

Battered wife his muse

Education and openness are key in tackling gender inequality, author Brian Vallee says

By **KATHY RUMLESKI**, FREE PRESS REPORTER

Journalist and author Brian Vallee said the four hours he spent producing a documentary on Jane Stafford were life altering.

Stafford suffered physical and mental abuse at the hands of her husband Billy. She killed Billy and her court case led to the battered wife syndrome as a legitimate defence.

Vallee was in London this week speaking to high school students from both school boards at the London Convention Centre.

"I'll never forget those four hours as long as I live," said Vallee, who produced the documentary for the Fifth Estate and subsequently wrote a book about Stafford's story called *Life With Billy*, published in 1986.

"Billy had been in the ground for two years at that point. When Jane recalled abuse . . . her eyes bulged. The sound man thought he had a problem with the equipment, but it was her heart . . . pounding like crazy. It was like (Billy) was there in the room. That's when I understood the fear."

Vallee, who has also worked for the *Toronto Sun*, followed up with *Life After Billy*, about the suicide of Stafford, and then combined the two books in an updated version called *Life and Death With Billy*.

Vallee, who writes his books to bring attention to violence against women and children with the hope that it will end, has recently released *The War on Women: Elly Armour, Jane Hursham, and Criminal Domestic Violence In Canadian Homes*.

He said his message to the London students was that they must speak out against insidious inequality.

"It may be difficult when you've got peers into sexist and racist jokes. You should tell them it's wrong. It may be hard to do, but it's worthwhile," he said.

"Kids have to be aware that this shouldn't be happening."

Vallee said he called his book *The War on Women* because of the statistics on domestic violence, which he compared with stats on military and law enforcement deaths.

He looked at numbers from 2000 to 2006 and found:

- 4,588 American soldiers and law enforcement officers died on duty or of causes such as heart attack or suicide.
- More than 8,000 U.S. women were killed by their partners.

In Canada:

- 101 soldiers and officers died in that time period.
- More than 500 women were killed by their partners.

Canadian politician, broadcaster and diplomat Stephen Lewis wrote the prologue for the *War on Women* -- which was short-listed for an Arthur Ellis award for non-fiction crime writing -- and called the violence against women a holocaust.

As well, Vallee said more than 5.3 million women are hospitalized due to domestic violence each year.

We have our own refugee camps, he said, in the form of shelters. There are 2,500 shelters in North America.

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Vallee talked to the students about how to end this war.

"The police can't do it on their own. They need the judges and the courts on side. A lot of times (police) will arrest a batterer and he's out on the street in no time."

He'd like to see abusers removed from the home and put in a half-way house. "Put an electronic bracelet on him and let him continue to go to work and take counselling. If there is reconciliation possible, fine. If not, he stays away."

Vallee said education on the subject must be a priority. "In law schools, we have to have full courses on this subject to understand the full dynamic of it."

The fuel to keep the war going is gender inequality. That's why it's so important that everyone speak out against it, he said.

"It's not a very pleasant subject, but it sure has to be blown open."

Vallee's speaking engagement was sponsored by Western's education faculty, its Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children, Changing Ways, the London Police, the Centre for Addition and Mental Health, and the Middlesex-London Health Unit.