

AAUW Court Watch End of the Year Report – April 2021

By

Ann Pinna, Chair

This has been a difficult year due to COVID-19 because we have not been able to attend our regular court monitoring sessions in person at Family Court since January, 2020. However, our team has managed to meet and conduct some business via Zoom and e-mails and, thus, has made some significant accomplishments.

The biggest achievement was the creation of a new, more efficient and streamlined Observation Form. Our team spent many meetings over several months, collaborating, organizing, and finally deciding on a document which we feel will assist us in gathering the appropriate information we need to assess domestic violence cases and give us the necessary quantitative results we need to determine the practical efficacy of many aspects of the judicial system as it relates to domestic violence cases. It was a long and difficult process, over many weeks of trial and error, scrutiny, discussion of wording, item enumeration, categorization, organization, etc. This document has been forever evolving and changing throughout the years. It has been a truly organic work. But, finally, we feel this latest Observation Form is the best we've ever created and we can now take it into Family Court and test it out. We are very hopeful it will aid us tremendously the next time we're allowed to go into court and use it once again.

Throughout this past year, our court monitors were given updates regarding programs at Family Services through periodic Family Services Newsletters. Leah Feldman, VP for Community Programs, and one of the key persons who initiated our AAUW Court Watch Program way back in 2010, has shared information with us. Also, it is significant to note that we happily and voluntarily made a contribution to domestic violence programs at Family Services in Leah's honor when she gave birth to her baby last fall.

Another accomplishment we made this past year was the updating of our Mission Statement on the AAUW website. We changed some of the text regarding the section on "Court Watch", added some pictures of our team, and also posted the new Observation Form.

It should be noted again that last January 2021, it was with great sadness that we reported in the AAUW Newsletter the passing of one of the key members of our Court Watch Team—Sandy Sherman. We deeply regret this tremendous loss. She was one of the most upbeat, encouraging, supportive, and loyal monitors on our team, a devoted cheerleader, and always there for us since the beginning launch of our program 20 years ago. In tribute and inspiration to Sandy's dedication, Court Watch made a memorial contribution to Hospice and will carry on, as it has in the past ten years, to monitor proceedings in Family Court in an effort to seek social justice and fairness for all. We will continue to carry on Sandy's legacy with strength and dedication to her memory.

Also, this past year, we have continued to update ourselves regarding the aftermath of the trial of Nicole Addimando in Poughkeepsie who was convicted of shooting her partner after a prolonged period of domestic violence. Whenever there is news from Ms. Addimando's advocates either through email or our local newspaper, information is shared with our team and comments made where applicable. Some members of our court monitoring team were present in the courtroom when Ms. Addimando's trial was being conducted, and some have made personal contributions to her legal defense team so there is a special tie with some of us in her fight for justice. In addition, we have discovered recently that Nicole

will be featured in a documentary about women and domestic violence in a film production of women, abuse, and justice the courts; it was also noted that some filming will take place in Poughkeepsie.

Additionally, monitors are periodically updated with news emanating from the Poughkeepsie Journal on topics relating to women and domestic violence. Recently, there was an article about the anniversary of the shooting of Jessica Welch by her partner at the Poughkeepsie Train Station where Officer Falcone was also shot and killed. Monitors were given a summary of the Journal article for their information and education.

We also welcomed back JoAnne Abraskin to our team and appointed Merrilee Osterhoudt to replace Joanne Dyson, to perform data entry. We also trained our newest member, Debbie Lee, for for court monitoring duties. Recently, Debbie informed us of a Zoom meeting that her local church was sponsoring on the topic of domestic violence. Interested members of our team were invited to register and take advantage of the interesting contents of the program.

Lastly, we have been in contact for several months now with Dr. Branka Bryan, the Executive Director at Grace Smith House. Finally, we were able to set up a Zoom meeting with her this week, April 30, 2021. At this meeting, Dr. Bryan will update us on the news and programs of women at the shelter during this time of COVID. We will also be able to ask her questions as to the status of domestic violence victims as it relates to court cases. Hopefully, we will discuss ways Court Watch might be able to partner with Grace Smith House and work collaboratively to advance justice for women.

In conclusion, though our Court Watch team has not been able to attend Family Court, we still, nonetheless, continue to stay together electronically and share information. Several of our team members have utilized this time during COVID to read and educate ourselves further in areas relating to domestic violence. We are hopeful that we will be able to return to Family Court in the near future and be able to continue to fulfill our mission of seeking justice for women and men who are experiencing domestic violence.

(Ann Pinna-April, 2021)