

## Independence House focuses on pain of transgender community

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Annual Independence House breakfast focuses on the pain of the transgender community.

HYANNIS — Civil rights activist Erica Kay-Webster spent years in an abusive marriage because she felt ashamed of herself.

"Shame is the underlying process that keeps us trapped," said Kay-Webster, who added she faced discrimination and was "singled out" because she was transgender.

"I am not less than any other human being," she said, "and I am not above any human being."

This was the message Kay-Webster conveyed Friday morning at the 13th annual Independence House Domestic Violence Awareness Month Community Breakfast at the DoubleTree by Hilton.

Each year, the breakfast focuses on domestic violence, particularly in communities that may be underrepresented. This year, the theme was "No More Shame," and the focus was on the transgender community.

"It's a day to bring the community together to provide information about domestic violence and who the victims are," said Lysetta Hurge-Putnam, executive director of Independence House, a Hyannis-based nonprofit organization that provides advocacy, counseling and education to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault.

Hurge-Putnam said the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community is "invisible," and their relationships are often not validated by society.

"They're not 'the other'; they're us, our family, our friends," Hurge-Putnam said before introducing Kay-Webster, the breakfast's guest speaker.

Kay-Webster said she grew up in a physically and verbally abusive home where she was belittled for her lifestyle. At 17, she ran away and by her early 20s was in an abusive marriage. She sought help but said she was often shunned and discriminated against because she was transgender.

"The reason we wanted to highlight the transgender community this morning is because the work we do looks at the way different people are oppressed," Hurge-Putnam said. "If one person is oppressed then we're all oppressed."

Hurge-Putnam said there are not many resources for transgender people; for example, a transgender person in transition might have a hard time finding a shelter, since most are women-only. The support community for transgender people is small, Hurge-Putnam said, and transgender people are generally not accepted in society.

"The vision for ending intimate partner violence is to end it in all communities," Hurge-Putnam said. "If we don't pay attention to a community that's gay or transgender then we're not solving that problem."

About 100 people attended the free community breakfast, including human services employees, nonprofit volunteers and members of the public.

The breakfast concluded with a candlelight vigil and moment of silence to commemorate the 10 victims of domestic violence in Massachusetts who were killed this year by their abusers.

"Awareness is important, but action is also important," said Hurge-Putnam, who encouraged people to talk about domestic violence and controlling behaviors rather than ignoring it. "It's simple but actually very effective."