



## Hearts and Hands

Piecing Together Faith and Safety  
for Rural Victims of Sexual and Domestic Violence

### Supporting Victims of Domestic Violence: Help for Rural Faith Community Leaders and Members

“What we don't realize is that victims are already blaming themselves, and abusers blame victims, so unless we are very careful, we confirm that blame. Then they don't come for more help or talk to us.”

*Rural clergy, 2010*





Dear Faith Community Leaders and Members,

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, domestic violence affects more than 32 million Americans each year, causing more than 2 million injuries and approximately 1300 deaths.<sup>1</sup> Women account for 85% of the victims, while men are victimized in approximately 15% of reported cases.<sup>2</sup> One in four women (25%) reports experiencing domestic violence in her lifetime.<sup>3</sup>

Domestic violence is particularly dangerous in rural communities, where victims seeking safety may confront barriers such as geographic isolation, lack of privacy and confidentiality, or scarce resources and services. In addition, social or familial relationships with health care providers or law enforcement officials may affect victims' willingness to discuss domestic violence and ability to access services.

Victims of domestic violence often turn to friends and family members in their congregations and communities for help when experiencing abuse. The 2009 Georgia Fatality Review comments, "Victims, survivors, and surviving family members consistently turn to their faith communities for support and safety, whether they disclose the abuse or not."<sup>4</sup> This study also found that, "in the cases we reviewed, victims of domestic violence are more likely to disclose the abuse to someone in their faith community than they are to seek help from the police."<sup>5</sup>

For many rural women, faith is a critical resource, a pillar of identity and community, and an essential element in decision-making and healing. A faith community or congregation can be an effective and critical resource for these victims of domestic violence in rural communities. As a member or leader of a congregation, you can play a critical role in helping victims seek safety. Be alert for signs of domestic violence. Learn to respond safely, effectively, and confidentially. You can make a difference in the life of a domestic violence victim.

Sincerely,



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Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence

“No woman wants to have ‘victim’ on her name tag for the rest of her life, but more than that, no one wants it on her headstone!”

Michele Weldon

*Our heartfelt thanks to the service providers and clergy in rural communities across the U.S. who shared their time, experiences, and wisdom so generously with us. We are also grateful to Kara Moller, Program Manager, Office on Violence Against Women of the U.S. Department of Justice, for her guidance and support. We have learned so much from you all, and we are deeply grateful. It is an honor to share the journey with you.*

## Table of Contents

Domestic Violence 5



Surprising Facts About Domestic Violence 6



Who Are The Abusers? 9



If You Think You May Be Abused 10



Warning Signs And Red Flags 11



How Can I Help? 12



For Immediate Help and More Information 14

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You can also download this resource and other rural resources for free at [www.interfaithpartners.org](http://www.interfaithpartners.org).

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## Domestic violence ...

- ❖ is a pattern of behavior repeated over time and used by an abuser to establish power and control over someone in a marriage or intimate relationship.
- ❖ affects people across the lifespan. Young people may experience teen dating violence, while older adults may experience domestic violence as part of elder abuse.
- ❖ may be physical, verbal, emotional, spiritual, psychological, financial, and/or sexual.
- ❖ affects both men and women; most victims (approximately 85%) are women.
- ❖ affects people no matter what their faith, class, race, country of origin, education, sexual orientation, age, physical abilities, or ethnicity. Your neighbor, your child's teacher, your mother's best friend, or the person next to you in the pew could all be victims.
- ❖ is a crime in the United States.

## Surprising Facts About Domestic Violence

### **Domestic violence happens in OUR congregation.**

Unfortunately, domestic violence can, and does, happen in every congregation. However, because victims often feel ashamed, confused, or too fearful to speak out, they may be silent. An Allstate Foundation study found that 3 out of 4 Americans know someone who is a domestic violence victim or survivor, and 30% of Americans said they knew a woman who had been abused physically by a husband or boyfriend in the last 12 months.<sup>6</sup>

Victims are often isolated and silenced. It is helpful to victims when someone breaks the silence. Speak up! Let everyone in your congregation know that no one deserves to be abused!

### **Abusers don't just "lose control!"**

The abuser might say that he "just loses control." However, he isn't losing his temper with his boss, flying off the handle with his friends, or threatening people on the street. In addition, abusers often make sure that they don't bruise their partners in places where it will show. These examples illustrate that abusers are, in fact, in control of where and how they use violence. They are making a deliberate decision to use physical, emotional, or other forms of abuse to control their spouse or partner.



