among the first of its kind.

By Jesse Ellison

Photographed by Cig Harvey

When Priscilla first heard that her ex-husband had died, she thought it was a trick. It had been almost four

years since she'd last laid eyes on the man she spent some 45 years married to, since the Monday morning when

she'd left for work and simply never returned. But she'd still lived with the ever-present fear that he would find her, that it was only a matter of time. "You're going to think this is weird," she says now, "but sometimes I thought, 'I wish he would just find me and get it over with.' "

Priscilla was born in 1949 in a small town in western Maine. She's tiny, just over 5 feet tall, and almost disarmingly bubbly, with a quick laugh and the fluttering energy of a hummingbird. Joe (a pseudonym) was her high school sweetheart. In 1966, when Priscilla was 16, she got pregnant, so she and Joe were married. Little by little, she says, she felt her rights start slipping away. Joe was jealous and paranoid. He would baselessly accuse her of having affairs and use the couple's three young children as his spies, always making sure one of them was with her to report on where she'd been and to whom she'd spoken. It wasn't long before he started beating her as well.

"In the beginning, I used to go to the police," Priscilla says. "They would come and say, 'We'll just take him for a ride, talk to him.' Then he'd come back and, of course, beat me up. Well, thank

you very much! After a while you think, well, it's worse if I ask for help, so I won't ask for help anymore."

It was another 14 years before Congress would pass the Violence Against Women Act, bringing the weight of the federal government to bear on the prosecution of intimate-partner violence. It was another two decades after that before Priscilla finally managed to leave, becoming the first resident of a refuge called Martha's Cottage, a transitional housing program for older victims of domestic violence. It's one of the only facilities of its kind nationwide.

There's a grim logic to the notion that elder domestic violence would emerge as an issue in Maine before the rest of the country. For starters, we're the oldest state, with a median age of just over 44. Half of all murders here are domestic-violence related, compared to only 30 percent nationwide. In 2014, Mainers reported 11,000 assaults, and nearly half of those were domestic-violence related — also a rate that's higher than the national average.

It's an issue on which Maine may be a bellwether for national trends. One recent study found that more than

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one in 10 women over 50 is abused by an intimate partner — and that, among Americans over 60, abuse of elderly women by their spouses is on the rise. In the next four decades, the number of Americans over 65 is expected to double. And while the CDC estimates that one in four women will be victims of violence at the hands of a partner during their lifetimes, that agency and others tend to stress the importance of domestic-violence prevention education early in life, with little to say about seniors.

“At the end of the day, we’re a very youth-oriented society, and that plays out in our policies and funding streams as well,” says Bonnie Brandl, director of the National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life. “It becomes sort of a siloed approach — even though domestic violence should be thought about across the life span, in reality, programs are better designed to meet the needs of 18–40-year-olds. And then aging services are often seen as completely separate.”

In the mid-1990s, at least one Maine group got out in front of the elder-abuse issue. Portland-based Part-



Photographed by Cig Harvey.

ners for Elder Abuse Community Education, or PEACE, focused on research and advocacy, reaching out to older people in greater Portland to find out what needs weren't being met and why. Early on, its members recognized a subset of women like Priscilla, older victims of often long-term domestic violence who were falling through the cracks.

“There’s this population that was not really being served,” says Linda Weare, one of the founding members of PEACE

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and now director of the Office of Elder Affairs for the City of Portland. "Not by anybody's fault, but everybody was doing their thing, and there was just this little segment that wasn't getting the attention they needed."

For years, such victims had almost nowhere to go. Safe homes and domestic-violence shelters tend not to be geared towards women in their 60s and 70s — for example, bedrooms are usually up at least one flight of stairs, for safety reasons, and the programming emphasis is often on job training and child care. There are other barriers too. The women PEACE encountered spoke of never having earned their own incomes, never having managed a checkbook, never having lived alone. Ending a long marriage can sometimes mean cleaving a family apart. And then there are more subtle psychological hurdles.

