

8 March 2016 International Women's Day Speech by Eugenia Pantahos

Good Evening and welcome to this meaningful event celebrating International Women's Day.

I am honoured to have been invited by the Greek Orthodox Community of South Australia and to stand before you to continue this very important discussion.

But first, a little bit about my book Greek Life.

Greek Life, a book celebrating family culture and food, was initially written as a private book for my three daughters and extended family to pass on the lessons learned from my parents. It is a true celebration of the unique and inimitable Greek culture and traditions with thought provoking philosophy, recipes, and photography. It is a timeless keepsake for both Hellenes and Phil-Hellenes.

I must say that it's has been an amazing journey so far and especially because men and women share with me what my book means to them, and that some now feel as though they have been given permission to reconnect and embrace their heritage.

As well as being the author of Greek Life, I am a daughter, sister, wife, a mother to three amazing daughters, an aunt and great aunt.

In my professional, student, and family life I have a number of younger people and especially young girls and adult women for whom I am a role model, and holding this awareness is of great importance to me.

Taking time to talk and connect, share stories, have fun, and exemplify positive behaviour and choices is part of the process to help others to feel inspired and empowered, as I have from those who have influenced me.

Importantly, for a woman of my generation, I have not felt the need or urge to diminish my femininity in order to be considered valued, intelligent, strong, respected and empowered.

As you've heard I have had a mostly blessed journey to date (not withstanding life's general ups and downs), and am thankful for the women and men in my life that helped shape this journey so far, especially my parents, and my husband.

Importantly I believe we need to be thankful for the invisible privileges that many of us enjoy for example simply being born in this amazing country.

But unfortunately, there are people in society who have had challenges beyond what can be considered OK.

Domestic violence can happen to anyone - all races, all religions, all income and all education levels.

I also want to share that I consider women's rights and feminism does not mean 'man hating', and that the subject of equality in my view is a human rights issue.

The prevention of violence against women will change society for the better, so that all women can live in safety, free from violence and abuse.

I'm certain we've all heard statistics about domestic violence, but tonight I'd like to share some stories with you, each from a different perspective, to highlight the patterns, so that we can all keep our eyes open to 'see' what might be going on with our loved ones, and to reach out and help without judgement.

Just a couple of weeks ago I was invited to Sydney to fulfil a speaking engagement about the inspiration behind my book *Greek Life*. My family and I stayed in an inner city hotel and to my surprise there was information on the coffee table in our room raising the awareness to stop family violence. The literature was promoting a campaign called Never Alone in support of the Luke Batty Foundation.

I'm sure we all remember the terrible and tragic circumstances of young Luke Batty who was beaten to death by his father on a cricket oval in Melbourne a couple of years ago.

The hotel CEO has partnered with the Luke Batty Foundation to make a contribution on the guests' behalf, because in his view every woman and child deserves to live free from violence. In my view this is one critically important step forward, to raise awareness, and move from words to purposeful action.

The next day I sat with my morning coffee skimming over the newspapers, and there it was – a heading titled *City's Affluent Abusers*. The report explained that domestic violence has skyrocketed in Sydney's affluent eastern suburbs in a life-threatening trend dubbed 'golden handcuffs'.

Affluent lifestyles and educating children in private schools, means that these women are keeping their abuse behind closed doors instead of putting their hands up to seek refuge. Domestic violence really can happen to anyone.

Leslie Morgan Steiner, a US author, blogger and businesswoman, addressed a critically important question: *Why does she stay?* This is just an excerpt from her full interview that I encourage you to read.

At just 22 Leslie was a recent graduate from Harvard College, she moved to New York City for her first job. She had her first apartment, her first credit card, and a very BIG secret, and that was, she had a gun loaded and pointed at her head, many, many times, by the man who she thought was her soul-mate. The man who loved her more than anybody on Earth, who had threatened to kill her more times than she can remember.

It was crazy love, a psychological trap disguised as love; one that millions of women and even a few men fall into every year.

She knew nothing of domestic violence, its warning signs or its patterns. Her boyfriend made her believe she was the dominant partner in the relationship. He idolized her. He loved everything about her. He believed in her hopes and dreams. He created an atmosphere of trust.

If anyone had told her that this smart, funny, sensitive man, who adored her would one day dictate whether or not she wore makeup, how short her skirts were, where she lived, what jobs she took, who her friends were and where she spent Christmas, she would have laughed, because there was not a hint of violence or control or anger at the beginning.

She didn't know that the first stage in any domestic violence relationship is to seduce and charm the victim. The second step is to isolate the victim, move away from family, friends, and colleagues so that they can't see the bruises or hear the screams.

She broke the silence, told everyone: the police, neighbours, friends and family, total strangers, and is alive today because those people helped her.

The answer to the question of: Why Doesn't She Just Leave? Is that it's incredibly dangerous to leave an abuser. Often love still exists, and all that is desired is for the abuse to stop.

You never know how strong you are until being strong is the only choice.

Fleeing takes courage, fleeing with children is far more challenging to say the least, and leaving the loyal and beloved family pet behind to wear the brunt of the rage and anger isn't as easy as some may think. This is another factor to consider when asking the question: Why doesn't she leave?

Closer to home the RSPCA in South Australia has developed a Safe Kennels program to support animals affected by domestic violence understanding that there will be people who won't leave unless somebody can arrange to care for their pets.

These accounts are shocking and confronting, yet unfortunately they are true!

So, what can we do as a society?

Encourage Financial independence – it leads to self-sufficiency that provides women opportunities and choices.

Have women in positions of leadership - it challenges our traditional norms about the roles of women and breaks down stereotypes.

Educate employers - on the dynamics of intimate partner violence and learn how to appropriately address it to prevent women finding themselves unemployed with fewer choices.

Gain support from men –

- recognising the positive role that men play
- understand that most men are courageous, loving, respectful and kind, and importantly not violent
- to have solidarity, and galvanise as many men and boys to be advocates for change
- challenge the attitudes and behaviours of a minority who use or condone violence against women
- to have effective programs for men and boys to be given the opportunity to change their behaviour.

Move from Equality to Elevation – Traditionally a woman's role in society is generally shaped by a restricted self-image – lower, slower and lesser. We need to continue the move towards equality and then importantly move forward to elevation to help improve behaviour and achievement among women. To have choices and to use education and imagination to create an upgraded self-image - to grow, achieve and win, and repeat again and again. Creating good energy knowing that it is contagious!

In the words of Kofi Anan: There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women.

Together good men and good women can work towards the prevention of violence against women and children. Together we can dream about and plan a different and fairer world.

We may not be able to start over, but we can begin now and make a new, and be the change that we wish to see in the world. We can be the heroine of our own life.

When we empower women, we empower humanity.

When we educate women, we educate families.

Now is the perfect time. Now is the only time.

And finally...

Here's to strong women, may we know them, may we be them and may we raise them.