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“Telling Amy's Story” – Documentary Transcript

Mariska Hargitay: Hi. I'm Mariska Hargitay. When I started on Law & Order: Special Victim's Unit, violence and abuse had never played a significant role in my life. And then there I was, immersed every day in the worst that people can do to each other. But it wasn't just the scripts that pressed the tragedy of these acts in to my consciousness, it was also the horrifying statistics; and the letters and emails I began receiving from victims of abuse sharing their own personal stories. Domestic violence usually happens behind closed doors, or hides in plain sight beyond the reach of family, neighbors, friends and co-workers who feel helpless. In the true story you are about to see, a dedicated police detective and her colleagues reassemble all the disparate clues that might have -- but failed -- to come together to prevent this heart-wrenching tragedy.

Det. Fishel: The ending of her life is the beginning. At that moment the process starts, and we build backwards. And we're trying to fill in what was happening right before that death. And then what was happening right before that...and right before that.

[Hinge squeaks]

Victim's Mother: He seemed like a nice guy. But, you know, I didn't know, you know, he was an alcoholic, and I didn't know that he was going to be abusive and...
So...

Det. Fishel: Everyone looks at the picture-perfect postcard of State College, and for the most part, that's really what it is. Central Pennsylvania is a very rural area, and then in the middle of this is this community that popped up around Penn State University. It's not a high-crime area.

I mean you can walk to the grocery store at night if you wanted to. Because it's this idyllic community, they refer to it as the Happy Valley. Everybody's here happy.

Nobody -- nothing ever goes wrong in Happy Valley.

But underneath of that, there is crime occurring, and there's violent crime occurring. And, unfortunately, a lot of that crime is within households. In the last two years, my unit has handled over 500 cases of domestic violence. And for a couple of years, all of our homicides in Centre County were domestic-violence related. Meaning that if you were not in a domestic violence relationship, pretty safe area. But if you can't be safe in your own home, does it matter if your community is safe?

In 2004, we sat down and did the review of the death of Amy Homan McGee. Friends, family, and co-workers of Mrs. McGee were brought in to talk about that death. One person's talking about an incident that happened in '99, one person's talking about an incident that happened in 2000. Another participant's talking about something that happened years before that.

How could all of these things have been going on, and she still died?

And the only way I could get my brain around it was to try to sit down, lay it all out, and walk through the process of Amy's life. I tried to dive into it and make it make sense to myself. And once it made sense to myself, it came together in this very streaming narrative of Amy's life. And this was making so much more sense when we walked through what Amy was experiencing in the manner she was experiencing it, so that we could see the times when maybe something could have been different.

And we said, "People have to hear this."

Sue Cromwell, Home Store Co-Worker: You know, you can tell. You can tell that some people are just there and others really pay attention to detail, and Amy's one of those. She always followed up, she always answered your questions. And I always thought Amy was very, very conscientious, very hard worker, intelligent, young woman, you know, to be doing the things that she wanted to do.

Amy and Vince, I think, this was the early part of their relationship. So, I think the attention that he put forth, it seemed like very positive attention. She seemed to be excited about it, that he would stop in and ask where she was, and he was concerned about, you know, her whereabouts, or he wanted to see her. So, it seemed like, being younger and in love, it was a very positive thing at the time.

Det. Fishel: So, in 2004, we did a case review on a couple -- Amy and Vincent McGee. At the time that Amy was graduating from Penn State, Vincent was coming back state-side and discharging from the military.

The two then met while Amy was working at a home improvement store, and Vincent was working for an armored car service, making the money delivery and pick up at that home improvement store.

Victim's Mother: He was just a different type of person. She had a couple friends, you know, that they would get together and do something. But it was, you know, after a while, he would take her to work. He would go pick her up after work. It was like, you know, she had to be with him all the time.

Sue Cromwell: I just thought some of his behaviors that he exhibited, you know, with the gun and the posturing and some of those things -- I just thought he was a little bit off. But I didn't know him very well. Those were only behaviors that you saw when he would come in.

Det. Fishel: In September of that year, the home improvement store sent a letter to the armored car service asking that Vincent no longer be the one who brings the money and picks the money up. And the letter indicated there was a conflict of interest.

Now when I talked to her co-workers, I asked them, "What is this conflict of interest? What would happen when Vincent would show up there?" And they told me that Amy would become very stressed -- it would interfere with her workday. She would have to worry about if she was talking to a male co-worker, if she was in the break room with males, if she didn't get to the door fast enough when he walked in, if she was talking to a male customer.

Sue Cromwell: And I remember one specific time that it was at the end of an evening and she appeared to be a little bit concerned about...she seemed to be anxious about Vince -- maybe not being there when he was in the store.

And I just remember saying to her, "You know, Amy, don't worry about that. I mean you have a lot of life ahead of you," meaning that you know you have a lot of opportunity. And she just kind of laughed it off, and just said "That's Vince."

Sgt. David Mulfinger: I didn't know that Amy Homan was Amy McGee. And a matter of fact, she had grown. Last I saw her was years before. But when she showed up with her father, of course, it all clicked into place for me that night.

Det. Fishel: In December of 1998, she needs help. Vince is intoxicated, she wants to leave. She doesn't know what to do. So, her parents go over to the house, she gets in the car, and she starts to tell them about his alcohol abuse, and the things that he's been doing, and what he did when she tried to leave.

Victim's Mom: She, you know, didn't feel safe. You know, she wanted to leave, and he tried to, you know, stop her when we left. And pulling away from the house, he took his fist and smacked the picture window, and broke the one section of it.

Det. Fishel: And her parents convince her to go to the police station with them. So, they drive to the police station. And now she's in the car in the police station in the parking lot, and they're trying to convince her to go in and tell the police what is happening. She doesn't know if what the police can do will be better or will make it worse. And, eventually, the officer comes out into the parking lot, talks to Amy. Thankfully, he knew Amy since she was a little girl.

Sgt. Mulfinger: We had a barbecue in the backyard, and I can remember Amy running around as a five- or six-year-old. She was the apple of her father's eye. Being an only child, she...he loved her dearly -- and it showed -- because she'd be running around and he'd be, let her go for a little bit and then he'd say -- tell her to calm down or to, you know, knock it off. And then he'd look at me and he'd smirk, you know, just because they're so full of energy. But, initially, I'm not sure that Amy even wanted to come to the police.

