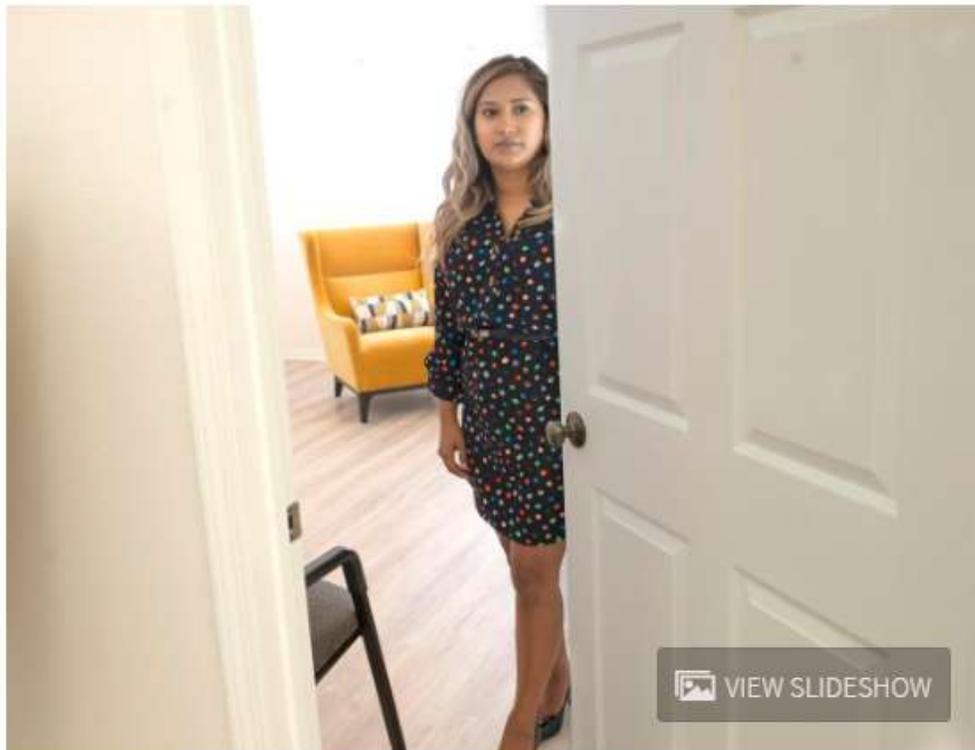


[LIFE](#)

Legal advocacy program is a lifeline for victims of domestic abuse

July 28, 2016



Legal advocate Magdalena Diaz is part of the team at the Domestic Violence Advocacy Center in Garden Grove, offered through Ladera Ranch-based Laura's House.

ANA VENEGAS, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

By **THERESA WALKER / STAFF WRITER**

He had never been to court before.

Apologies and sweet talk would follow the abuse in his nearly 5-year-old relationship with a boyfriend and they'd always make up.

But this time, the 24-year-old college student wanted a restraining order.

"It was definitely the worst," says Thomas, who asked that his full name not be used out of concern for his safety.

The violence back in January sent him to the emergency room with a fat lip, two black eyes, bruises and scratches.

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A week later, he went to court.

His dad told him he *had* to do something this time and accompanied him to Lamoreaux Justice Center in Orange, the Superior Court that handles the bulk of domestic violence filings in Orange County.

Thomas had no idea what he needed to do. Worse, he felt ashamed.

“I felt like people were looking at me,” he says of his journey through the metal detectors at the court entrance and up the elevator to the seventh floor to seek a restraining order.

“I felt like I had to keep my head down.”

But there was help for him: the Laura’s House Domestic Violence Advocacy Center, a free service offered on the spot.

“Without them,” Thomas says, “I don’t know what I would have done.”

The advocacy center began two years ago as a pilot program in the courthouse hallways to provide guidance and support.

Now, with a small suite of offices a few minutes away in Garden Grove, services have expanded to include transportation to court, low-cost counseling and referrals to pro bono attorneys.

The center is an outgrowth of the legal advocacy that Laura’s House, based in Ladera Ranch, has been providing survivors of domestic abuse since 1997.

But before the advent of the legal advocacy center, the organization only reached those who called the Laura’s House hotline, came to their resource center in south Orange County or were being sheltered by the organization.