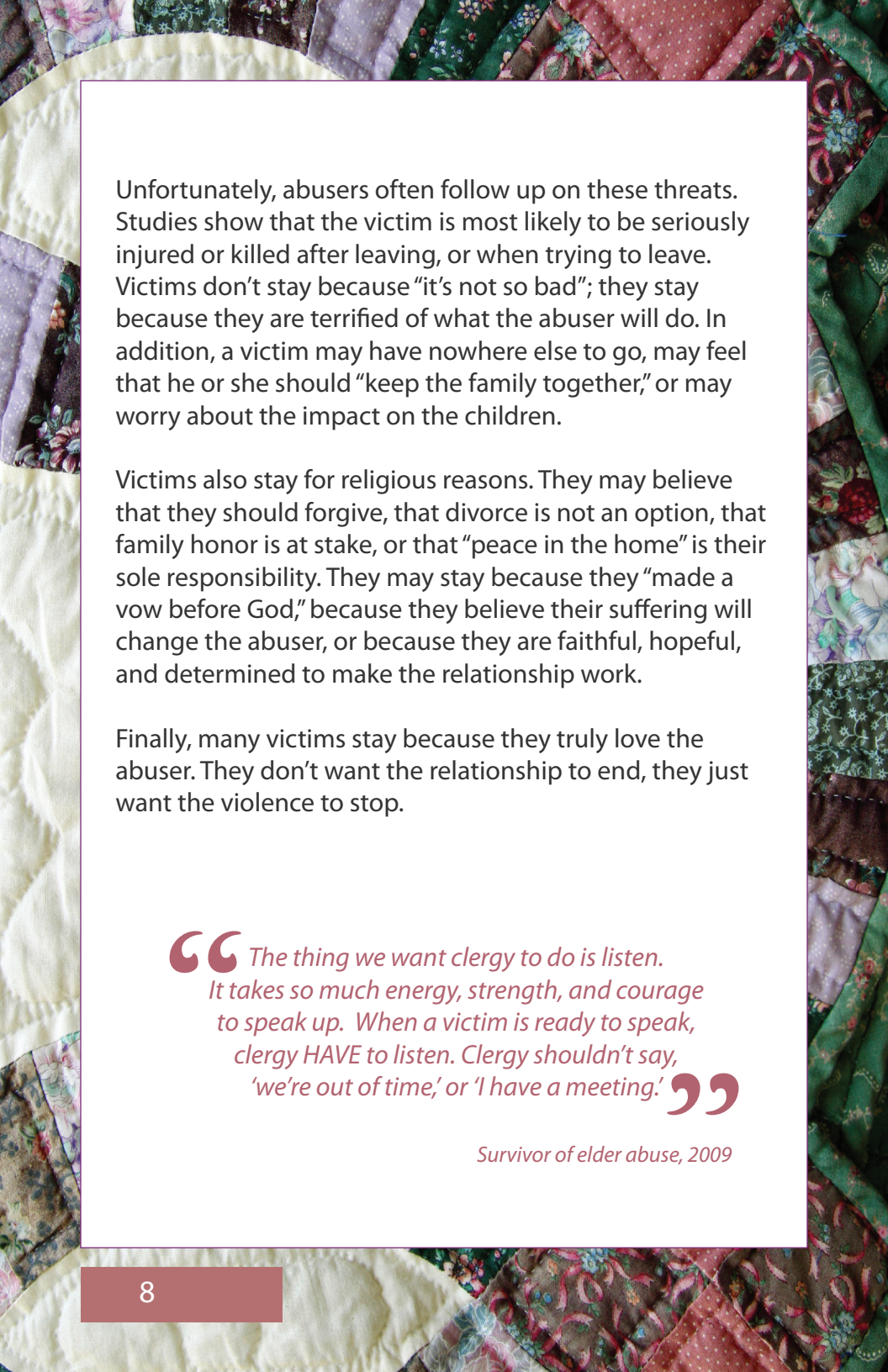
## **Domestic violence is everyone's business.**

Because domestic violence happens within a marriage or intimate relationship, it is tempting to think that it is only a private matter. On a personal level, it violates the sacred trust that is the foundation of a marriage or loving relationship, breaks the covenant of marriage, and demeans and dehumanizes the victim.