She didn't know what to do. She called her parents, and they came and got her, and then Mr. Homan just brought her right over to our station. She was saying that her husband had been drinking most of the day, that he was breaking things up around the house. The threat she told me that he made to her was, "if you take my kid away from me, I'll kill you." And, at the time, there's a condition on that threat, and the D.A. would not prosecute those type of threats. So, after speaking with her, I strongly urged her to get a PFA.

Det. Fishel: So, the officer takes Amy before a local magistrate, and an emergency protective order is issued by the judge. And that order calls for the relinquishment of his weapons, and the eviction of him from the residence, and directs that he have no contact with Amy until there's a hearing or a continued order.

Officers go out to the house. When they get there, he's immediately aggressive.

Sgt. Mulfinger: Several times, I asked him, you know, "Mr. McGee, where are your weapons in the house?"

"Do you want me to tear your whole house apart, or do you just want to tell me where they are?" And he wouldn't answer me so, the first -- Sergeant Albright watched him while I started searching the residence for a weapon.

The first place I went was the chair that he had been sitting in. And underneath where his right leg would have been was a loaded handgun. While I was gathering up the weapons, Sergeant Albright was just kind of keeping an eye on Mr. McGee. And I noticed several times as I'm going in and out of rooms that, and I can hear a cell phone ringing.

Det. Fische: He's on the phone, and he's complaining, and he's angry, and he's agitated. And he's complaining about her getting the police involved, and she's making this happen, and this is all her fault.

Sgt. Mulfinger: As I was going out the door, I noticed that he was on the phone again. And he made a comment something along the lines of, "Thanks for..."

"...thanks for taking my guns."

Det. Fishel: While they're loading their cars out in front of the house, their dispatching center calls them over the radio.

Amy just called. Vincent's calling her on the phone.

Sgt. Mulfinger: So, I called her, and she said, "He's been calling me." Well, he said that he had another gun that we didn't find, and that he was going to kill himself.

"And why are you doing this to me, and why'd you take my guns from me?" Well, that's the comment I had just heard him make.

Det. Fishel: The judge said, "Don't have any contact with her," and while we're still here, you're calling her and continuing this abuse? So, they go back inside, and they violate him on that protective order.

At the hearing the next day, the judge says, "Yes, you are in contempt of court," and holds him accountable for the time he spent in jail.

No additional jail time, but time served.

Sgt. Mulfinger: I believe this was the first time that she actually took a step, that night to protect herself and her child. So, that was a huge step for her to take.

And...I'm sure it was very difficult for her.

Det. Fishel: Because it had happened over a weekend, the emergency protection that Amy had was expiring that Monday, the 21st of December. Amy needed to go and ask for additional protection if she wanted that protection to continue -- and she did.

So, on December 21st, she went and she outlined the history of what had been happening. And when she outlined that history, she went back for nine months. She recounted him pulling the baby out of her arms, him choking her, him breaking things in the house, threatening to burn the house down, threatening to kill her.

Honorable David Grine: The person filing the PFA -- and a lot of times, it's because of the way they've been treated -- think it's their fault and it's their failure.

There are people that finally file the PFA, and when you look at the background of this, you're sitting there thinking, "Why didn't they file this thing two years ago?"

Det. Fishel: So, even though we know now what had been happening, quite often, we don't know it at the time. There's more occurring in these cases than we're ever aware of.

Victim's Mom: She never talked about being abused or anything like that. We never learned until it, you know, came out from co-workers that she was in an abusive setting.

I mean, there was time that she had some black and blue marks on her arms, but she told us that that was because she went to the storage where they had stuff stored, and was looking for something, and boxes fell on her.

Det. Fishel: December 28th, the couple appears together before the judge, asking that that protection order be dropped. Now, imagine this relationship where there's this escalation, and these put-downs and these insults and these threats.

"I'm going to burn the house down, I'm going to kill you," I'm choking you, I'm physically violent with you, I'm breaking things in your house.

And now you're sitting next to me, in the courtroom, and I'm telling you, "Tell the judge you're not afraid of me. Tell the judge he should give me my guns back."

So, Amy's stuck. So, Amy tells the judge she's not afraid, tells the judge to give him his guns back -- and the judge does.

Now, Amy doesn't understand all of the nuances of the legal system. She doesn't understand that the only reason the judge has the guns is because of the protective order. All she knows is that as she's sitting in that courtroom with her batterer right next to her, she is watching a judge give him those guns.

Honorable David Grine: Guns are never returned until someone files a request to have the guns returned. And once I receive that request, I serve a copy on the District Attorney and the victim -- the other party -- and they come in. But there's nothing under the law that really allows us to keep the guns once the PFA has expired or been withdrawn.

Victim's Mom: You know, it's...it's like when you talked to her and he wasn't around. It was like she was trying to get out of the situation. I think she knew that he would try to do something, but she wouldn't tell us that.

Det. Fishel: The couples now living in Uniontown. They have moved to Uniontown from the State College area because Vincent's family is in Uniontown. In October, Pennsylvania State Police gets involved. In the Bedford barracks, they're called to an incident that occurred on State Route 220. While they're in the vehicle, a heated argument starts -- that's right out of the police report -- a "heated argument." And in the course of that argument, Vincent takes a handgun, discharges it into the passenger window of the vehicle.

Amy's driving the vehicle, and the baby is strapped in a car seat in the back of the car. When they take Vincent into custody, they take him before a magistrate, and he is lodged in the local jail for \$5,000. But the interesting thing about the date that that happened -- October 18th -- was supposed to be Amy's first day at work at a new job. Now, thankfully, her employer did extend her training day, and they let her continue and complete her training starting a little bit later.

John Bolton, Phone Store Co-Worker: I think one of the first indications I had that there was abuse with Amy was, she could never be working alone with a male. And then just the things that Amy would have to do. She had to report in when she left for lunch, and by report in, I mean she had to call to her husband, she had to call when she got back from lunch -- so he had to know where she was at all moments of time.

She had to miss work a few times because of Vince, or she had no one to take care of her children because he had done something.

As an employee, she performed her job very well.

Det. Fishel: In January of 2000, an employee at the phone store documents with his employer, "Vincent keeps calling and calling here. It's interfering with our workday, we don't know what to do, it's interfering with the business of the store."