"Women in that generation — and this is a generalization — but they didn't even know it was wrong," says Patricia Kimball, executive director of the Elder Abuse Institute of Maine (EAIME), a nonprofit organization that evolved out of PEACE. "The language I think

I've heard so many times is, 'You make your bed, you lie in it.' You got in this marriage, it's your responsibility to make it right."

After her kids had grown and moved out, Priscilla worked as an activities director at a nursing home. Her life was a tightly controlled routine. "I'd leave for work," she remembers, "and he knew it would take me 10 or 12 minutes to get to work, so he'd call when I got there. Same thing at lunch. He would always know where I was. Always."

Small delays or variations could send Joe into a rage. "If there was a line at the grocery store," Priscilla says, "sometimes I'd just leave and go home, because you never knew when you came home what it was going to be like. It could be a perfectly normal evening with no problems, or you could get slapped the minute you walked in the door."

In 2000, Priscilla made an escape attempt. Joe had won the lottery for a moose-hunting permit and Priscilla saw his weeklong hunting trip as a chance to flee. On the sly, she lined up a job on

the midcoast as a live-in assistant for a woman with Alzheimer's. When he left for the hunt, she left too. The client paid under the table so that there was no paper trail. She set up a post office box in a nearby town to receive mail.

"I thought I was so smart," Priscilla says wryly. "I just had everything figured out."

But Maine's a small state, and within a couple of weeks, she ran into someone who knew Joe. He found her and dragged her home shortly after.

Meanwhile, throughout the first decade of the 2000s, EAIME continued a focus on research and advocacy rather than direct services. It was volunteer-run, and its members all had other full-time jobs. Then, in 2009, Kimball and Weare applied for a "stimulus" grant from the Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women.

"We were like, I think we could address this housing thing we've been talking about for the last 10 years," Weare says. "We said, okay, if someone were to give us money, how would this look? What kind of model might work?" A few months later, the group was awarded \$599,000. "We were like, 'Holy shit!'" Kimball remembers. "We don't even have a staff!"

Weare coordinated the use of a govern-

ment-owned property in greater Portland that the group could establish as a long-term safe house for women over 55 fleeing domestic abuse. The grant allowed them to renovate and redesign the place, turning the house into the platonic ideal of a grandmother's cozy cottage — today, here are comfy chairs and throw pillows all over; a steaming cup of tea adorns the cover of the brochure. They called the place Martha's Cottage, after an early client who volunteered her own story of five decades of abuse for a training and advocacy video.

The next obstacle, Kimball and Weare knew, wasn't one that a grant could overcome: It was how to make escape to Martha's Cottage a viable — and visible — option for the women who needed it most. Women like Priscilla, who'd long since given up on the idea of a safe place.

Research indicates, perhaps counterintuitively, that domestic violence can grow worse with advanced age. Increased isolation, physical dependencies, and financial strains can all provoke and embolden a perpetrator. Older victims are just as likely as younger ones to die at the hands of their abuser, says Kimball, although their plight is often dismissed in part because people can't believe an elderly abuser could really be all that dangerous.

When Priscilla and Joe entered their 60s, Joe's violence escalated, becoming potentially lethal. One night in 2011, Joe choked her until she could barely breathe, then held a gun to her head. On another occasion, he beat her so badly that he was certain she'd go to the police or the hospital, so he spent the night parked at the end of their tree-lined driveway, cradling a gun and waiting for her to leave.

"Fortunately, I didn't," Priscilla remembers, shaking her head. "I was frozen. But I'm glad, because I'd probably be dead."

One night, while working late, Priscilla found a co-worker crying in the break room. She told Priscilla she was going through a divorce from a man who'd abused her and had threatened to kill her. She said she was thinking of seeking help from a local domestic-violence organization and she asked Priscilla if she'd go with her. The prospect of help was suddenly so close.

"I thought, 'No, don't go there, Priscilla,'" she says. "'You're just asking for trouble. They're going to want to come down and talk to Joe and try to find out why he's abusing me.' Because, you know, my experience with people helping had not been good."

