

NETWORKS of Hope

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(Names and locations have been changed to protect the innocent)

Having worked in the Violence Against Women field since 1995, I find myself now at a place where most of my time is spent in the logistics of the business; managing grants, planning strategies, insuring our program meets all of our funding requirements. You know the scenario; the behind-the-scenes business of making sure a shelter maintains it's vital backbone.

This is what I do, so when I received a call from the hotline a few evenings ago I was not thinking outside the box of the 'normal' brainstorming and crisis support I am often asked for on such 'on-call' evenings. As it turns out, this call was something that I had not encountered before. Of course, no matter how many years in the business, there are always new situations – reminding us that all of our lives are unique and come with their own variables.

The crisis counselor called to tell me that the statewide hotline was on the other line and that they had a woman on the phone calling from our local airport. "Rachel" had flown in from Nebraska to pick up her children and bring them home with her. Her abuser had taken them to his mother's house in Maryland and refused to return them. Seemingly more reasonable, the mother-in-law had assured Rachel that if she flew in to the Norfolk airport then she would have them there waiting on her. So Rachel took off from work, and, with meager resources, bought one round-trip ticket and two one-way tickets from here to her new home in a domestic violence shelter in Nebraska.

When she landed in Norfolk her children were nowhere to be found. A quick call to Maryland and she found out that the mother-in-law was refusing to drive "such a long distance to turnover the children." If she wanted them she must drive to a small town about 70 miles away and get them. If she used the last money she had to rent a car to drive to Maryland then she would miss the return flights – if she moved the flights to a later time, it would cost her \$150. With not enough money to do both, she moved the flights to 6am the following morning and began calling for help.

After exhausting her cell phone and several phone cards, an airport worker offered his phone so that she could continue her search for resources. She had made several calls to the local police and sheriff's office in the area where her two girls were but with no luck. She explained to them that she had fled to a domestic violence shelter in Nebraska two weeks earlier and had petitioned and received an order of protection. Her temporary injunction was granted with full custodial rights in her favor. Both departments said they could not enforce her order and hung up.

Finally, she was given the number to the statewide hotline and that's when they called us. After a quick brainstorming with my boss, I went to the airport and met a very scared and overwhelmed mother. Happy just to see a face of support, she broke down and told me briefly of what led her to here. Since she had already called the local authorities several times, I offered to advocate for her on the next call we made together. Sure enough, the local police in MD wanted to hang up about the time they heard it was Rachel again, but when I identified myself and asked him to clarify that he was refusing to honor another state's order of protection, he decided to put me on a conference call with his superior officer and the local sheriff's office. This was the first of many calls and

recalls. Sitting outside the airport for two hours, we were finally connected to a captain in the sheriff's office who was willing to work with Rachel. I read him several pages of the order and clarified a few things about the process. He told me that as long as we got her to him, he would take her to get her children. He got off at midnight but would leave orders for the oncoming officer if we did not make it in time.

At 1015pm, my partner and I drove Rachel to rural MD. We pulled into the sheriff's parking lot at 1150pm – and waited for the captain to do turnover. When he was able to meet with us, the first thing Rachel and I both noticed was that he was no less than 6'6" and extremely kind. He allowed us to follow behind their cars as they rushed her to her little girls. It went without much incident; a raised voice and a couple of off-handed remarks by the mother-in-law, but the girls, "Laci" – age 8 and "Destiny" – age 4, were more than excited to see their mother. As she gathered them up, the captain leaned into our vehicle and pointed to the both of us, "This would never happen here – people wouldn't do this sort of thing that ya'll did." He went on to add his own stories of training and attempts at better protections for abuse victims. Eighteen years of service and he seemed genuine. For me, I choose to believe that as long as he is there then maybe this 'sort of thing' *will* happen again.

Buckling them up and heading south, we left for Norfolk shortly after 1am. The youngest almost cheered in the backseat when she reported to her mom that she had heard she had "broke-up with daddy." Rachel assured her daughter that they would talk about that later and for now she should rest. With that, the girls were soon asleep, clinging onto and falling into their mother's lap. "Good thing," I thought, because the sky was lighting up and it looked like bad weather was coming.

We offered a bed in our shelter for them to sleep in for a couple of hours, but Rachel wanted to make sure they caught the flight home. At 230am, just a quick three hours before boarding, we nested them into a cozy corner near check-in. We slipped them enough money for food and a phone card.

We hugged a long good-bye and I gave her numbers and emails to check in with us. "Think about this day as a source of your strength when you need it," I tell her. She nodded her head and told me she now knows that she has what it takes to start over again. I tell her I know the same things about her. We both thanked each other for our parts in each other's lives.

As I walked out of those airport doors and headed to the safety of my own home, I realized by the first drops of rain that we had just escaped another storm.