John Bolton: He called into the store and asked to speak to his wife. She had just left for lunch. She didn't call him like she was supposed to, and she turned her phone off because she didn't want to talk to him.

So, she was out at lunch, he called into the store, and I said, "Okay, I'm sorry, she's at lunch." And he said, "Well, go get her." And I said, "Well, you know, no. She's left the store, she's at lunch."

The next thing, another line in the phone rings -- in the store rings, I should say. Another employee answers the phone, and it's Vince on the phone with her asking to speak to Amy.

And she starts to explain the same thing -- "she's not in the store, she's left for lunch." And we're both talking to this guy at the same time so he's got his, probably, his cell phone and his home phone going, calling the store looking for her.

And I had mentioned to him at that time that he needed to stop calling the store like this for her, he was disrupting business, and he was going to get her in trouble. And then he mentioned that maybe he would come down and take care of me, meaning, you know, I won't use the "kick my..." the rest, you can fill in the blanks. So, I thought, "Boy, this is really something."

Det. Fishel: In March, Vincent's granted ARD. And in the court system in Pennsylvania, ARD means Accelerated Rehabilitative Disposition. And, basically, that's a really fancy way of saying, "If you be good for 18 months, we'll erase this like it never happened."

And this is for shooting a gun off in a car -- in a moving car on a state highway. What was the court system thinking? Why would they agree to throw this away?

They didn't have any choice.

This is the best they could get because Amy was not able to testify. And you'll never hear me in any of my cases that I prosecute, talk about a victim who won't testify. Because if we could guarantee a victim that they would be safe, that the outcome of the court case would be better for them, then I believe that a victim would testify.

But we can't guarantee that.

April of 2001, the couple's second child is born. In June, they got in an argument, Vincent was intoxicated, and when Amy tried to leave, Vincent jumped in the bed of the truck. So she drives to the police station to ask for their help in her, her toddler child, and her infant child escaping to State College to her parent's house. So the officer separates the two, drives Vincent back home, and allows Amy to continue on to her parent's house.

In August, the Uniontown police are dispatched to the local hospital. Amy is at the hospital with a broken nose. She tells the officers that her husband Vincent punched her in the nose in an argument. The officer doesn't arrest him, but does give Amy some information about protective orders and tells Amy to call the Uniontown police if the problems continue when she gets home.

A few days later, Amy goes to another doctor for a follow-up appointment for the injury to her face. She tells them she got hit in the face with a softball.

Now think about this, when you're the victim of domestic violence and you finally have the courage to disclose to a police officer in a hospital bed what happened to you -- and nothing changes -- are you going to keep telling this story?

Amy's still working at the Uniontown store; she has been putting in for transfers trying to move back to the State College area.

And in August, she is granted an emergency transfer from the Uniontown store to the State College store. And that transfer's being made so she can escape Vincent. What the employer doesn't know is that Vincent goes with her.

Victim's Mom: You know, like, when she came back to State College, she had told us it was her and the kids coming.

And then, you know, she called us when she got here, and we went up, and he was there, too.

And I said, "How come he's here?" And he -- You know, she said, "Well, he decided he wants to be a family."

Janene Miller, Phone Store Co-Worker: When I first met her, Amy came to the store her first day of work, she had a black and blue eye. She had claimed that she had been hit by a softball.

But her work ethic and everything was really good. It was really good, so she kind of fit in with us right off the bat.

Denise Thal, Phone Store Co-Worker: I was hired as a customer service rep, and she was the one that trained me in my position. And I got to know her really well.

Janene Miller: When she first started there, when she thought we didn't know, it was like, "Oh, yeah, Vince is a good man." "Oh, yeah, you know, this kind of thing," but you do that.

Det. Fishel: And when she transitions into that new store, her co-workers are now helping her transition by posting fake schedules for Vincent so that he doesn't know that she's working late with males, or that she's closing the store with a male, or she's on a shift with a male -- which tells us something.

If you need to post a work schedule for someone on-site, that means he's coming there.

Denise Thal: The first time that I think I realized that there were some situations going on with Amy and her husband, was when she made a phone call from the store. And she started yelling her husband's name on the phone. And after she got off the phone, she said that her husband had passed out on the floor and that he was supposed to be babysitting the boys. And the one little boy answered the telephone, and she had him take it over -- take the phone over to his dad, and she kept trying to get him awake. And she left the store a little bit after that to go home and get the boys and take them to her mom's.

Janene Miller: You can't force a person that's being abused to come forward -- One, because they're scared, two, because they have no self-esteem, and, three, they don't know if other people are going to believe what they're saying.

So, I had told her my story. And I had told her that I actually had just left, in April of that year, my husband of 21 years, of domestic violence.

It was funny. I guess I wanted Amy -- when I learned about her -- I wanted her to experience the happiness that I felt, believe it or not, the morning that I left.

Denise Thal: The one time that really stuck out in my mind was the time that she came in and she had bruises across both of her arms. And she said that she was pulling something off the top of a shelf in a closet, and it fell down and hit her.

And later she admitted that...that he had hit her with a baseball bat.

Janene Miller: And it did kind of effect, not her, the way she worked when she was at work, but, like, she would be late or she would have to leave or she would call off.

You know, and you could just kind of see the signs without her actually coming out and saying, you know, that this was going on. I mean, she did talk about Vince's drinking and -- but she always denied

the abuse, you know -- the physical part of it and everything. Until one day that she finally had told us that she was not hit by a softball, that Vince had done it.

And I think maybe that that was a turning point for Amy.

Det. Fishel: In September -- September 1st of 2001 -- Amy's father -- Garth Homan -- calls the State College police. And he calls the State College police because he needs help with his drunk son-in-law. And he tells the police, "He's drunk. I want him out of here." I want him out of this house. I own this house, and I don't want him here anymore."

Well, the couple has lived there together for three weeks. This is Vincent's home. We can't kick Vincent out of his home because he's drunk. So we assist Amy in leaving with Garth, with the two children, and going over to her mom and dad's house.

So, at that incident on the 1st of September when we were out there, and he was intoxicated, he relinquished one hand gun to State College police for safe-keeping due to his intoxication.

Remember, he's been on probation since he shot that gun off in the car. So, when we check his probation status, we find out from the probation department in Bedford County that we just missed it. He just came off of probation, and we did not catch it in time to violate him on his probationary status. We don't have any lawful reason to keep his gun from him under the current gun laws, so we have to give it back to him.