The number of clients – from all over Orange County – has multiplied almost fivefold since April 2014, from about 200 to more than 900.

So far this year, about 80 percent of clients who see the process to the end obtain a restraining order, according to the center’s statistics.

“Our goal is to try to be there every day and ensure that every survivor of domestic violence has a legal advocate,” said Adam Dodge, legal director at Laura’s House.

The advocacy center is his brainchild.

Dodge, who has been with Laura’s House for five years, had observed something on his visits to Lamoreaux that bothered him.

“I saw hundreds of domestic violence survivors in the courthouse who had nobody to help them,” Dodge says. “They were alone. They were unprepared.

“The odds were stacked against them mostly because they didn’t know what they were doing.”

Even someone studying the law, such as Renee, a 32-year-old mother of three, can find the ordeal intimidating.

Renee, who also asked that her real name not be disclosed, walked out of a decadelong marriage that she says was rife with emotional and physical abuse. Dodge helped her prepare for a restraining order hearing, where she represented herself.

Her request, heard by a judge in divorce court, was not granted. But she says she was glad to expose the dark secret in her marriage to her husband's family members in attendance.

"It was my first time ever standing up to my husband in 10 years," she says. "It was nerve-wracking, but he knows for sure that I'm not going to lie down taking it anymore."

Through the advocacy center, Renee enrolled in a program designed to empower abuse victims. She will take the bar exam soon and, instead of aiming to become a criminal lawyer, she wants to focus on the legal advocacy from which she benefited.

"I saw the need," she says.

The Laura's House advocates work in partnership with the county's Domestic Violence Assistance Program, established at the courthouse in the 1980s and run by Community Service Programs Inc. The advocates share a desk in that office during court hours, but can still be found in the hallways.

The small staff in the Domestic Violence Assistance office assists with the paperwork necessary for someone to file for what is known as a temporary restraining order.

A TRO is typically granted by the court the same day it's requested and stays in effect for three weeks until a restraining order hearing can be held. (A hearing is set even if the judge denies a TRO.)

The help offered at the Domestic Violence Assistance office can include attaching evidence of the alleged abuse, such as text messages, to the court filing. But services do not extend beyond filing for the TRO.

"We help on the front end," says office supervisor Leticia Ambriz, looking up from photographs of a woman's bruised arm and back that she prepared as documentation. "They help on the back end."

The Laura's House advocates step in throughout the ensuing court process – and afterward.

No longer a pilot project, the center has four legal advocates on staff who are assisted by five interns through a partnership with Cal State Fullerton and up to four volunteers.

Two therapists also provide counseling services on a sliding rate scale.

"We are making sure now they've got all those resources available," says Margaret Bayston, executive director and CEO of Laura's House.

Bayston anticipates a move to a larger office to serve increasing clientele with added staff. Private grants and donations will cover the roughly \$250,000 annual cost, she says.

Mostly, those who seek protective orders as victims of domestic violence are women. But there are men, too, such as Thomas.

For him, the advocacy center proved invaluable.

“I was a total mess,” he says.

Signs directed him to the Domestic Violence Assistance office, where he met Magdalena Diaz, a Laura’s House legal advocate the past three years.

Thomas says the compassion and advice provided by Diaz gave him the courage to return three weeks after his first court visit, when the TRO was approved right away, for the restraining order hearing.

He had to sit 20 feet away in a public courtroom from the man he says beat him up and take the stand to be questioned by lawyers. Diaz helped connect him to pro bono legal services and stayed in the courtroom, lending moral support.

The court commissioner in Department L-11, where restraining order hearings are typically held, did not grant Thomas’ request. Thomas failed to convince her that what happened between him and his boyfriend had not been a mutual fight, he says.