But domestic violence is much more than a personal problem. It is a crime that impacts every facet of our communities, from the traumatized children who witness abuse in their homes, to the \$4.1 billion in related medical costs in the U.S. annually, to the \$1.8 billion in lost productivity associated with related injuries and absences.<sup>7</sup> Domestic violence affects everyone: the individuals and children who are victims, the families, friends, bystanders, and employers who try to help, the congregations and communities that struggle to respond and to provide services and resources. Domestic violence is EVERYONE'S problem.

## **For a victim, it can be dangerous and difficult to leave.**

Domestic violence often involves threats, such as "if you leave I'll kill you," or "if you leave I'll take the kids and you'll never see them again," or "if you leave I'll kill your family." To make those threats more real, abusers sometimes kill a family pet or destroy an object that is important to the victim. Whether the threats are spoken or implicit, the message is clear: "Don't leave me or else."



Unfortunately, abusers often follow up on these threats. Studies show that the victim is most likely to be seriously injured or killed after leaving, or when trying to leave. Victims don't stay because "it's not so bad"; they stay because they are terrified of what the abuser will do. In addition, a victim may have nowhere else to go, may feel that he or she should "keep the family together," or may worry about the impact on the children.

Victims also stay for religious reasons. They may believe that they should forgive, that divorce is not an option, that family honor is at stake, or that "peace in the home" is their sole responsibility. They may stay because they "made a vow before God," because they believe their suffering will change the abuser, or because they are faithful, hopeful, and determined to make the relationship work.

Finally, many victims stay because they truly love the abuser. They don't want the relationship to end, they just want the violence to stop.

“ *The thing we want clergy to do is listen. It takes so much energy, strength, and courage to speak up. When a victim is ready to speak, clergy HAVE to listen. Clergy shouldn't say, 'we're out of time,' or 'I have a meeting.'* ”

*Survivor of elder abuse, 2009*



## Who Are the Abusers?

Just as a victim of domestic violence can come from any background, abusers can belong to any age, race, class, or ethnic group. Abusers can be sober, employed, and charming, or they can be alcoholics who can't hold down a job. Abusers can be from urban, suburban, or rural communities and from any faith tradition. Abusers can be doctors, police officers, electricians, or clergy. Most often, abusers are men, although women also abuse. Abusers need long-term, expert, specialized services. Contact your local domestic violence service provider for more information.

“Please take this as an example that this can happen to anyone. If you are in a situation that is in any way abusive, no matter how small it may seem at first, please ask for help. You cannot fix this yourself, and no matter how many times your abuser says he has changed, you cannot trust that.”

*Susan Sleeper, speaking after her daughter, Allison Myrick, 19, of Groton, MA, was stabbed to death by her former boyfriend*

## If you think you may be abused...

you are not alone!



you do not deserve to be abused!



without professional intervention, domestic violence typically escalates over time. Please seek help!



focus on your safety and that of your children.  
You deserve to be safe in your home!



contact your local domestic violence service agency  
(see p. 14) or the National Domestic Violence Hotline  
(1-800-799-7233/SAFE)

for more information, safety planning, and support.

“ Many women don't report domestic violence because they are afraid they will die of embarrassment. It is never the embarrassment that kills them. ”

*Michele Weldon*

## Warning Signs and Red Flags

Victims and survivors of domestic violence may not even realize they are in an abusive relationship. They may be too overwhelmed to admit there is a problem, or too fearful of the abuser to talk. However, you may notice some warning signs, which could indicate a problem.

The victim...

- ❖ feels like she is “walking on eggshells.”
- ❖ is often cancelling plans or missing work, religious services, and other events.
- ❖ is afraid of doing anything that might upset him.
- ❖ has frequent “accidents.”
- ❖ becomes overly submissive when she is with him.

The abuser...

- ❖ is extremely jealous and possessive.
- ❖ blames her for his problems or feelings.
- ❖ is disrespectful or cruel to her and others.
- ❖ is always calling to check on her.
- ❖ speaks badly about past girlfriends or wife.

The presence of these behaviors does not necessarily mean that abuse is taking place, and the absence of these behaviors does not necessarily mean that everything is fine. If you notice some of these behaviors or are concerned and can talk to the victim privately, don't be afraid to offer help! You might be saving someone's life.