Denise Thal: He would follow her all over the store. And then, if she made him leave, then he would call the store constantly -- every couple of minutes.

If we picked up the phone, it was usually him. And we would say that she's busy with a customer.

Janene Miller: We just wanted to be friends, we just wanted her to be able to come to us and feel like she had someone to come to, feel like she had friends.

Denise Thal: Probably about middle October, and she had started to contemplate ways to end the relationship and get out. She said that she had made the move to State College to get away from Vince, but he followed her here.

Janene Miller: He was so controlling, just always there, you know what I mean? Even though he physically wasn't there... to Amy he was, like, always there because he was, like, on the phone calling, or she would have to call him.

Det. Fishel: October 16th of 2001, Amy sends an e-mail to her employer pleading to get transferred back to the Uniontown store.

Now remember, she just came to State College in August, and now in October, she's asking to go back. And the e-mail sounds very distraught, and it's stressed, and there's a tone of desperation in this e-mail. And she's describing her dad and Vincent getting into it again. And saying that she's stuck in the middle, and she's thinking that if she can get back to Uniontown maybe Vincent will calm back down.

The employer gets back to her on October 21st and says, "I'm sorry, "we cannot transfer you back to Uniontown until the State College store is up to full staff."

Det. Ralph Ralston: I think, initially, Amy, the red flags were flying whenever she was allowed to drive herself to work. This was something that did not happen. And that particular day, he allowed her to drive the truck to work alone.

Det. Fishel: And that moves us to November 8th of 2001. Amy got up that day thinking it was like every other day. She knew she had to get ready for work, and then wake Vincent in order for him to drive her to work. She wasn't allowed to have a car.

So, the standard routine in that household was that he would get up, drive her to work, she would work throughout the day, and then he would pick her up immediately after work so that he could then retake that control of her day.

So, on this day, November 8th, she woke up, got ready for work, went to wake Vincent; and she says to Vincent, "It's time to get up, I have to go to work." And he says, "No, I'm not driving you."

"I have to go to work, I can't keep missing work. Every time I miss work, I'm getting in more and more trouble. I'm going to lose my job."

"You take the truck then."

Take the truck? This was unheard of. Why would he let her take the truck?

So she gets in the truck, and she drives to work. And she gets herself frantic worrying about what's happening there at the house. What's going on with her children? Why was she allowed to take the truck to work today?

Janene Miller: We were busy, we were short-staffed at the store.

Denise Thal: Amy was kind of quiet that morning. She wasn't as jovial as what she usually is. She was...she seemed concerned.

Det. Fishel: So as she gets herself more and more anxious knowing that something is up with Vincent, she goes ahead and calls her mom. About 10:30 that day, she calls her mother, and she says to her mother, "I know I'm calling you again. I'm sorry that I'm calling you again, but something's going on with Vincent. I don't know why he let me take the truck to work today. I'm at work right now, he's not answering the phone. I don't know what's going on with the babies. Can you please go check on them?"

Well, even her mom recognized this as something different. So, her mom's concern was also piqued.

So, mom says, "You know what? You stay at work, I'll go over and check the boys."

So, Grandma takes the day off from work, she drives over to the house, and she finds Vincent asleep on a mattress in the family room with the one baby tucked under his arm in a soiled diaper and the toddler sort of running around the house also in soiled clothing. So, she wakes him up.

"Vincent, what's going on? Why are the kids all soiled? Why aren't you up? What's happening today?"

And so when he wakes up, he starts to tell her, "I'm just too tired. I just can't handle all this stress. Amy doesn't understand how hard it is for me to raise these children. Amy goes off to work, and she's outside the house and she has all her friends, and she goofs off all day, and I'm stuck here with these kids."

So, Grandma says, "You know what, I understand. You must be tired." Grandma's not going to start this argument with him all over again.

Grandma says, "I will take the children for the day with me." So, Grandma cleans up the two little children, and takes them for the day.

Now, Vincent -- who is so tired -- instead of laying back down and going to sleep, he immediately starts calling the phone store.

Janene Miller: And I actually, at the time, didn't realize that her cell phone was ringing so much and that she was answering the phone because I was with customers and stuff. And it got to the point where Vince was actually calling the store a lot.

Denise Thal: There were probably at least 20 to 25 phone calls just, you know, every -- every 15, 20 minutes. Then it got to the point where we didn't answer that line. We would just ignore it.

Det. Fishel: Lo and behold, Vincent shows up. He had walked from his residence to the store. He comes into the store, and he goes into the back room where he begins to confront Amy.

"Where's the truck? Why aren't you taking my calls? Who's hanging up the phone on me? Who's telling me that I can't call you? Who do you think you are for standing up to me?"

So, the co-worker goes into the back room where armed Vincent -- co-workers don't know he's armed -- where armed Vincent is arguing with his wife. They go up to Vincent, and they tell him, "If you don't leave, we're going to call the police."

And Vincent says, "Fine." And he storms out of the store.

When she has convinced herself that he has really left, the phone starts to ring at the phone store. And it's Vincent. He found the truck, and he tells her he's going to go out drinking, and he slams down the phone on her. Now she turns to her co-workers, and she's even more distraught.

Janene Miller: You know, she was just...she was scared to death. That's the only way I can describe it. Just scared to death. She begged and pleaded with me to please don't call the police. And it wasn't about Vince, it was about what Vince would do afterwards. And so I didn't call.

Det. Ralston: Vince came back with the truck around closing time, and Amy had already gone. Unbeknownst to him, her family had picked her up -- they decided to go have dinner together.

Janene Miller: Vince then pulled out -- probably wasn't there more than two minutes. He pulled out. He didn't leave in the direction of where him and Amy lived. And I sort of figured that he was headed to find Amy. I just kept trying to call her. I kept trying to call. I probably called, like, four or

five times. And her phone just kept going to voicemail. I couldn't let her know. I wanted to let her know that Vince was probably headed that way. And I didn't hear anything else.

Det. Fishel: So he drives directly to the restaurant. And when he gets to the restaurant, he goes in to the table where Amy and her parents and her two young children are eating dinner. And he goes right up to her at the restaurant, and he begins to confront her again.

And she says, "Enough. I can't do this anymore." And she tells him, "You have until tomorrow to get out of that house. You call your brother, you call your sister, you call whoever you need to call, but you tell them to come get you and come get your stuff and get out. It is over with us. I am done. I'm taking the boys, and I'm going to my parents' house, "and that's where we're staying until you get out of there."

