Debbie Dart’s retirement from Choices after 24 years left enormous shoes to fill. Her courage and resilience are evident in the organization’s outstanding service and advocacy to domestic and sexual violence victims. My arrival in January coincided with a spike in COVID cases and the enduring challenges a pandemic has brought to our community. The shelter continues operating at half capacity in adherence to social distancing requirements. Housing opportunities for our clients are dismal with high unemployment and a record low of rental availability. The pandemic has also impacted the court’s ability to try cases, and yet, nationwide data suggests that domestic and sexual violence remain consistent and have possibly increased.

The statistics are no better in Page County. Over the past three years, our court systems have doled out more than 83 protective orders and tried over 78 charges of domestic violence, while law enforcement have responded to hundreds of domestic and sexual violence and stalking calls. These figures represent only those who sought out help – the majority of domestic violence cases are never reported.

This bleak picture does not tell the whole story. Our staff and clients embody the very essence of courage and resilience. Masked, operating the shelter 24-hours/day, answering hotline calls, providing court advocacy, rapid-rehousing support, and ongoing counseling requires strength and endurance. We have also begun to reintroduce proven prevention strategies back into the community in an effort to reduce the risk of domestic and sexual violence in our homes, schools and workplaces.

But it is our clients who truly shine. Women and men wearing invisible badges of bravery that remind the world of what it takes to ask for help and take control back over their lives. We hope you enjoy reading these stories of courage and resilience, the latest programming and staff updates and of course, honoring April as Sexual Assault and Child Abuse Awareness Months.

With best regards,

Vanessa C. Kulick
Within Shelter Walls

by Felicia Housden

Broken, shattered, traumatized. Clients walking in our doors are grasping at straws to stay alive. Women, and men, come from every socioeconomic background, race and religion in Page County. Despite abuse and desperation their courage and resilience shines through.

Making that initial phone call for help from domestic and sexual violence requires tremendous strength. As does escaping violence to come into shelter (many times with children in tow). Starting over with nothing but the clothes on their back speaks to a deep inner courage. Trusting staff – strangers at first – with their story and allowing themselves to be helped finding employment, community and health resources, and childcare illustrates incredible willpower. Finally, the pursuit of independent living and for most, living alone for the first time in their lives is a hallmark of inner power.

Each of these trials require courage. Choices clients typically take on all of these and more. Many choose to participate in our in-house Trauma Support Group with truly transformative results. Clients might also join Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous to find healthier coping mechanisms for trauma and pain. And we mustn’t forget those who pursue justice in court: facing their abuser and reliving the trauma with the hopes of protection, accountability, and moving on with their lives.

It doesn’t stop with courage. Clients continuously demonstrate the power of resilience. They take steps to reclaim their lives and stories to lead healthy, powerful lives. Beginning with self-care, survivors work on good sleep schedules, seek medical treatment for ailments stemming from abuse, and cook more nutritious meals. They learn that taking time for personal grooming and exercise is its own reward and their children. It also pays off when seeking employment.

Clients learn to make goals and work to meet them one step at a time. They deepen their parenting skills, take their children outdoors, read to them, help with homework, play games and remember just to listen even when tired. Repaying debts and seeking better, higher paying jobs also helps build a more stable financial foundation.

These may seem like small things, but they are not. People who’ve been treated like they do not matter must rebuild slowly and mindfully. This is resilience. We are honored to be on the frontlines with these beautiful people. Watching them heal and grow is a privilege.
Psychology defines resilience as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress. As much as resilience involves “bouncing back” from these difficult experiences, it can also involve profound personal growth.

In the last year, thanks to COVID, we have all been developing our own personal resilience as we face new challenges. But what does this look like for Choices’ clients facing the stress of domestic violence and a global pandemic?

The Parent Corner
by Carrie Comer

Sue* was a woman in the shelter with her two children due to abuse in the home. While Sue was at Choices, she participated in our parenting classes and her children attended support group sessions. The in-house parenting course covers parenting styles, developmental milestones, routines, and nutrition. The children learned to identify and express their emotions to better heal from the domestic violence they witnessed.

Jill* was another mom who completed the 5-session parenting program while in shelter. Jill faced challenges including prohibitive childcare cost. As a United Way Community Impact grant recipient, Choices was able to cover her childcare fees. Jill was then able to maintain her employment while navigating other critical issues in her life.

*Names are changed for confidentiality and safety.

Breaking Silence
by Tina Knupp

“What happens in the family stays in the family.” I have heard this multiple times throughout my years at Choices. But I also hear stories of courage. Courage to talk about your pain. Courage to talk about your husband, family member, acquaintance, etc. taking advantage of you. Courage to talk about your partner’s verbal and emotional abuse while you fix supper, do the laundry, take care the house, the children, and work a full time job. Courage to disclose abuse during adolescent years.

