

SPECIALIST STANDS TALL TO STOP DOMESTIC ABUSE

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Growing up in Selma, Ala., with five older sisters, **J.R. Thicklin** learned from an early age the right way to treat women.

"My mother and sisters really influenced me greatly to respect females and to be honest with females and to treat females fairly," recalls Thicklin.

Now 33, he seeks to impart those sensibilities and other wisdom to middle school and high school students in Palm Beach County as a teen intervention specialist with Aid to Victims of Domestic Violence (AVDA). In Thicklin's two years on the job, his efforts have been widely recognized. Among others, he was honored this year with the Peace At Home Award by Gov. Lawton Chiles and, more recently, with AVDA's Board of Director's Award for his efforts to alleviate domestic violence.

"He's absolutely an incredible human being," said Ann Beal Salamone, a member of AVDA's Board of Directors. "He's really taken the initiative with the (Teen Intervention) Program and made it outstanding."

The bulk of Thicklin's efforts is in presenting a four-day curriculum to students to help them identify and begin dealing with different abuses in family and dating relationships. He lives in West Palm Beach and works out of AVDA's office in south Palm Beach County. He also works part-time with adolescents at 45th Street Mental Health Center in West Palm Beach.

Thicklin said his work with AVDA complements his goals as an ordained minister - to promote healthy relationships, racial harmony and close family among others - but he said he is so circumspect about keeping his ministry separate from his profession that no one in the schools has an inkling of his background. He is the senior pastor of a new ministry in Belle Glade and was previously an associate pastor with a church in West Palm Beach.

"I've always been the type of person who likes to intervene for those people who are hurting," he said. "I guess it's just part of my natural calling." Thicklin knows he's making a difference when students who attend his Teen Intervention Program take the first step and disclose abuse they are enduring. It's all part of stemming the cycle of abuse that occurs when children model the abusive behavior of their parents in their own relationships, he said.

Last school year, a student at Boca Raton High School sought help for the abuse she was receiving from her baby's father after Thicklin's presentation. Another student at Gold Coast High School in West Palm Beach said she got the courage to call the police on her abusive boyfriend as a result of the program, he said.

"I'm one of those types of people who people feel very comfortable with," he said. "I present myself as non-intimidating and non-threatening." Attesting to his popularity are the requests he gets from outside Palm Beach County to present his program. They come from as far away as Volusia County to Lake County and Miami. And CBS News is including him in an upcoming Class of 2000 show that will look at teens and domestic violence, he added.

Thicklin, a father of four, said he has always been careful to follow his own advice and not argue with his wife in front of his children.

"I try to set that example," he said. "It is a great responsibility to particularly show my sons the right way in today's world."

His greatest reward is a close, loving relationship with his children who are 10, 6, 3 and 1.

"My oldest son, Jermaine, really touched my heart," Thicklin said. "He drew a picture of myself and him holding hands and it said, 'My best friend, my dad.' "