And he says, "Fine." And he storms out of the restaurant.

So, she turns to her dad, and she says, "Hey can we stop at the house? I need to go in, and I need to get some things for the babies."

And they drive back to Amy's house so she can go into the house and get all the things that a mom would need to take care of her babies at Grandma's house for a couple of days. So, when they pull up to the residence, Amy gets out of the car while her father and her mother and her two young babies sit in the car.

She goes into the house to get diapers and onesies and bottles. And then her parents and her children wait. And no one knew Vincent was inside the house. He had parked the truck inside the garage. And she's in there for five minutes. And then Vincent comes out. And when Vincent comes out, he says, "Someone call 9-1-1. I just shot Amy."

And he shot her in the top of the head at point-blank range, and he killed her instantly.

And when we hear a story like this, every time I tell this, I think to myself, "Make it end differently. Make it end with a happy ending."

And I can't, because this really happened in the life of Amy Homan McGee.

And so we have to ask ourselves, what can we do as a community, to change the ending for another victim?

“Telling Amy’s Story” – Local Discussion Transcript

Host: I’ve seen Amy’s Story 4 times now and I have to say that each time I have the same lump in my throat, and I know that you’ve been to public screenings. I think when people watch this, they just don’t know what to do with how they feel. What’s the reaction at the public screenings you’ve attended.

Det. Fishel: It...you can hear a pin drop. You can hear a pin drop in the room after people have watched this movie because it just ... it takes people’s breath away. And it sort of freezes you for the moment not knowing what to do. And so our goal, though, in Telling Amy’s Story is to get people from that moment of *I don’t know what to do* to *Here are some very concrete things that I can do*. And sort of helping people identify this as the community problem that it is and start making strides to address it.

Host: Go ahead.

Sr. Legal Advocate Cuomo: Yeah, I was going to say that one of the things that is so overwhelming for people is that it’s an issue that hits so close to home. And, you know, statistically, you know someone who is a victim of domestic violence and whether that person has come forward or not – the numbers are so staggering that, you know, it is an issue that everyone in the community is affected by whether they know it or not.

Host: Your goal is not to overwhelm people emotionally, but to empower them. So, what advice would you give to people right out of the door after seeing this?

Sr. Legal Advocate Cuomo: I think because a lot of the people that you hear in this story are people that are... were related to Amy, or Amy’s co-workers, or involved in the criminal justice system that it’s easy to sometimes look to them to ask *well why didn’t they intervene* or *why wasn’t the response different*. And I think the biggest lesson from this story is that Vincent is the person who was abusive and Vincent was ultimately the person who caused Amy’s death. And it...it becomes difficult, I think, when you hear this story to keep that as the focus because there are so many questions that come out of this film about what could have been done differently. But the biggest lesson is that Vincent chose to kill Amy.

Host: My guess is that there are more than a few people listening to this right now who say *I know someone just like Amy*. And I have tried numerous times to intervene... to be there... to provide support and she won’t take it. What do you say to that person, Diana?

Sr. Legal Advocate Cuomo: Sure, and I want to thank them for, you know, being understanding and wanting to offer that support and to be there for that person. But it is a really difficulty thing for victims to open up, especially to people that they know because they, um, might not know that they are going to get that supportive response right off of, you know, the bat like that. Um, so I would really encourage a person, if they do know someone, that they can be in touch with their local domestic violence advocacy agency and, you know, offer that information to the victim and, you know, let the victim know that there are services that are confidential, you know, where the victim can share her story and, you know, have access to resources and information so she can decide what’s in her own best interest.

Host: How does somebody intervene in a way, I'm wondering if there are some concrete steps or advice, to intervene in a way that doesn't put them in harm's way and that has the best chances of ending positively. Are there concrete steps or advice that you can offer?

Det. Fishel : I would say the first step for advice for someone who has a loved one that discloses that there is violence is to let the loved one know that it's not their fault. And to start educating that victim, or that loved one, that what is happening is the fault of the perpetrator and not the fault of the person that the crime is happening to. And then completely support that victim. It's...it's...if you think about Amy and when we talk about Amy's story, it's really important to remember that had people told her to leave that day that was the day he killed her. And so we have to make sure that we're not making decisions based on whatever information we have because we won't have all of the information about what's going on in that situation. Only the victim and the perpetrator know the details of what's happening and so we have to have a little bit of faith and a little bit of trust that some of the decisions the victim is making are in her best interest. And all we can continue to do is give her options and give her more information so that she can build safe ways to leave when she chooses to. The best way to give a victim option is to educate them by hooking them up with other services in the community that are trained on how to work with victims and develop safety plans for staying and/or for leaving.

Host: One of the things that sort of can't be underestimated when you talk about this is the psychological damage that's been done to the victim and so, while it may seem like the rational thing to do, to just leave, it's not as simple as that.

Sr. Legal Advocate Cuomo: ...It's not simple for so many different reasons. Um...and victims choose to stay for a variety of reasons. They choose to stay because financially they have few options, they choose to stay because share children, um, and they choose to stay because they love their partner – even if he is abusive. And, you know, maybe he is abusive, you know, very infrequently, and a majority of the time he is a good partner to her. And so victims hold out hope, understandably, that he is going to change. And so, um, it is a very difficult process to leave.

Host: It sounds, too, from looking at Amy's Story - - don't expect someone to come right out and tell you what their problems are at home. You have to kind of look, it seems, for red flags because it took a while before Amy disclosed her to co-workers and good friends that there really was a problem. And never really disclosed to the people she loved the most, her parents.

Det. Fishel : I think what happens a lot of times is victims feel like they are going to be judged because the person that they love is harming them. What did they do wrong that would cause this person to harm them when we know that it is the batterer that chooses the violence not the victim. And so what happens quite often is victims will not disclose the violence of what's going on and when they do disclose it they get a very shocked or very, um, drastic reaction which makes them stop disclosing. And in Amy's case, specifically, when she had been punched in the face by Vincent and it broke her nose, she originally told the police officer and the nurses at the hospital what had happened. And then when she went to go have that nose repaired, she had already changed the story to she had been hit with a baseball. And so what happens is depending on the reaction that someone gets when they do disclose, they will change and they will not disclose again. So if a neighbor comes to you, or a loved one comes to you, and discloses to you that they are a victim of a violent incident and you seem shocked or dismayed or you over-react, or you "I can't believe that, that can't be true" they are not going to repeat it again.