I also recognize courage when a rape survivor talks with a forensic nurse about the assault. I see courage when a rape survivor talks with an investigator, the Commonwealth Attorney, and then testifies in court facing the rapist while a defense attorney cross-examines her/him. Since July 2020, Choices has worked with 89 survivors of sexual violence, 62 adults that experienced childhood sexual abuse and 22 children exposed to sexual abuse.

Domestic and sexual violence survivors are the most courageous people I know. They don’t want us to fix it. They simply need someone to hear them. Believe them. Support them. Intimate partner violence is a heavy burden to carry alone. I am honored to help our clients carry this burden.
Creating Safe Online Spaces

by Tina Knupp

The world is moving at such a fast pace. It is hard to keep up with all of the technology! New apps are created every day. These innovations make our lives easier but may be dangerous, too. Online predators use apps designed for pre-teens to lure and trap kids. Parents and those in parental or supervisory roles should continue to educate ourselves and monitor their family’s online presence.

MeetMe is a social media dating app that encourages people to meet in person based on location. Live.Me is a live streaming app that uses geolocation to share videos. Users can use “coins” to “pay” minors for photographs. Calculator+ is one of several apps used to hide pictures, videos, files and browser history. Kik kids can bypass traditional texting features using the app. “Kik” allows unlimited access to anyone, anywhere, anytime.

APP ALERT!

MeetMe: Too risky for kids! This app is designed for ages 17+ to connect based on interests.
Live.Me: Children could be exposed to age inappropriate content through live streaming.
Calculator+: Works like a real calculator but acts as a vault that requires a unique passcode to access.
Kik: One of the most dangerous apps for teens! It’s privacy settings are perfect conditions for abusive predators.

A Better Tomorrow

by Carrie Comer

This year’s Child Abuse Prevention Month theme in Virginia is “Growing a Better Tomorrow for All Children, Together”. The theme highlights everyone’s role in disrupting the cycles of child abuse, neglect, and poverty by strengthening Virginia’s families and communities. From July - December 2020, Choices served 10 children directly by domestic violence in the shelter. Children and their moms received nutrition classes, parenting classes, homework help, and support group.

We are also doing our part to promote awareness in April! Look for blue pinwheels placed at Luray Middle School, Page County Middle School, Luray High School, and Page County High School to raise awareness of the issue of child abuse. The pinwheel has come to serve as the symbol of the great childhoods we want for all children. You can take part by planting pinwheel gardens or distributing pinwheels at local physically-distanced events. On Thursday, April 1, individuals and organizations across the country will band together to make a visible commitment to preventing child abuse and helping create great childhoods nationwide by wearing blue.
Choices is an 18-bed facility. COVID-19 protocols and guidelines restrict the agency from operating at full capacity. We have nevertheless continued to provide shelter, hotline support, court advocacy, and individual support services to those affected by domestic and sexual violence.

Choices' team members work hard to provide empathy, comfort, support, and encouragement to trauma survivors while adhering to the Center for Disease Control COVID-19 safety requirements. We noticed wearing a mask had a re-traumatizing effect on clients who might have experienced strangulation. Choices staff created, “maskfirmations” – a simple breathing and grounding exercise to use if triggered while wearing a mask. Clients improved their ability to handle mask-related trauma and applied the breathing technique to respond to other trauma triggering events.

EPPEC Strides
by Felicia Housden

COVID-19 has changed how we do prevention at Choices. Unable to get out into the community, we adapted by taking Domestic Violence and Sexual Violence Prevention online. The Prevention Team introduced virtual The Choices Prevention Center on July 10th, 2020.

The Prevention Team has made big changes to our site since then. We changed the name to Engaging Page: The Prevention Education Connection (EPPEC). We have a new look and graphics and streamlined access to our resources through easily identifiable categories. The Prevention Team introduced the updated site at the beginning of February and saw a 200% increase in traffic. We invite you to search EPPEC. Resources relate to prevention work, healing trauma, and social-emotional learning. There is information and resources for teachers, families, community members, and allied professionals. Do not forget to take a survey or two.

Search EPPEC on the internet, or go directly to https://sites.google.com/view/eppec. You can also access EPPEC through the Choices website and clicking on the Services menu.

Unmasking Trauma
by All Staff

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Executive Director
Retired Director Debbie Dart dodges the spotlight, but she worked tirelessly behind the scenes for more than 23 years to support domestic and sexual violence survivors in Page County. Debbie opened the emergency shelter in her first year with just two staff. We have now grown into a trauma-informed agency with eight full-time and three part-time staff. Our shelter has helped thousands of people in Page County to escape violence and remake their lives. Deb’s leadership also raised awareness of domestic and sexual violence within schools, churches, and civic and community groups.