Still, under the guise of going to a work meeting, the two women went. Priscilla

planned to wait silently for her coworker, but instead she broke down in front of a staffer.

"I'm in the waiting room, and now I'm crying for no reason. You know, the tears are just like . . . I guess I was thinking, I'm so close to help, and I can't have it. I don't dare ask.

"But that woman knew. She just kind of knew. She said, 'Why don't you come into my office?' And before you know it, I'm telling her my whole life story and crying my eyes out." The counselor told Priscilla she knew of someplace she'd be safe. She had, it turned out, just recently received a brochure for Martha's Cottage.

Together with Meg London, another EAIME board member, Priscilla's new advocates came up with an exit plan. The next Monday morning, Priscilla got in her truck and went to work, where she grabbed a sweatshirt — one of the only items of clothing she was able to take with her — then told her boss and coworkers she wouldn't be coming back. The local advocates helped her close her bank and credit card accounts and notified police from Dexter to Portland.

"They knew exactly what he was going to do," Priscilla says. "He called the police department and first he says, 'My wife has stolen my truck.' Then he says,

'Well, my wife is missing. I think something has happened to her.' They all knew, though."

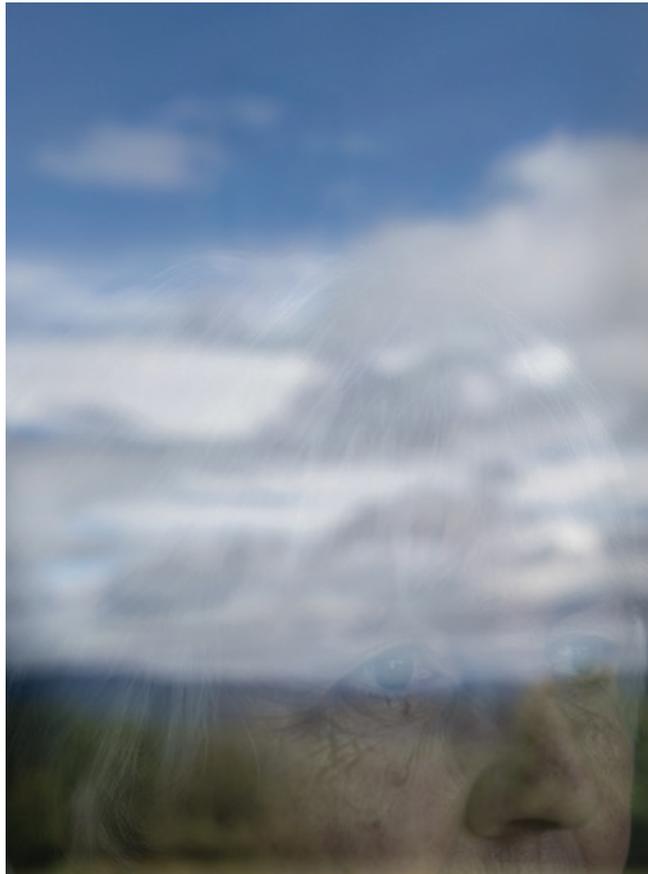
Then Priscilla drove herself 100 miles to the Portland area. Looking back on it, she says, she remembers nothing of the drive. She suspects she was in shock.

"Listen," Priscilla says, "I believe in God. I have a great faith in God. And when He moves, He just, like . . ." She trails off. "You see, I had been praying for years for God to change Joe. And then the last few months, I was like, 'Lord, just take me out of here. Just find a way for me to get out of here.' "

When Priscilla first arrived at Martha's Cottage, she was physically unable to sit still in a chair; she was always ready to bolt.

"She had not been protected, over and over," Weare says. "So it was really hard for her to believe, 'I am safe here.' She told us afterwards she slept the

first few nights in the cottage with her purse and her shoes. She was ready to flee, because she just thought, 'He will find me.' It took her a long time just to settle in and think, 'No, I'm in a safe place now.' "



Photographed by Cig Harvey.