Host: The workplace provides a unique opportunity for people to intervene. Talk a little bit about what can happen in workplaces and why it's so important that a program like this is viewed in workplaces.

Sr. Legal Advocate Cuomo: I think one of the things... the workplace can be a safe haven where...when a victim, you know, leaves the home and goes to work she knows that she has maybe eight hours during the day where she can be in a place where she is not going to be abused. Um, and if she chooses, she does have the opportunity to maybe share, um, a little bit about what's going on but I think what Diedre said, you know, that the first response that a victim gets when she chooses to share her story...

Host: ...is critical...

Sr. Legal Advocate Cuomo:...is absolutely critical. And really if we are talking about ways that the community can be helpful it's an understanding that the best thing you can do is be supportive and tell the victim that you believe her.

Host: People will be seeing this film in different places across the country and will be wanting to ...uh...to create the kind of network that works and does now exist in Center County. Who needs to be, Dana, at the table?

Sr. Legal Advocate Cuomo: Yeah, absolutely a community coordinated response is the best way to try to address an issue that does affect so many different members of the community. So, we have a long existing task force that has been meeting in Center County for over 20 years. And really the people who come to that table are law enforcement advocacy, the District Attorney's Office, the medical community, probation and parole, um, we have....who else is there?

Det. Fishel : The campus is at the table.

Sr. Legal Advocate Cuomo: Right, the campus because we are part of a campus community. Um, and so it is, trying to involve as many groups as possible who are impacted and work with both victims and abusers in the system.

Host: Congressional Quarterly recently named State College, uh, the safest metropolitan area in the country. And yet the work that you do suggests that domestic violence, what happens and what should be the safe sanctuary of your home, really is troubling.

Det. Fishel : There's a lot of it. There is a lot of domestic violence at a national level. I mean this is epidemic proportions of domestic violence, crimes against women. 1 in 3 women will be a victim of domestic violence in her lifetime is a staggering number. And, so the idea that because we are a semi-rural area or semi-metropolitan because of the university, that our problems are different here are not true. Our problems are very, uh, very much the problems of a national level. And what I always say to people when they say that that won't work here, *well what have you done to try to change what you are doing in your community.* If you are saying that our model won't work exactly...tweak it. Make it fit your community. You invite to the table the partners that you have in your community. Maybe that's the Children Youth Services of your community, maybe that's the mental health agencies of your community, maybe that's the drug and alcohol agencies, maybe that's the homeless shelters of your community. I don't know who's at the table at your community because I don't know your specific community needs but I know that the more people you bring to the table the more likely you are to be able to hit on each of the individual problems that a victim of domestic violence will face in her challenge of surviving the violence that she's exhibiting...or that she is experiencing in her home.

Host: There are some people watching this who say *But State College is so different from the community that I live in.*

Det. Fishel : Domestic violence looks the same in every community. Domestic violence doesn't look different in metropolitan cities or rural America. The violence stays the same it's just the response that needs to change. And so the idea that ok, maybe in my police department of 65 officers we have one designated domestic violence detective. But in an agency with 1,000 police officers, well then maybe they have 30 domestic violence detectives. And so the scope may be very different. In the community that has 3 police officers, maybe there is no designated domestic violence officer. Maybe in that community every officer trains themselves to know how to respond at a patrol level to domestic violence. So you tweak it for your community and you make sure that you, you take that information about domestic violence and you learn it and you figure out how to apply your resources to it.

Host: Now you've talked about the fact that this is happening all over the country and the truth of the matter is it's happening among young couples, old couples, wealthy couples, well-educated couples. Is there, nonetheless, a profile or certain characteristics, Dana, of someone who abuses.

Sr. Legal Advocate Cuomo: I'd like to say, you know, that you could look at your neighbor, look at the person, you know, across the street and be able to tell if they're abusive or not. And it's really not something that you can see. And so I think that's a really important piece is that this affects everyone. It affects every socio-economic, you know, status. It affects every race, every ethnicity, um, age is not a factor either. And so, um, it would be nice if we could look at someone to be able to tell, but that's the other really important piece of this is that the person who is abusive in the home is very likely to be a very upstanding community member who has a good public positive image. And, um, who you wouldn't suspect to be abusive and that's one of their strategies in manipulating not only their abusive partner but their communities as well.

Host: You know, I've been saying *what does she do?* What are the stats, Dana? Most victims are women, but of course there are men who are victims of domestic violence. Can you address that?

Sr. Legal Advocate Cuomo: Yeah, there are men who are victims of domestic violence. However, overwhelmingly, 95% of the victims nationwide are going to be women. And so while we, you know, kind of turn to the language of he and she to speak about abusers and victims, we are doing that only because that's what the statistics are telling us. Um, but yes, absolutely, we know that there are male victims. We know that there are victims in same sex relationships and so, um, you know, statistically we are relying on the data that we know is accurate.

Host: I do have one other question. As I listen to what you do and how you coordinate efforts, are there one or two things that would really help you in the work that you do day to day? Some need that's unmet at this point?

Sr. Legal Advocate Cuomo and Det. Fishel: More of us (laughter).

Sr. Legal Advocate Cuomo: More of us. Our numbers are so high right now that we tend to triage things.

Host: I laugh, but that's a really serious issue.

Det. Fishel: When we talk about what would we like people to do...we would like people to stand up and say *I'll be one of the voices. I'll be a voice for a victim.* Because quite often victims, such as Amy, don't have the ability to tell their story. And so, people standing up and saying *I'll do it* is really powerful. And so it wouldn't rely on just a couple of key people in the community but rather the whole community. Having that solid voice...it's not ok in my community. Domestic violence is not ok in my hometown. And we're going to change it.

Sr. Legal Advocate Cuomo: And we might have different responsibilities and obligations within our own offices and our own agencies in the coordinated community response but if that's the end goal that domestic violence is not ok then we need as a community to figure out a way to get to that point and be able to work together and to be able to do it effectively.

Host: This really is a tremendous opportunity, after seeing this film, not just to take this, you know, you're emotionally, wiped out – but how can you get people to something with that?