“Abusers have many blind spots  
about their own behavior.”


*Rural clergy, 2009*

## I'm part of a faith community...

### how can I help?

Because so many victims turn to faith community leaders and members for help, **YOU can make a difference** in the life of a domestic violence victim. If someone turns to you for help, you can . . .

- ❖ be calm, compassionate, and patient.
- ❖ focus first on the victim's safety. If the violence has just occurred, encourage the victim to seek safety.
- ❖ maintain confidentiality. Don't talk to anyone else about the situation without the victim's permission.
- ❖ reassure the victim that she is not to blame. No one deserves to be a victim of domestic violence.
- ❖ let the victim know that he is not alone. Provide emotional, physical, and spiritual support.
- ❖ refer her to a local or national domestic violence hotline (1-800-799-7233/SAFE) and to local services in your community (see p. 14) for expert help, safety planning, and support.
- ❖ offer to accompany the victim to the hospital, police station, court, etc.
- ❖ honor the victim's decisions, even if they are not what you would do.
- ❖ avoid couple's or family counseling, which can be dangerous and is not recommended.
- ❖ follow up with continuing support.



In addition to compassionate listening and referrals to community services, victims and survivors may need your spiritual guidance and support. They need to know that they can count on their faith community in this crisis. Think now about resources in your faith tradition that will help a victim of domestic violence find justice, peace, and healing.

In addition, here are six things victims may need to hear.<sup>8</sup>

“I’m afraid for your safety.”



“I’m afraid for the safety of your children.”



“It will only get worse.”



“I’m here for you.”



“You don’t deserve to be abused.”



“What can I do to help?”

“When I was abused,  
my spirit was dying.  
I needed help.”

*Elder abuse survivor, 2009*

## FOR IMMEDIATE HELP

Call your local police, sheriff, or Village Public Safety Officer, or dial 911 (where available).

Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline  
1-800-799-7233/SAFE | [www.thehotline.org](http://www.thehotline.org)

*The National Domestic Violence Hotline is free, confidential, and available 24/7. Language translation is available. Anyone can call. You do not have to give your name or identifying information to receive help.*

*Add local service provider information.*

*If there is no local information here,  
call the National Domestic Violence Hotline  
(1-800-799-7233/SAFE)  
and ask for services in your area.*

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

National Network to End Domestic Violence  
1-202-543-5566 | [www.nnedv.org](http://www.nnedv.org)

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence  
1-303-839-1852 | [www.ncadv.org](http://www.ncadv.org)

National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence  
1-512-407-9020 | [www.ncdsv.org](http://www.ncdsv.org)

National Sexual Violence Resource Center  
1-877-739-3895 | [www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org)

National Council on Elder Abuse  
1-800-677-1116 | [www.ncea.aoa.gov](http://www.ncea.aoa.gov)

## References

<sup>1</sup> See <http://usgovinfo.about.com/od/healthcare/a/femhealthcost.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics Crime Data Brief, Intimate Partner Violence, 1993-2001, February 2003.

<sup>3</sup> The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and The National Institute of Justice: Extent, Nature, and Consequences of Intimate Partner Violence, July 2000. The Commonwealth Fund, Health Concerns Across a Woman's Lifespan: 1998 Survey of Women's Health, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Georgia Commission on Family Violence and Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2009 Georgia Domestic Violence Fatality Review, p. 15. See [www.gcadv.org](http://www.gcadv.org) for more information.

<sup>5</sup> Georgia Commission on Family Violence and Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2009 Georgia Domestic Violence Fatality Review, p. 5. See [www.gcadv.org](http://www.gcadv.org) for more information.