A female detective — "she was no bigger than a minute, but boy was she tough," says Priscilla — started dropping by the cottage regularly, to reassure Priscilla the grounds were safe. She was given a panic button, in case Joe showed up or she ever felt threatened. But the most helpful thing, Priscilla recalls, was how Weare, London, and others just sat

with her quietly and helped her process the previous 44 years.

"They just listened to me," Priscilla says. "They didn't ask a lot of stupid questions like, 'Why did you stay with him?' They listened to me talk, and then we'd hug. They were always encouraging me and telling me I was a good person. I hadn't heard that for so long."

Other women came through the cottage while she was there. One of them had previously been in a traditional domestic-violence shelter, a facility that mostly housed younger women with children. As is common, the younger women there had treated her like a grandmother, asking for babysitting and for pieces of her chocolate.

“Of course, because we’re from that giving era, you know, we give to younger people,” Priscilla says, “so she would give these things and then she would go without. Then she’d hate herself for being that way. I don’t think I could have stayed at a shelter if there had been young people there. I couldn’t have taken that on.”

Priscilla stayed at Martha’s Cottage for a year. She enrolled in the Address Confidentiality Program, an initiative that conceals the addresses of stalking or domestic-violence victims across governmental agencies. She applied for subsidized housing, and in the meantime, she kept the cottage sparkling clean. “I was like, I am just so grateful to be here, I will scrub this place with a toothbrush.”

Since Priscilla’s time at Martha’s Cottage, which can house three guests at a time, some 25 other women have come through. Impressively, not a single one has returned to their abuser. The organization has also served some 200 oth-

ers who haven’t needed housing, but who needed assistance with orders of protection or other safety measures.

In January, Kimball became EAIME’s executive director — and its first paid staffer. Last summer, they opened a second location, an apartment in greater Lewiston/Auburn.

In the coming years, they hope to offer more housing elsewhere in Maine. Nationally, there’s just one other transitional housing program focused on older women, according to Brandl, of the National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life. Research into elder domestic violence, she says, is still decades behind social issues like child abuse, but efforts are ramping up. Last March, her organization convened the first-ever national conference on emergency and transitional housing for older victims, bringing together officials from agencies like the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Martha’s Cottage was held up as a model program, and Priscilla was a featured speaker. Standing before the group, she says was a watershed moment.

“I never realized, until I went to Martha’s Cottage, that there was so much [domestic violence] in this world,” she says. “And then, in DC, I saw that it’s not just in Maine, it’s all over the country. It was just so good for me to go — when I talked, and they listened, I

just thought, 'There's no stopping you now.' "

Joe died of a heart attack last January, and it was weeks before Priscilla believed he was gone. He'd spent the interim years trying to get in touch with her in various ways, never successfully. Until his death, Priscilla's relationship with her adult children was strained by the split. Joe would try to use them to find Priscilla, texting her from their phones and pressing them for information. Priscilla had taken to contacting them only through letters, which she'd drive several towns over to mail — thinking the less they knew about where she was, the easier it would be for them. They all got together recently. Priscilla says that everyone wept.

Two years ago, Priscilla got remarried to a widower named Armand, whom she met in a walking group for seniors at the local high school. They live in an immaculate apartment attached

to Armand's daughter's house, with a back deck looking out over fields and beyond to the White Mountains. Horses sometimes wander into view. It's idyllic. And Priscilla and Armand are quite plainly over-the-moon in love. "Sometimes," she says, "I just pinch myself."

Armand wipes away tears as Priscilla tells her story, especially during the parts when she tried to get help. Both of them say she has finally lost most of the habits that came from her long period of abuse. She doesn't stash money around the house anymore — she always used to have a few dollars tucked away in her Bible, her recipe box, the glove compartment of her car. And Armand is glad that she has finally stopped flinching.

"When I touch her cheek," he says, "it's special now. Because we were able to change it from, you know, being scared."

To learn more about Martha's Cottage, call EAIME at 207-805-3708 or visit eaime.org.



14 Maine Street, Brunswick, Maine 04011
www.eaime.org