Det. Fishel: The idea is not to stall. Don't look at this as a huge global problem that you're going to have to address. Instead, think about what locally can I do? What piece can I start to address right here in my community? Whether that's volunteering at a local shelter, whether that's getting in touch with law enforcement to find out what the current legislation is. What is the law enforcement's policy if somebody reports to the hospital? What services are available through the hospital? Get involved. Start asking the difficult questions about what happens to a victim of crime in this community. When somebody is a victim of domestic violence in my hometown, what happens? Because the answers will surprise you and the voices out there will shock you. Because you'll find out that there's already people that are actively doing something in every community in this country and you can be part of that very large voice to make a difference. So that the next Amy's story ends differently. That the victim of crime that is being ...that is suffering right now...doesn't have the same outcome that Amy had. And so the idea is to get up, go out and start making difference one step at a time and one voice at a time until the national agenda for domestic violence has changed.

Host: I have to say, on behalf of anyone who just watched this program, I have to thank you both, really for the work you are doing. Thank you so much for talking with us.

Sr. Legal Advocate Cuomo and Det. Fishel: Thank you.

“Telling Amy’s Story” – Local Response Transcript

Mariska Hargitay : If you're anything like me, Amy's tragic story will leave you feeling heartbroken, angry, frightened, horrified, confused, and powerless. What we hope you do with all that emotion and energy is simply not turn away. We invite you to turn toward the issues of domestic violence -- its complexity, its heartbreak, and its reality. We can't change what happened to Amy Homan McGee, as Detective Fishel said, or the thousands of victims killed by domestic violence. But we are not powerless to prevent this from happening to our friends, our neighbors, our sisters, mothers, loved ones, and to ourselves. I am joined by Sheryl Cates of the National Domestic Violence Hotline and a leading expert on the issue of domestic violence.

Welcome, Sheryl.

Sheryl Cates: Thank you, Mariska. Wow! When you see that video, it's just Amy's story is so heart-wrenching.

Mariska: I think that when we watch a show, a documentary like we've just seen, and you think like, "How did this happen? How could it have happened?" And we feel so powerless and how can we, as you said, empower ourselves?

The way to empower ourselves is to talk about it. And we wish more people are talking about it, and that's the only way we'll ever be able to...

Sheryl: And believing that they can make a difference, right? I mean, if I know someone, or have a friend, a family member, or a coworker and say, "I want to help," or "How can I help?"

Mariska: I remember when I was first doing my research for "SVU," and I went through some crisis training, and I learned the statistics, and I was just dumbfounded.

If people knew them, then everyone would be talking about it, because it's true that it affects all of us. So, can you talk a little bit about that?

Sheryl: Absolutely, I mean we know that one in four women will ...

Mariska: One in four?

Sheryl: Yes.

Mariska: Which means that if you're at lunch with four girlfriends, one in four, or you're at a baby shower, and you look around the room at 20 women, and you say, "If that statistic is the truth, in this room, what does that mean?"

Sheryl: And I look at in my own family, where we have four girls, and one of my sisters has been abused. And I think that that statistic comes alive at that moment. It's not just someone else. It's my family -- it's your family.

Domestic violence can happen to anyone, any race, any age, sexual orientation, religion, gender. It also can happen across all socioeconomic backgrounds and education levels. There's often a question about men, you know, are men abused as well?

And, yes, they are, but the vast majority -- 85% -- are females.

Mariska: What is the impact of a child growing up in a violent household?

Sheryl: When they are exposed to violence in the home, I think children, it has a profound impact on them. And we know that there's 3.3 million children who are affected by domestic violence.

Mariska: So, before we get into those statistics, may I ask you just for clarity, what is exactly domestic violence? Can you tell us...really define it for us about what it is.

Sheryl: Well, it's a pattern of behavior where someone uses power and control in any relationship against their intimate partner. It's physical, it's emotional, it's sexual, it's psychological, it's economic. It might be where someone threatens and terrorizes another person.

Mariska: I just want to stop you for one second because I think that's something that people need to hear, if somebody threatens you or intimidates you or uses a weapon, or touches you in an unsafe way, that is abuse.

Sheryl: Right.

Mariska: That is not normal behavior. And if somebody is treating you like that, even though you're used to it, it's not okay --

Sheryl: Right.

Mariska: --and it's not normal, and it needs to change. And we urge you to tell someone.

Sheryl: And we do want them to tell someone, I mean, if they can. There are shelters all across this country, and they do such wonderful work. And they're here 24/7. They are here to do counseling and legal services and create an environment for their lives to change, for hope to happen.

Mariska: [Nods head in agreement.]

Sheryl: And they do an amazing amount of advocacy on behalf of the victim, and make sure that they're safe.

Mariska: Well, another thing that I hear over and over from survivors of abuse -- domestic violence -- the fact is, is they feel alone because of the shame and the guilt.

Sheryl: And they need to know they're not alone.

Mariska: They're not alone.

Sheryl: They're not alone.

Mariska: And the one-in-four statistic proves that.

Sheryl: Right, and I think one of the things that we, again, tell them is that reaching out to someone for help is critical. We know that oftentimes it takes a tremendous amount of courage. It takes a tremendous amount of courage to reach out and make that first phone call.

Mariska: And they feel that it is their fault, which it is so not. And I think it's so important to be non-judgmental about it. And I think it's hard for people because they don't understand it. And there does seem to be a lot of judgment toward the victim.

Why didn't they just leave?

Why are they still staying in a relationship?

You know, I would never put up with that if somebody was treating me like that. And I just get that question over and over. "Why doesn't she just leave?" And I think, so many times, it's women that truly feel that they do not have an option, and that is why they stay, especially if they're financially dependent on the husband.

How are they going to care for the children?

How are they going to eat?

But I want to ask the question this way, not why didn't she leave, but why does the abuser choose to abuse?

Sheryl: And, you know, I have a story for that, in terms of what I've heard from men who perpetrate violence. And I actually was in a class with a man who was talking about what he had done to his partner, where he had actually taken her head and put it into, you know, a bureau or a dresser.

And he said, you know, "I can do this. You know, I can. I have the right to do it, and it works. When I tell her to shut up, she now shuts up."

And also he said, "And you know, there's no consequences."

And that, to me, was one of those moments where I thought to myself that we have to change that thinking of a person who is perpetrating violence. That they can't do that, we're not going to tolerate this. We are not going to allow this to continue. We are not going to keep blaming victims, because they want the violence to stop.

