

Newsmaker: Farrah Fawcett

Our January speaker, Lt. Steve Searcy of the Montgomery Police Department, highlighted the importance of the movie *The Burning Bed* in bringing the issue of domestic violence out of the shadows and into our collective awareness. The movie was based on a true story and starred Farrah Fawcett as Francine Hughes.

Fran's husband Mickey was abusive; he beat her; he demeaned; he controlled her. Fran repeatedly tried to escape the abusive relationship, and once was fairly successful, though only for a time. Early on, her own mother told her that she needed to stay with her husband. Mickey's family occasionally challenged him, but always ran to his defense when law enforcement was involved. And, where family failed, law enforcement did no better.

Once, the police arrived to find Mickey beating Fran violently outside their home. In a rage, he fought them as well. Fran is then seen in the office of a bureaucrat. She asks about criminal prosecution for attempted murder, and is told that, since Mickey was on probation, he would face jail time for the incident with the police. It's as if he didn't hear her say that Mickey had tried to kill her. It is as if the world didn't hear.

Ultimately, one night in March 1977, after Mickey had twice beaten her, forbidden her from continuing with school (a key to her own self worth), and then "requested" sex, Fran poured gasoline around the bed where he slept. The house burned, with the man she still loved inside. She and her children were free. (He had never beaten the children, but they heard and sometimes saw the abuse he inflicted on their mother.)

In the movie, a jury acquitted Fran based on a defense of temporary insanity. Her lawyer had said that the temporary insanity argument was the way to go, as there was no precedent to support a theory of self defense. Could Fran be acting in self defense even as her husband slept? *The Burning Bed* makes a case for that conclusion.

Of course, you only reach the question after the criminal justice system and social supports have failed miserably. Had there been a place, like the Family

Justice Center envisioned for Montgomery and discussed by Lt. Searcy at our last meeting, Fran and her children would have had a non-violent way to safety. As it was, every path she had tried led to a dead-end, even as she came to fear for her life.

For her role as Francine Hughes, Farrah Fawcett was nominated for an Emmy and for a Golden Globe. Of course, during 40-year career in entertainment, Fawcett appeared in many television shows and movies, and was nominated for a number of awards. She guest-starred in *I Dream of Jeannie* and *The Six Million Dollar Man*, before her role as Jill Munroe in *Charlie's Angels* brought her fame and sent sales of the iconic photo of her in the red swimsuit into the millions.

Fawcett was born in Corpus Christi, Texas, to a homemaker and an oil field contractor. She began her acting career in 1969. She was married to Lee Majors from 1973 through 1982. For most of the years after that, she was romantically linked to Ryan O'Neal, with whom she had a son. Fawcett passed away last June from cancer at the age of 62.