

M I L W A U K E E  
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# Sharing her story

## Abducted Wind Lake woman wants to help others avoid abuse

By MEGAN TWOHEY

Until now, Teri Jendusa-Nicolai has revealed little of her relationship with the man whom authorities have accused of abducting her, beating her and leaving her for dead in a freezing storage locker this past winter. But five months after the ordeal, the Wind Lake woman is prepared to talk about her former husband, David Larsen, and the abuse she says he inflicted on her for years.

She told her story Wednesday, and she'll talk again Saturday at a Walk Against Family Violence, and she plans to continue talking about it in public forums once she has fully recovered.

Her goal, she said, is to help other women avoid or get out of the type of abusive relationship she had.

"I want to grab hold of women and say, 'Don't allow someone to beat you down so much that you have no hope for yourself'."

Jendusa-Nicolai appears as a pillar of strength and self-confidence. The 38-year-old bubbles with conversation and employs self-assured body language, even though she is confined to a wheelchair.

But when she first met Larsen as a student at the UW-Parkside, Jendusa-Nicolai lacked self-esteem and was eager to please others. "My attitude was: I just want to do whatever I can to make you happy," she said.



Photo by Jack Orton

***"Deep down I was afraid. But I talked myself into it, saying he wouldn't do anything bad to me."***

When they started dating, she overlooked her future husband's faults because they appeared to share many of the same values. Like her, Larsen was religious and wanted a traditional marriage in which the wife would stay home to care for the children. He had a good job, as an air traffic controller, could be charming and seemed to have a sense of humor.

But Larsen would flash a hot temper and would bad-mouth his sister and other women in his life. When the two wed in 1996, Jendusa-Nicolai already had a sinking feeling that something bad could happen.

"Deep down I was afraid," she said. "But I talked myself into it, saying he wouldn't do anything bad to me."

The physical abuse began on the honeymoon. When they returned home from Hawaii, Larsen became overwhelmingly controlling, she said.

Even before she had their first daughter, Larsen demanded that Jendusa-Nicolai, who had been a

mortgage lender, not work. He refused to put credit cards in her name and made her give him receipts from purchases she made. He told her how to dress and wear her hair, she said.

### Bible admonition invoked

He also would use his religious faith, which she had originally admired, to justify his behavior, saying that the Bible calls for a wife to submit to her husband.

"I would say 'Yes,' but husbands need to love and honor, and you're not honoring me by slapping me," Jendusa-Nicolai said.

She knew their relationship wasn't right, but any time she talked about leaving he would bombard her with insults and say that, if she left, no one else would want her.

But three years and two daughters into the marriage, Jendusa-Nicolai did just that. For six months, she had been showing up at a Waukesha shelter to get counseling on domestic violence. It had helped confirm that she no longer wanted her children and herself living in an abusive environment.

"I had been raised in a normal family," she said. "I knew this wasn't how life should be. The counseling confirmed that."

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### Sticking with it considered

But moving out was only half the battle. Even after she moved into a shelter and divorce proceedings began, Jendusa-Nicolai continued to have a hard time breaking free.

She told Larsen in letters that she would be willing to take him back if he went to anger management, marriage counseling and a psychiatrist - steps she said he refused to take.

Her tendency to overlook or downplay Larsen's abusive nature continued after the divorce when the joint custody of their daughters forced them to interact. He struck her on three different occasions before her abduction in February, she said.

"I think me and other victims of domestic violence assume the best of people," she said. "But instead, we should think every time they're in the vicinity that they're going to try to kill me."

Attempted homicide is among the state and federal charges against Larsen.

Before Jendusa-Nicolai was found in the storage locker in Wheeling, Ill., Larsen told police he had struck her with a baseball bat because she suddenly appeared in his home with her pants around her ankles and holding a hammer over him, according to a criminal complaint.

Larsen's attorney, Dean Strang, has charged in federal court that Larsen's statements should be inadmissible as evidence. Strang has said investigators used coercive tactics while questioning Larsen, exploited his emotional state and ignored repeated requests for a lawyer.

Strang did not return calls for comment Wednesday.

The federal case is scheduled to move forward later in summer. Jendusa-Nicolai said she hopes she will never see Larsen again.