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Salon owner dedicated to ending cycle of domestic violence

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Chicago salon owner George Gonzalez earns a living coiffing well-heeled patrons on the North Side.

Then there's his mission: Highlighting the issue of domestic violence against women.

"God," the Calumet City native said simply, "has given me a responsibility."

And it's one that Gonzalez, 35, takes seriously. The veteran stylist, whose celeb clientele spans TV personalities to PGA stars, is donating \$5 from every service in October -- National Domestic Violence Awareness Month -- to Between Friends, a nonprofit agency in Rogers Park.

Yet that's just a token gesture. His compassion runs year-round.

Visitors to George -- The Salon, 23 W. Hubbard St., find a stack of crisis-intervention brochures in the restroom, should a customer hiding bruises want to call a hotline "from a very safe area," Gonzalez said.

"There's an 800 number where they can call to speak to a counselor or lawyer," he explained. "Some people don't believe (violence) affects very wealthy patrons, but it does."

Less well-off patrons merit equal consideration. Gonzalez, an alum of Creative Hair Styling Academy in Highland, quietly asks women's shelters to send residents to his young business (he launched George last year). There he and his 11 staffers treat survivors once a month to free hair- and coloring services to bolster their self-esteem. Some ask for a fresh look for job interviews.

It's a rare chance to be pampered, much less in a sleek, chrome-and-earth-toned salon where cuts start at \$40 for men, \$60 for women, and a thermal straightening costs \$400. Employees have been briefed "on what to say and what not to say," Gonzalez said. "We treat them like normal customers."

For the soul-scarred, "normal" is bliss, a paradox that Gonzalez understands well. As a child, he witnessed his stepfather batter his mother routinely in the early 1980s.

The abuser blackened George's mom's eyes. He locked her, George and his three siblings out of the apartment, forcing them to sleep in the car. Once he attacked his wife at a

family event, punching her in front of his own relatives. No one intervened. George, the eldest son, was 8 or 9 at the time.

That beating is seared in his memory. He was shocked that the shameful family secret was out -- and that the adults accepted the unacceptable. The realization froze him in his tracks. "I was frightened and helpless and so sorry I couldn't help my mother," he said.

Tragically, the senseless crime transcends age, race, income and every walk of life. According to the Domestic Violence Resource Center, one in four women experiences abuse in her lifetime. More than three women and one man are murdered by their intimate partners in this country every day. About half of all female victims suffer injuries, but only 20 percent seek medical aid.

A common misconception is that victims are weak "and make bad decisions," Between Friends executive directors Kathy Doherty said. "These women are very courageous and strong. They know how to endure until it's safe for them to get out of the relationship."

The time came for George's mother. She confided in her employer, who pledged support and help. So did friends, who put her in touch with a lawyer who filed her divorce papers pro bono. His parent underwent counseling and slowly, painstakingly, began to rebuild her life and relationships with her children.

Today she is happily remarried, and Gonzalez and his siblings lead stable, productive lives. Gonzalez is engaged and planning to marry next year.

His mother, shy at first of his public stance against domestic violence, now backs his efforts wholeheartedly.

"It is our story," her son said.

Between Friends offers counseling, court advocacy and other programs to victims of domestic violence. The toll-free, 24-hour hotline is 800-603-HELP (4357). The Web site is betweenfriendschicago.org.