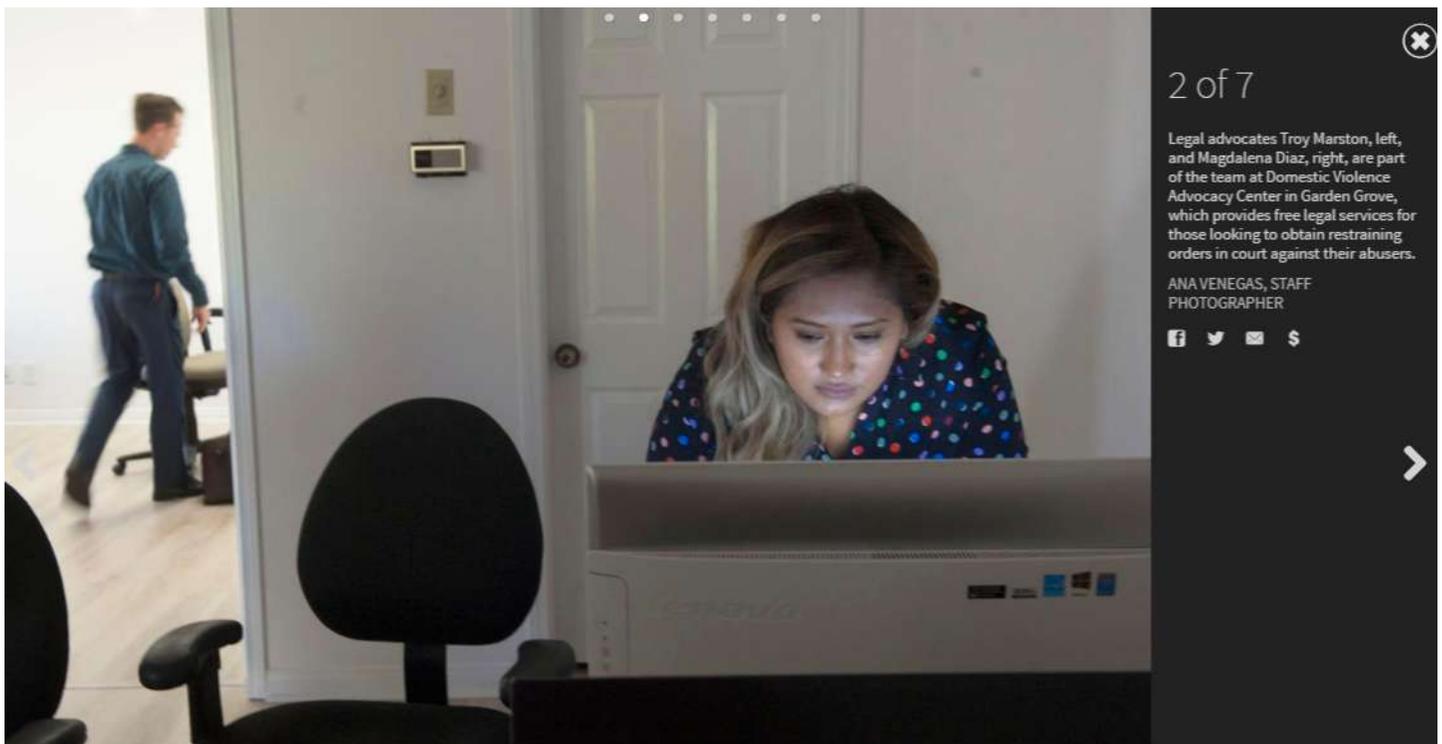
Still, like Renee, Thomas felt he had won a victory of another sort.

He began weekly therapy sessions at the legal advocacy center and gained back self-confidence. He doesn’t break down crying at work anymore, he says, and is close to getting his degree in psychology.

“I can genuinely say I really like myself now where I definitely did not when this started,” he says.

And if he were to run into his ex at one of their old hangouts, Thomas believes he can face him without fear of returning to an abusive relationship.

“I’m strong enough now to turn around and walk away.”



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Legal advocates Troy Marston, left, and Magdalena Diaz, right, are part of the team at Domestic Violence Advocacy Center in Garden Grove, which provides free legal services for those looking to obtain restraining orders in court against their abusers.

ANA VENEGAS, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER





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Advocates Troy Marston, left, and Magdalena Diaz, right, and volunteer intern Rachel Umara are part of the team at the Domestic Violence Advocacy Center.

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Legal advocate Troy Marston takes a call at Domestic Violence Advocacy Center in Garden Grove.

ANA VENEGAS, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER





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A nondescript door leads into the Domestic Violence Advocacy Center in Garden Grove. The staff provides free legal services for those looking to obtain restraining orders in court against their abusers.

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Amanda Thoreson, a marriage and family therapy intern, meets with a victim of violence she counsels at the Domestic Violence Advocacy Center in Garden Grove.

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