

## THE STORY GOES | MARTA PALAEZ | FAMILY VIOLENCE PREVENTION SERVICES

**MOLLY:** Hello! (funny voice) And coming to you *live* in a darkened closet at KLRN. (laughs) That's the new opening.

**KIRAN:** It doesn't get old.

**MOLLY:** It doesn't ever get old. It's me, Molly, and I'm here with Kiran.

**KIRAN:** Hello!

**MOLLY:** We are with SA2020, and we are doing The Story Goes podcast, a collaborative podcast in partnership with KLRN, your local public television station. Here in San Antonio, Texas where we are interested in telling the full story of various people and organizations who are doing incredible things, often quietly, sometimes loudly, depending on who we talk to change the trajectory of our community. Today, we have Marta Pelaez with us, who I would say loudly is changing—

**MARTA:** That sometimes we don't like (ALL laugh).

**MOLLY:** I always appreciate when somebody walks into the podcast room, and then the headphones go on, and you start to hear your voice weirdly in stereo, and we are in a darkened closet, and then all of the sudden we are like, "Welcome, we are about to have a conversation. Get ready!" (laughs)

**MARTA:** You're just being your normal self.

**MOLLY:** It's normal. It's just a normal conversation. [\(1:06\)](#)

**KIRAN:** You learn a lot about people in the tiny closet when the lights go out and microphones are in everyone's face apparently. (MOLLY laughs)

**MOLLY:** It's so true. We, Marta, we have been doing this now several digits deep on how many podcasts we've had, and almost across the board, we always find out a couple of things we didn't know about the person before obviously, but then sort of to talk about your work. We wanted to sort of frame up the fact that you are the President and CEO of Family Violence Prevention Services. We want to talk very specifically about San Antonio and Bexar County specifically being top in the nation for violence against women.

**MARTA:** Unfortunately, that is the case. [\(1:50\)](#)



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**MOLLY:** It's never the one where you're like, "Hey, we want to be number one." That's not the one. But before we go into that, we always like to talk to the person who's leading the way how you ended up in this work. [\(2:02\)](#)

**MARTA:** Before I jump into that, you said I was the President and CEO, and again because we are in front of these very—

**MOLLY:** Bizarre?

**MARTA:** Intrusive, yeah, things. It still sounds different to me because I see myself as one off. Sometimes the title implies a separation. I want to be colleague. I am colleague with my staff. It's just that my job description has some different items in that list, but it takes all of us, and we are all equally important. There is a level of antipathy for that or those. [\(3:02\)](#)

**MOLLY:** It's true. It's like we are all in this together. There's no way you could do this by yourself, particularly do a lift as y'all are doing in your organization. So, I appreciate that so much.

**KIRAN:** Yeah, thank you. We say often respecting the knowledge and experience that exists along a hierarchy of an organization. So, it also has to do with thinking about how we respect one another and how we all work together. That's what I hear as you being able to evoke yourself as a colleague.

**MARTA:** I just thought I needed to get that out.

**MOLLY:** No, I like that a lot. Tell us how you ended up in the work that you're doing. [\(3:37\)](#)

**MARTA:** Well, it is a little bit convoluted.

**MOLLY:** We will take it.

**MARTA:** Okay, so I began professionally helping children who were abused. After that, I helped parents who abused their children. Something clinically interesting for me. By then, I was already a mother of three. I wanted to know what is it about these parents that can abuse their children. We were in Chicago, and then we came to San Antonio via El Paso. When we arrived in San Antonio, we wanted to do something for the community. We looked up several nonprofits, and we chose Battered Women. It was the Battered Women at the time. That's how I knew of this wonderful organization. Later on, I called my predecessor and said I think I have a dual perspective on abuse that I think the agency could use. So, she said, "Please, come on over, yes." That's how I began. Shortly after that, she retired, and the Board gave me a call from I think it was a Saturday afternoon and said, "can you please come and take over on Monday morning?" That's how it began.



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**MOLLY:** You had a day and a half to prepare. That's fine. (laughs)

**KIRAN:** (laughing) Wow.

**MOLLY:** What year was this? (5:22)

**MARTA:** That was—

**MOLLY:** Or generally. (laughing) What decade? What generation?

**MARTA:** '90s?

**MOLLY:** Okay, so you've been with the organization since the '90s?

**MARTA:** Oh, yes.

**MOLLY:** Okay. Over the course of the last several decades, I can imagine you've seen shift in our community need, changes in the way you are reducing barriers in your own organization. It would be intriguing for you to sort of walk us through what you've seen shift in our community? (6:00)

**MARTA:** Absolutely. I will begin with a name because I already emphasized that the Battered Women's Shelter. When I first came in I noticed the number of children that were coming for services to our nonresidential counseling center, and also children that accompanied the mothers began to, of course, have a more in depth understanding of domestic violence to the children. So, sometimes it's expressed as the exposure of DV creates impact. The term exposure for me creates a distance that it's not valid. The children are directly impacted. (7:00)

**MOLLY AND KIRAN:** (overlapped inaudible talking)

**MARTA:** Exposure I imagine someone looking out the window and watching domestic violence and mentioning, "Oh, that was terrible. Now, let's move on with my life." That is not the case for the children. So, I thought that the name of the shelter needed to reflect that the majority of the victims of domestic violence are not women, and by far, of course not men, but children.

