

Look out: This lady justice vows to wield sword to break the ...

News

Look out: This lady justice vows to wield sword to break the silence**Being a survivor herself, Durban attorney is determined to help victims of domestic and sexual abuse**

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Shout out Durban attorney Karen Botha is launching a campaign #breakthesilence to encourage women who have been abused to speak out.

Image: Thuli Dlamini

Sexual abuse and violence was “normal” for Durban-based attorney Karen Botha, and she believes it has become the norm for so many others.

“It was only in my 30s that I started to confront everything that I had experienced, that I started to talk about it. And that is when my life changed,” she says.

And when she talks about her snowballing campaign #breakthesilence, she practises what she preaches and does not shy away from her own truths.

“Firstly I was sexually abused between the ages of four and 10 by our neighbours’ four sons. This ended because we moved away.

“I was bullied at school right through high school. I found solace with my horse. In Grade 11 I was battling with science and my teacher offered me private lessons during break and after school. He became physical with me, so I moved to a lower grade to avoid him.

“I was verbally, emotionally and psychologically abused by my husband after my son was born. I finally plucked up the courage to leave in my early 30s, but I was broken.”

It had a massive impact on her life as she repressed the sexual abuse as a child until she was in her 30s.

“I had flashbacks and nightmares which I did not understand. The first person I told was my husband, who told me I was making it up.”

It was only then that she finally saw a psychologist who helped her deal with being a typical victim of child sexual abuse – drinking too much, partying too hard, indulging in risky sexual behaviour and not being able to hold down a

job or relationship for long.

“It was only when I finally spoke about it that I was able to see the destruction it had caused in my life and how it influenced my behaviour.”

I wanted to specialise in family law so I could help other women who have gone through what I had.

Karen Botha

At the time Botha was working in the clothing industry. Getting to grips with her experience paved the way for her to “follow her dream” and she studied to become an attorney.

“I wanted to specialise in family law so I could help other women who have gone through what I had.”

From her experiences in her law practice – and a support group she started two years ago – Botha says intimate partner abuse is on the increase.

“And it does not discriminate on race, religion, economic status, age, etc. I have photos of clients who have been beaten black and blue. I have recordings of a husband saying he would rather go to jail for murder than give his wife R5. So many women are threatened with death if they talk, or if they threaten to leave.”

And so the #breakthesilence idea was born – a campaign for social change.

“The idea was at first just to have a picnic and invite a few friends and ask them to invite a few friends, and so on. But this slowly just morphed into a campaign. As more and more people became aware of what I was doing, it just started growing,” Botha says.

The inaugural event, with guest speakers including rape survivor Jess Foord and “dad coach” Craig Wilkinson, takes place at the Shongweni Club on December 2.

The problem starts in our homes and the only way to break the cycle is to teach our boys how to be powerful without being violent and to teach our girls how a man should treat a woman.

Karen Botha

Botha has lofty aims: She wants to facilitate more support groups in more communities, and to find “homes” where people can go to escape abuse.

“I also want to improve the court systems. Education is key: I want to be able to go to schools and even universities and teach the kids about domestic violence, sexual grooming, sexual abuse and bullying – the problem starts in our homes and the only way to break the cycle is to teach our boys how to be powerful without being violent, and to teach our girls how a man should treat a woman.

“I have recently had a new client, a 16-year-old , who has been sexually groomed by a science teacher for a few years. It is a massive problem for our youth. They are brought up thinking this is normal. It was my normal and my life was a train wreck,” she says.

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