

Corrie M. Avila, MSW
Registered Clinical Social Work Intern

Outside my front door lies a lush butterfly garden that I planted. My hope was to help increase the rapidly dwindling population of Monarch butterflies. While observing the butterfly garden, it was enriching to watch the different stages of caterpillars. Some would even grow up to be big fat caterpillars! One hot summer's day, I came home from running errands with my son, and we watched with horror as a wasp was eating our very hungry caterpillar. My son started yelling at the wasp and began to cry as we watched helplessly. We were unable to do anything to save the caterpillar because it was already gone.

Later that year, I had the pleasure and privilege of working under a Community Mental Health grant. This grant enabled me to stretch my wings out of the clinical office and into our local Domestic Violence (DV) shelter. Even with varying areas of experience over the past ten years, I was completely unprepared for the world of DV and the level of trauma and intensity that each DV survivor brings.

The multifaceted roles I participated in within the DV shelter included providing crisis therapy, offering parenting support and running the weekly community DV therapy group. Every time I thought I had heard something that was the "worst thing anyone would have to face," I then heard something even more egregious and traumatic. Many of these DV survivors have stared in the face of death and lived to speak about it. DV does not discriminate against race, financial status, sexual orientation or religion. DV has a reach that is wide and far. Just this past week our local sleepy little beach town experienced a husband who shot and murdered his wife in their own home.

After coming home one evening from an especially arduous DV group, I saw several new baby caterpillars on the milkweed. As I looked closer, I saw one baby hanging from what looked like a spider web. I don't know what came over me, but I dragged that potted milkweed into my house and put it in my kitchen, babies and all. I couldn't fix or control what these DV survivors were facing or going through, but I sure could create a safe environment for those baby caterpillars to grow and flourish away from outside threats.

Since that evening, I have had a lot of growth. I've become better at managing my own vicarious traumatization as well as improving my self-care. There were five babies on that milkweed, and all five made it to adulthood. It was therapeutic to be able to foster them to butterflies and then release them into the world.

Monarch butterflies are categorized as "near threatened" and have recently been petitioned to be on the endangered species list. Another fact is that the Monarch caterpillar will sometimes use its spinneret to spin silk as a defense mechanism. So you see, when I thought that the baby caterpillar needed to be rescued, it was actually using its own internal defenses. The ultimate lesson is this: Inside each DV

survivor, lies great, amazing and wonderful strength. Sometimes all they need is a little guidance, appropriate therapy, and most importantly someone to believe in them.