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Liberal resident Diane Tillson, far left, meets with the rest of the 18 people representing the state of Kansas at the recent World Conference of Women's Shelters in Washington D.C. Tillson was one of two people to receive a scholarship from rural Kansas from the Kansas Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence. Courtesy photo

By ROBERT PIERCE

Studies show that approximately one billion women globally will be beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused by an intimate partner in the course of their lifetime.

In the U.S., 12 million adults per year are victims of an intimate partner, and each minute in America, 24 people become the victims of rape, physical violence or stalking by a partner. These numbers reinforce the significance of the World Conference of Women's Shelters in Washington D.C., and one Liberal woman had the privilege of attending the gathering recently.

The conference is sponsored by the National Network to End Global Domestic Violence and the Global Network of Women's Shelters. More than 1,500 people from 96 countries attended the conference including Diane Tillson of the Liberal Area Rape Crisis and Domestic Violence Services office, who said it was amazing to see all of the people there for one cause.

"The attendees included leading international experts in health care and public policy, survivors and family members who've been struck by tragedy and frontline advocates such as myself doing lifesaving work every day," she said. "There were 18 people from Kansas who got to go."

Tillson attended the conference thanks to a scholarship from the Kansas Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence, who sponsored two people from rural Kansas.

“We would not have got to have this experience if it weren’t for that,” she said.

There were 220 presenters from 35 different countries on hand in Washington D.C., and Tillson said she tried to go to the presentations from international people as well as those from the U.S. in order to get an experience of what domestic violence is like in foreign nations. “One that I attended that was really powerful was about women who have went to prison for killing their husbands after years of abuse,” she said. “On average, nationally, 4,500 women are in prison for killing their partners due to abuse. That’s a really staggering number.”

Attendees got to share and learn from each others’ experiences at the conference.

“Globally, in shelters, we all have the same stories, the same struggles,” Tillson said. “I know it’s big and it’s everywhere, but to see that many people there and people that represent all those different countries to come and talk about their experiences was just really, really good. We were able to learn and grow from each other, share our successes and solutions and uncover vital new ways to address gender violence in communities globally. There were a lot of big people there.”

Among some of the presenters were actress Reese Witherspoon and former President Bill Clinton, along with the Princess of Denmark.

Tillson was told that she was going on the trip by her boss at LARC/DVS, and she was understandably a little surprised.

“I was sitting in a staff meeting when my boss told me I got it,” she said. “I started crying. This will be the 14th year in June that I’ve been here. I’ve never gotten to do anything like it.”

Tillson said domestic violence advocates do a lot of work, but she said hearing the stories of clients is amazing.

“We as advocates bring hope to people,” she said. “We restore a sense of hope in themselves and their future, that they can do things on their own that maybe they’re told they never can do and their sense of hope in others.”

Tillson said she came back from Washington D.C. with more knowledge about how agencies such as LARC/DVS empower women and strategies other shelters have implemented to deal with domestic violence.

“One thing that’s big is if people are on drugs, a lot of shelters have a zero tolerance,” she said. “At this conference, at one of the trainings that I went to, they want to move away from that a little bit. If they’re having problems because of domestic violence, that’s their way of coping. It doesn’t mean that if they use, they’re going to be threatening other people.”

Tillson said she now also has a better understanding of how domestic violence workers make a difference.

“We know that 75 percent of women are at a greater risk of being killed or seriously hurt when they leave a relationship,” she said. “You hear about ex-spouses or ex-boyfriends that are doing things. It’s more dangerous when a person leaves. I think if people understood that, they might have a better understanding.”

Tillson said, likewise, the conference brought the realization that many people around the world are also helping with the problem of domestic violence.

“It was an experience I probably never would have if I wasn’t able to go there for some of the different things,” she said. “Sometimes, you can get down and feel like what you’re doing isn’t worth anything, and this restored in me that we are making a difference. It makes you feel what you’re doing is worth while. If you can make a difference in one, you’ve done something.”

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