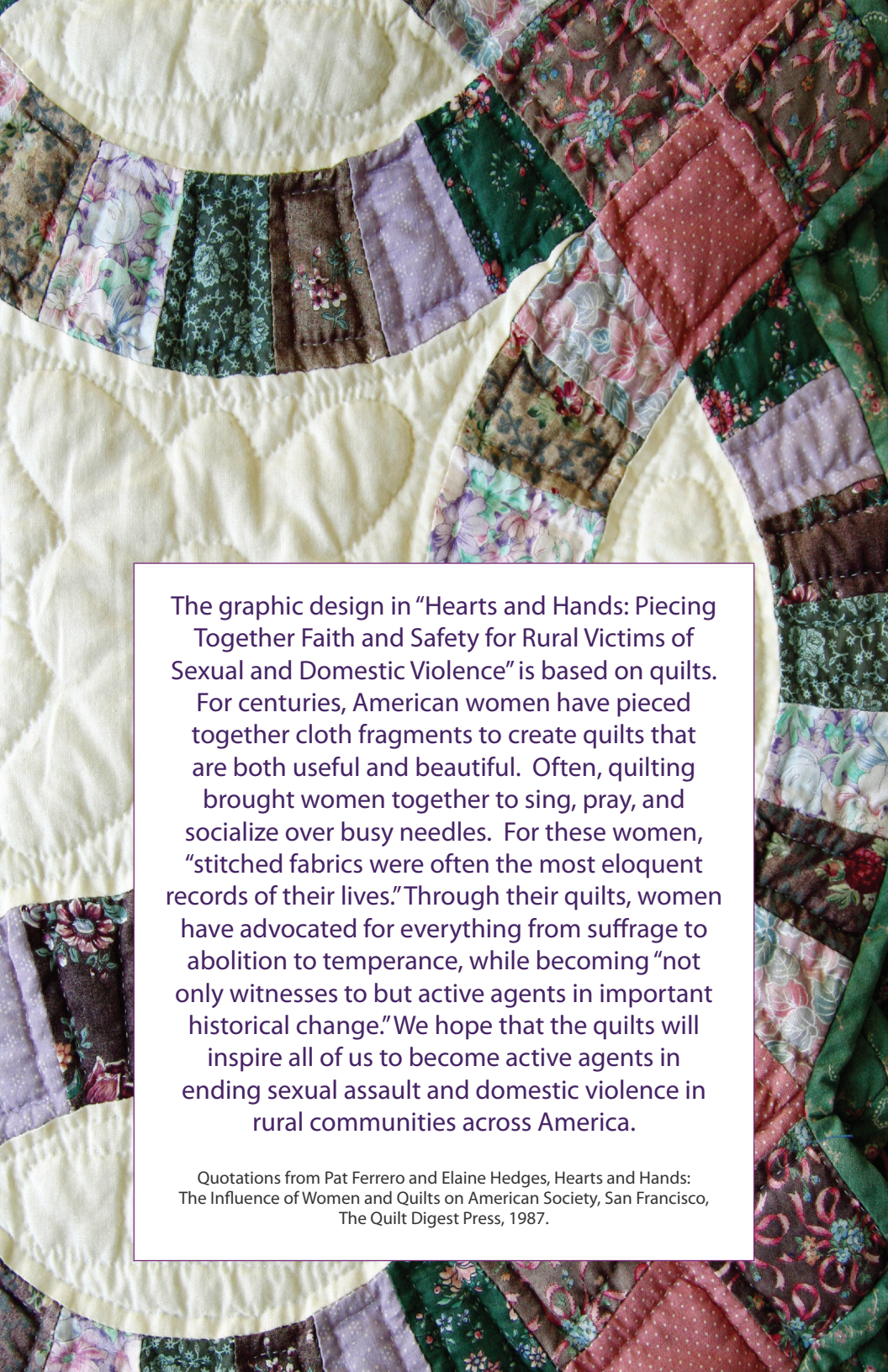
<sup>6</sup> Allstate Foundation National Poll on Domestic Violence, 2006. Lieberman Research Inc., Tracking Survey Conducted for The Advertising Council and the Family Violence Prevention Fund, July – October 1996.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://usgovinfo.about.com/od/healthcare/a/femhealthcost.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Adapted from the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence, based on a study by Sarah M. Buel, JD, and the Quincy, MA Court.

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The graphic design in “Hearts and Hands: Piecing Together Faith and Safety for Rural Victims of Sexual and Domestic Violence” is based on quilts. For centuries, American women have pieced together cloth fragments to create quilts that are both useful and beautiful. Often, quilting brought women together to sing, pray, and socialize over busy needles. For these women, “stitched fabrics were often the most eloquent records of their lives.” Through their quilts, women have advocated for everything from suffrage to abolition to temperance, while becoming “not only witnesses to but active agents in important historical change.” We hope that the quilts will inspire all of us to become active agents in ending sexual assault and domestic violence in rural communities across America.

Quotations from Pat Ferrero and Elaine Hedges, *Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women and Quilts on American Society*, San Francisco, The Quilt Digest Press, 1987.