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Cabrillo student shares 19-year story of domestic abuse

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AWARENESS MONTH: Psychological effects linger long after violence ends

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APTOS — On July 29, 2007 Annie Lagunas ended the torture.

For 19 years her husband abused her verbally, psychologically and physically.

On that summer day she got into an altercation with her husband while on a drive in Monterey County. Two off-duty sheriff's deputies who witnessed the fight got out of their car and asked her if she needed help.

Lagunas was frozen with fear. Her daughter, not quite 13 years old, pleaded with her mother to leave with the deputies.

She got in their car with her daughter, and after nine previous attempts to escape, the

'He is behind bars for the rest of his life, but I still look over my shoulder. I'm still paranoid.'

ANNIE LAGUNAS, domestic violence survivor

10th worked.

"He controlled me so much, I couldn't make decisions on my own anymore," Lagunas, 47, said. "That was my day when I became free. He is behind bars for the rest of his life, but I still look over my shoulder. I'm still paranoid."

Almost two years later, in June 2009, a court

sentenced Aniano Olea to four consecutive life terms after convictions on multiple counts of torture, aggravated mayhem and criminal threats.

Still, Lagunas is still "in hiding," having changed her name and taking precautions to make sure he can never contact her again, even from prison.

Wednesday, Lagunas shared her story with fellow students at Cabrillo College. She also has filmed a segment for the "Dr. Phil" television show that is expected to air later this year.

Her talks are part of the healing process, as she finds her own voice and helps spread

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awareness of a crime that often goes unspoken.

"I think it is under-reported," said George Rivera, an inspector for the Santa Cruz County District Attorney's Office. "Often when a case does finally get reported you find there have been prior instances and a history of abuse."

There were 2,019 domestic-violence related calls for assistance to authorities in Monterey County and 856 to Santa Cruz County authorities in 2009, according to California Department of Justice figures.

One reason Olea received such a strict sentence is

because he kept meticulous records of his violent behavior toward his wife. He photographed the results of the beatings, and even kept a journal of the daily abuse.

"It's not typical to find so much evidence in a case like this," said David Norum, a retired investigator who worked on Lagunas' case for the Monterey County District Attorney. "It really was an indication of his true nature as a narcissistic sociopath. Normally it is more difficult to get a conviction in domestic violence cases. Without all that evidence the sentence would not have been as strong because the jury never would've believed it all."

Lagunas, after a year of working with Cabrillo com-

munications professor Skye Gentile, has built up her courage to talk in front of large groups and share the horrific details of her case. She intersperses statistics and information on how to identify types of abuse with examples from her life.

The photos provide chilling proof of the bruises Olea gave her all over her body, the burn marks from hot kitchen tongs pressed against her face, and the words "whore" and "adulteress" that he forced her to have tattooed on her neck and forehead respectively. In one photo she is strung up from the ceiling by her arms.

"I speak to people as often as I can, because it's important," she said. "People need to know you can survive after 19 years of abuse."

In the spring Lagunas expects to graduate with her associate degree in human services. In the future she would like to open her own facility for victims of domestic violence, a place where people can take their children for extended periods and get the rehabilitative care they need.

She effusively points to all those who have helped her during recovery, from the Monterey County prosecutors and victims assistance staff, to the Cabrillo staff that have helped her move on and build a new life.

"I still have a hard time making decisions," she said. "Today I must have asked people 10 different times if what I was wearing was OK. I was so used to him controlling everything I did."