We were very sad to see Debbie retire in January, but, have wholeheartedly welcomed Vanessa Kulick, as the new Executive Director. Vanessa comes to Choices with 12-years of international violence prevention, grant/staff management, and diplomatic experience at the U.S. Department of State and World Bank.

Court Advocate
Lindy Swinson retired after 17 years with Choices. She was the Court Advocate for 14 of those 17 years. Lindy was well versed in the legal system and was a strong advocate of the clients that were involved in the judicial system.

Leona Dean is our new Court Advocate. Leona is born and raised in Page County. Her experience with the courts and school system and human services degree is an asset to our work.

It is with a heavy heart that we extend our deepest condolences to the family of Officer "Nick" Winum, the Stanley Police Department, and all brothers and sisters in blue.

If you need support dealing with this trauma, we are here for you.

Comings and Goings
by Jacalyn Lee
April 2021

Sexual Assault Awareness & Child Abuse Prevention Month

Thank you!

For contributing $500 or more in monetary & in-kind donations in Fiscal Year 2021!

- Warren & Kate Coopersmith
- The Coopersmith Foundation
- Andersen Corporate Foundation
- BCT LLC
- The County of Page
- The Town of Shenandoah
- Luray Rotary Club
- LD & B Insurance
- Luray Caverns Employees
- Valley Eye Clinic
- Valley Automation
- Compass Tea Room
- Bethlehem Christian Church
- Christ Episcopal Church
- Page United Methodist Church
- Mt. Zion Church of the Brethren
- Luray United Methodist Church
- Ida Grove Gospel Church
- Alfred & Eleanor Ames
- Christine Andreae
- David & Carol Angier
- Mildred Brumback
- James Robert Davis
- Dr. John Dedman
- Kathy Deigan
- Patricia Dougans
- James Graves
- Helen Harman
- Clyde Humphrey
- Bill & Lucia King
- Kim McNeely
- William Menefee
- Brian Plum
- Mark Reed
- Alfred Reilly
- Martha Reinsfeider
- Mike Salvino
- Barb Stewart
- Walt & Sharon Surratt
- Phil & Annie Windzek

Advocacy Services Provided by Choices

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<tr>
<td>Emotional Advocacy</td>
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<td>Financial Assistance</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
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By the Numbers

Current Fiscal Year to date

We collected the data provided from July 2020 through March 2021. Even a pandemic could not stop Choices’ advocates from providing crucial services to victims and survivors.

However, a significant 20% grant funding cut is pending for the next fiscal year. These funds keep our doors open and services running. We will need help from our community of supporters to offset the drastic budget cut. Let’s work together to end domestic and sexual violence in Page County.

Meet the Crew

The Board

- Chairperson | Cathy Weaver
- Vice-Chairperson | Barb Stewart
- Treasurer | Amanda Story
- Secretary | Gena Comer

- Board Members:
  - Brian Plum
  - Audre H. Scott King
  - Stephanie Lillard
  - Caleb Routhier
  - Eleanor Ames
  - Aaron Cubbage
  - Erich Bennett
  - Dr. John Dedman, PhD.

The Staff

- Executive Director | Vanessa Kulick
- Services Coordinator | Robin Stevens
- Volunteer & Outreach | Becca Frasier
- Children’s Services | Carrie Comer
- Sexual Violence Services | Tina Knupp
- Court Advocate | Leona Dean
- Prevention & Dom. Viol. Advocate | Felicia Housden
- Housing Services | Jacalyn Lee

- Shelter Managers:
  - Jennifer Mayhew
  - Mary Rothgeb
  - Sarah Meany

Meet the Crew

We welcome our new board members and staff and appreciate the time and effort it takes to support victims and survivors of intimate partner violence.
April is
SEXUAL ASSAULT AWARENESS MONTH

Consent is realizing that vulnerability is not an opportunity.

–Dr. Gail Stern

Day of Action
Tuesday, April 6, 2021
This year, we’re asking everyone to wear teal, the color of sexual assault awareness and prevention, on the Sexual Assault Awareness Month Day of Action. Wearing teal — whether that’s a teal shirt, ribbon, or another accessory — will serve as a conversation starter for important issues about consent, respect, and supporting survivors. Share a selfie of your teal look online using hashtags #SAAM, #Ask, and #Teal

Start By Believing
Wednesday, April 7, 2021
Believing survivors of sexual assault is crucial to ending the silence that surrounds sexual violence. It’s time to start believing.