

# Court Watch monitors domestic abuse cases



## Community Voices

Ann Pinna  
Guest columnist

*Editor's note: "Community Voices" is a regular column featuring local non-profit organizations that offer services to the community in an effort to effect change and make a difference. If you represent such a group and would like to participate in this feature, email bfarrell@poughkeepsiejournal.com; include "Community Voices" in the subject line.*

The murder of Linda Riccardulli by her longtime abusive husband in Dutchess County nearly a decade ago caught the attention of many, together with sobering statistics: One in every three women experience domestic violence in their lifetime and an average of 20 people are physically abused by an intimate partner every minute. Many felt then, and now, that there is an urgent need to do something about domestic violence and advocate for women who cannot speak for themselves.

Though advocacy programs for domestic-violence victims existed in the Hudson Valley at that time, there were still concerns that the legal system was not providing the protections victims needed. Issues existed over visitation, custody and firearms, which to some seemed to favor the abuser instead of protecting the victim.

Recognizing this need and with leadership from Grace Smith House and Family Services, the Poughkeepsie branch of the American Association of University Women, a national philanthropic, educational and research organization whose mission is to advance female empowerment and gender equity for women and girls, organized its "Stand Up to Domestic Violence — Court Watch" initiative in 2010. AAUW volunteers gathered to learn more about domestic violence and train to become court monitors. Their goal was to document systemic issues in the local justice system that

result in the re-victimization of women and children who have suffered domestic abuse and to make sure they are treated fairly and justly.

Eight years later, Court Watch is still flourishing. Today, the local AAUW Court Watch team consists of 11 monitors who regularly monitor hundreds of cases in Dutchess Family Court, fill out observation forms, and, from their collective data, produce a quantitative analysis which they share with judges and other court personnel. Their purpose is to hold up a mirror to the court, bring about greater accountability and make suggestions for improvements.

In 2014, Court Watch was invited to partner with the Fund for Modern Courts, a statewide court reform organization in New York City, and, after several hundred observations and analysis of the data, was able to make assessments about possible courtroom improvements. A collaborative document was issued that was shared with the judges in Family Court and publicized in the Poughkeepsie Journal. According to monitors, the document brought about changes such as the need for a clearer explanation of orders of protection, maintenance of interpretation and translation services, courtroom decorum and questioning of firearms.

Although there are court monitoring teams across the country, AAUW Court Watch in Poughkeepsie has been noted for its excellence in monitoring and for its comprehensive training. In 2016, Court Watch was awarded the Samuel J. Duboff Memorial Award at a reception at Dorsey & Whitney in Manhattan in recognition of non-lawyers who make "extraordinary contributions toward improving the quality of justice in New York state."

AAUW Court Watch is happy to share its knowledge with others seeking advice on how to develop their own court-watch programs. Materials were shared with Jessica Flynn, director of law and policy for the YWCA in Kalamazoo, Michigan, who is creating a court-watch program on human traf-



AAUW Court Watch team members receive the Samuel J. Duboff Memorial Award in New York City. From left, Margaret Nijhuis, Chairwoman Ann Pinna, Mara Goldstone, Sandy Lash and Barry R. Bohrer, chairman, the Fund for Modern Courts. SUBMITTED PHOTOS



From left, Elizabeth Graham, Joanne Dyson, Sandy Sherman and Flo Mondanaro (in foreground) are members of the Court Watch program.

ficking. Attorneys from the Center for Court Innovation in New York City are utilizing our materials to develop a "tool kit" and training guide for dissemination in the United States and around the world.

Court Watch encourages others to become active in their local courts and raise awareness about domestic violence in their communities. According to the Poughkeepsie Court Watch team, "Court monitors can help keep victims safe, bring about improvements in the courts, and promote justice and fair treatment for all."

*Ann Pinna is the chairwoman of Court Watch, the American Association of University Women Poughkeepsie Branch.*