Mariska: And they love the person.

Sheryl: - -love this person.

Mariska: They want the abuse to stop. They don't want the relationship to stop.

Sheryl: I've even heard people say they deserve what they get.

Mariska: Wow. I don't even know how to respond to that.

Sheryl: -- which is alarming.

So that's something I wanted then to say, is that we, as community members, can step in and make a difference.

Mariska: Mhmmm.

Sheryl: And even if they don't leave, let's try to reserve our judgment so that we can respect their decisions and the timing that they have, because they know more than we will ever know. It's not an easy answer. But there is, I think, an answer for communities to be more involved, get more educated, be a listening ear. Think about ways that you could have made a difference in Amy's story. It's simple. It's reaching out. In terms of, the other day I was at -- picking up my clothes at the cleaners and seeing a woman with a black eye and four marks on her arm, and just taking a moment to let her know that if there's somewhere you need to go, I have a 1-800 number and there's someone who can help you there.

We, as a community member, have to say that if my neighbor is abusing their spouse or their loved one or intimate partner that we have an opportunity to make that call to the police department or to say, "Hey, I heard something going on last night, and I'm not okay with this, I'm worried."

Mariska: Well, I wanted to ask you about that. I think that is such a difficult thing for people that they're so scared of. I mean, if you suspect something that is going on with friends of yours, right, and you know, you're close with the husband, and you think he's a great guy, but you've noticed that he's being disrespectful ...

Sheryl: Right.

Mariska: ...or he yells at her or he threatens her in public. And then you say to yourself, "Well, if he's doing that in front of us, what is he doing when they're alone?"

So, how can people...You know, people are scared.

What if they're wrong?

What if I'm right?

Who am I to get involved? It's not my business.

Sheryl: But it is our business. It makes our neighborhoods unsafe, it makes our families and our homes unsafe. So I think that's important that we take the opportunity to say something. If nothing else, give a card of "here's where you might get some help," or "is there some things going on in your relationship that" -- You know, "I'm here for you to talk, or "when you're ready, I'm here for you."

Mariska: [In agreement with Sheryl]. I'm here.

Sheryl: And I'm telling you, they will come back to you, they will see you, that you've heard them, that you're not leaving them alone, that they can trust you with these most vile secrets sometimes. You

know, where they've been not only physically abused, emotionally abused, psychologically abused, and sexually abused.

And when that all happens to you, and you're trying to decide, "Am I going to leave, or am I going to stay?" "Can I trust this person with my life?"

Because this person who is my intimate partner who says they love me is the one that's hurting me the most.

Mariska: And how can they trust anyone, what you just said, if the person who says, "I love you," if the person who they're supposed to trust the most and garner that support and love from, you know, is betraying them -- how confusing. That's like getting the rug pulled out from you every day.

I mean, just in watching, you know, the movie -- And I know I keep going back to this word "complexity," but I just find it so key, because when you're watching the movie, and the way Vince wanted to drive her to work and everything at first, you're thinking, "Ah, that is so sweet," at the beginning. And especially imagine, you know, a young girl that has never had this kind of attention before and he wants to be with her every second. But she works, so he thinks --

Sheryl: It's actually a controlling behavior.

Mariska: I always say to young girls I meet to trust their gut, to trust that intuition. And if ever they're in a situation when they don't feel safe, get out.

Sheryl: Absolutely, and I think that those are great words. So you just said it...This is what a community member can do. This is what each one of us can do.

Mariska: You're saying the most important thing is for us to acknowledge them, to remind them about their strength, to listen to them, let them know that the abuse is not their fault.

Sheryl: And not okay.

Mariska: And not okay.

Sheryl: We can make this happen together. We can prevent domestic violence. We can stop it.

Mariska: I remember a participant on one of our programs for the Joyful Heart Foundation trip once said that it was her first time that her body didn't feel like a crime scene. And I just remember how that stuck with me, and I thought, "You know, nobody should ever feel like that."

So I have the same ambition for all women who are being abused. What can we do collectively to solve this?

Sheryl: As members of the public, we can donate our time and our energy, in terms of volunteering, knowing what your public officials think about this issue. What do they vote on this issue? That is critical. And be sure you know the resources in your community. There may be many options for a person. It may be in a faith-based organization, it may be a shelter provider.

Have a conversation. Begin the dialogue. See it as a process, too. We aren't going to be perfect. You don't have to be the perfect expert on domestic violence. You can do just encouraging words. It's that simple, but begin the dialogue. If you see that your friends or neighbors or coworkers are involved in violence, have something to say or have a card to give them or a brochure. It may be that it's a call to a hotline, a 1-800 number like the National Domestic Violence Hotline.

Say there's no more excuse.

Mariska: No more excuse.

Sheryl: There's not an excuse. We are not going to tolerate violence. We are not going to be a part of sitting in silence, because our silence can be just as powerful as approval.

And it goes back to what I was saying earlier about an abuser who says, "I can and there's no consequences."

Mariska: There are consequences.

Sheryl: We need to make sure that a part of our community response is that there is accountability. Domestic violence is a crime.

Mariska: Period.

Sheryl: All across this country. We have to treat it as one.

Mariska: It is so important when we talk about domestic violence, we're not talking about men versus women or women versus men, we're talking about violence versus peace.

Sheryl: That's right.

Mariska: We're talking about control versus respect.

Sheryl: That's right. And I think that's what we need to look at, is how can we change that conversation to being, it isn't about men versus women, but it is about peace.

Mariska: All right.

Sheryl: Thank you.

Mariska: We're both going to cry. But thank you, Sheryl, so much for being here today. I feel nourished and encouraged and armed with some tools, and I really appreciate it. God bless. Thank you for joining us. Thank you.

Mariska: I am so proud to be part of a movement that will change the way we talk about and behave around the epidemic of domestic violence. For so many victims, their safety and their path to healing begins with and continues to be affected by the response of the community.

We envision a community that is strong enough not to turn away.

We envision a community that says to a survivor, "We hear you, we believe you, you are not alone, and your healing is our priority."

This film can serve as an important tool to bring communities together to talk about domestic violence. Our hope is that that you will feel empowered to share Amy's story, to foster further conversations, and to reach out to others. While we will never be able to change the ending to Amy's story, we hope that it's telling can change outcomes for the millions of victims, survivors, and loved ones affected by domestic violence every day.