

Etta Caver recognized by National Women's Coalition Against Violence

By Denise Spranger, College of Education, Health and Society

Ohio's Miami University graduates Etta Caver and Rita Corbin Burns never met. In fact, the selection of Caver as the first recipient of the Rita Corbin Burns Award was simply a "pure and poignant coincidence," in the words of Michelle Bart, president and co-founder of the National Women's Coalition Against Violence & Exploitation (NWC-AVE).

"We didn't make the Miami University connection until we learned that Miami was planning to release a story," says Bart, adding that the nomination had come from Caver's former student, Tracey Tindall (Miami '14), who now works as a client advocate for Women Helping Women of Hamilton County.

NWC-AVE established the award in tribute to the lifelong work of Rita Corbin Burns who died in 2013 after a 10-year battle with breast cancer. Burns had been a donor and founding member of the Washington-based nonprofit organization. Caver was honored with the Burns' award at the NO MORE Summit in Vancouver on Jan. 17.

"I really feel honored to be connected to this powerful, wonderfully gracious woman who had sacrificed her life to work with women who had been exploited through domestic violence and human trafficking," says Caver.

While Caver, a visiting instructor at Miami, and Burns share an alma mater, including degrees from the College of Education, Health and Society (EHS), the two women also share a history as survivors of domestic violence.

Caver's exposure to violence began at the age of fifteen when her mother was found murdered

on the front lawn of their home. Though she and her siblings were never told the details, Caver suspects that the incident was the result of domestic violence.

As a young adult, Caver faced the harsh reality that her husband was an abuser. Though she ended the marriage, her next relationship proved even more perilous. Caver now feared for her life and the safety of their children as the abuse escalated. But in the pervasive sense of insolation and shame that still haunts victims of domestic violence, Caver told no one of her circumstances.

"I understand the shame, the guilt, the silence," says Caver, "I thought that there would be no way out. I thought that no one understood. I thought that there was no help for me."

An especially brutal attack left Caver hospitalized with a fractured cheekbone and eye socket. Though Caver filed charges, the court simply ordered her abuser to leave the city.

Thirteen years of domestic violence had come to an end for Caver, but the burden of her experience remained with her.

In the years that followed, Caver maintained her silence as she raised her children and continued a career as a computer specialist at AK Steel in Middletown. Finally, she discovered an organization in Monroe, Ohio, named Citizens Against Domestic Violence, founded by Jim (now deceased) and Elsa Croucher, who had suffered the murder of their teenage daughter, Tina, by her ex-boyfriend.

"I was still broken by the abuse I had endured, even years later," says Caver, "But Elsa and Jim Croucher let me know that there is help out there, that I was not the only one, that I didn't have to be embarrassed, that I didn't have to hide any

more. I learned that I had a voice, and that I could speak loudly about my experience."

Caver raised her newfound voice to support Citizens Against Domestic Violence in their efforts to establish what has come to be known as "Tina's Law." The act, signed into law in the state of Ohio in 2009, requires public school districts to incorporate and address dating violence in their policies and programming.

Caver's involvement with the local nonprofit, first as a struggling survivor, and then as an avid supporter, changed the course of her life.

Leaving a 24-year career at AK Steel, Caver enrolled at Miami University in 2002 as a nontraditional student, completing her bachelor's in social work in 2005. After earning her master's degree at the University of Cincinnati in 2007, she returned to Miami in 2011 as a visiting instructor in the department of family studies and social work. Currently, Caver is pursuing a doctorate in interdisciplinary studies at Miami.

Throughout her university years, Caver has worked in the field as a speaker, an advocate and most primarily, she notes, as an educator.

"For victims of domestic violence, education is both empowering and powerful," says Caver, "A lot of people think that domestic violence is only about hitting, but it's also about sexual assault and about the mental, psychological and verbal abuse. Domestic violence is really about power and control. And boy or girl, adult or adolescent, no one is exempt."

In 2003, Caver began an eight-year position as victim's advocate for Butler County, assisting women going through the court system as a result of a violent relationship. For the past five years, she has worked for



Etta Caver

the Center for Family Solutions, educating victims of domestic violence about victimization and their rights. Caver also became a minister, and is now associate pastor at God's Paradigm Christian Center.

Among her several awards, the Rita Corbin Burns Award has special meaning, says Caver. By that "pure and poignant coincidence" described by the NWC-AVE co-founder, both women were born in Hamilton, Ohio, only a couple of years apart. Both were alumni of the same school and university, and most significantly, both women transformed hardship into a life dedicated to helping other survivors to thrive.

A native of Hamilton, Ohio, Rita Corbin Burns was a 1970 graduate of Talawanda High School. She received her bachelor's degree in home economics from the School of Education (now EHS) at Miami University in 1975 and her master's in administration from Florida Atlantic University in 1989.

During her 30 years as an educator in the public school system, Burns was an active member in the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences and devoted to the prevention of domestic violence and human trafficking. She was also a passionate supporter of animal rights.