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She's everyday heroic; SHELTER: Joy Lang headed a home for abused women in Chatham

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When Joy Lang arrived in Chatham three decades ago, police officers and social workers wouldn't buy that domestic violence happened in the Southwestern Ontario Bible Belt.

"Chatham was small-c conservative and everyone -- from police officers to the Children's Aid -- said 'It doesn't happen here,'" Lang says now.

"At the time, there was no research about what domestic violence was."

When Lang and her husband and kids moved to the Southwestern Ontario city from Sault Ste. Marie in 1979, the local newspaper wrote a column introducing her family to readers. Lang told the columnist that she was a stay-at-home mom who'd volunteered at a women's shelter in the Sault. "When the paper hit the streets, I got a phone call asking for my help," Lang said.

A group of women in Chatham were working together to open a women's shelter, which would be one of only eight in Ontario. At the time, Lang didn't even call herself a feminist.

But to the women in Chatham who were trying to get their first shelter off the ground, the fact she'd set foot inside one in Sault Ste. Marie made her an expert. The mood on the street was lukewarm at best, Lang says: "Nobody rallied against (the shelter), but everyone was in denial, They didn't want to see that it went on in Chatham."

Lang became the first executive director of the women's shelter in Chatham-Kent -- it had eight beds and was full within days of opening -- and remained at its helm for more than two decades.

Wednesday, she'll be honoured with an Everyday Hero Award, presented to her by the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children at UWO, where Lang is now the community-liaison officer.

Things have changed significantly since 1979, when that Chatham shelter opened its doors on a small grant and "a wing and a prayer," Lang said.

"I'd go out to groups to educate them and there was a lot of women-blaming. A lot of people asked 'Why doesn't she leave?' but never "Why is a man hurting someone he says he loves?"

"A lot of people blamed the women. They said, 'You make your bed, you lie in it.' We were called home-wreckers, man-haters and a lot of other nasty things," Lang said.

Police officers responding to domestic-violence calls would make abusers take a walk around the block to cool off or take a woman to a family member's house instead of pressing charges, Lang says. She will receive her award at the Hilton Hotel, at 300 King St. in London, on Wednesday at noon in the Queen Victoria Room.

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