**MOLLY:** This idea that y'all are doing both, prevention and intervention, at the exact same time because there is a cycle of abuse that occurs. You can't just stop it because they're not just exposed. They're inside it.

**MARTA:** Absolutely, that is key.



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**KIRAN:** Yeah, which is related to shifting to community needs. We sometimes see a conversation about intervention and prevention as two separate conversations. Those are different organizations. There are different people working on intervention or prevention. It seems that by the way you describe the work, it is by necessity, it cannot be focused on one or another because it is cyclical. We focus on both. [\(8:11\)](#)

**MARTA:** Absolutely. So, it was seen, and thank you for that because it is very much so. It is seen as two separate prongs that are both necessary. However, when you are intervening and dealing with these very severe crises that we see at the shelter, we are also preventing the next generation from participating in the cycle. Children, for the most part, are very critically impacted. This is many times the father inflicting all the pain on the family. It is the very same father they have known from close to birth that they need to emulate. They need to be like. They need to respect. You need to listen to your father. Your father knows best. However, this is the same father who is battering the mom, sacred person in their lives. Many times, abusing them, so they're very conflicted and confused between what is abuse and what is respect. What is love, and what is abuse behavior? So, those messages need to be clarified. They need to be dealt with for the children. [\(9:50\)](#)

**KIRAN:** We talk often on the podcast about how within the work, how important it is to change the conversation in order to do work and continuously make a greater impact. What are some of the assumptions that you find yourself having to continuously debunk, myths you find yourself continuously debunking when it comes to domestic violence? [\(10:09\)](#)

**MARTA:** I am very sensitive to the words that are said. For example, let me ask my husband to see what he thinks. To me, it has a very literal implication. You have to hear your husband's opinion in order to form your own opinion. I already have my opinion, so I will share with him, and the two of us will decide how we are going to address whatever it is before. Things like that I am extremely cognizant of what is going on in the way people communicate with one another. Actions as well. And I'm going to talk about 753 B.C. when (inaudible) roamed. The things that he did was that he gave us Padre o Pateras, which is the paternity and the proprietorship over a man's family. The wife and the children were his property. He could and perhaps should batter the women, and physically punish her because he was responsible for everything she did. But he created a standard, so it was, she could be beaten only with a rod of the same circumference of his right thumb, which became the Rule of Thumb, which is also, I hear those clichés, and I immediately go there, and in a very intrusive manner and point it out. "Excuse meee, let me tell you what Romolus did. [\(12:19\)](#)

**MOLLY:** I can imagine that sort of communicating for you, specifically, because you're also thinking, for a lack of a better word, red flags, something we should be paying attention to. There are very specific things in the community that we as community members could also be noticing if we think there is potentially a problem in a home.



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**MARTA:** Absolutely. Again, going back to correcting those messages that children have received. We need to address whether the child is afraid of the father or respectful of the father, and clarify every time that we have a chance. [\(13:04\)](#)

**MOLLY:** When you got into this work, back in the '90s, and I'm interested in how you started with working with children who had been abused and shifting to parents who are abusive, sort of trying to unpack and understand why this is occurring. I can imagine then with that lens moving into the '90s, and then into today, how having an understanding or desire to understand both those things, then leads to you shifting or pivoting the services you're providing, as well as, the removal of barriers that are potentially there. Can you talk a little bit about what's shifted in your own organization? [\(13:48\)](#)

**MARTA:** Absolutely. Let me exemplify that with the contracts we were able to bring to the agency with CPS.

**MOLLY:** Child Protective Services.

**MARTA:** Right, Child Protective Services. So, Domestic Violence Camp and CPS Camp were traditionally silos—

**MOLLY:** which makes no sense.

**MARTA:** Exactly. Let me just say, typically we live in a siloed social expression of problems in society that are all interrelated, but people don't see them that way because there are these silos that have been created, alongside with their own allocations and denominations. Their very own handling of the issue. I always saw, again, Battered Women and Children's Shelter, a lot of the women that came to us had active cases with CPS, so it became a necessity for me to address how we could integrate knowledge and action with the CPS silo and create bridges around the two. So, to that effect, there was a man that created a task force to strengthen the collaboration between the domestic violence movement and CPS. The task force began creating a philosophy of integration. There is very little action when you are going up 35-North and down 35-North to only philosophy about the task force. I came back and called the regional director at the time, Sherry Gomez. I said, "Sherry, how about if we just jump into some kind of action?"

**MOLLY:** Let's just do something. [\(15:58\)](#)

**MARTA:** Let's just do something. Child fatality was at an all-time high. Domestic violence was beginning. It's upward train that we now have before us. So, it made every bit of sense.



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**KIRAN:** Marta, I imagine for this to work effectively, trust is crucial. I am curious then, how do you build trust? How hard that must be to come by somebody who is leaving an abusive home to trust, and then navigate a system like CPS? [\(16:38\)](#)

**MARTA:** Let's remember that 1 in 3 women live in an abusive situation. Those women that come to us are so ready and so hungry to trust. The population that comes to the nonresidential counseling services, I would say is ready, is more ready than the population that comes to the shelter. Many times, the women that come to the shelter have been rescued by the police at a very grave moment when she was shot at, attacked with a knife. She was dragged through the kitchen by her hair, and many, many other things have happened before. So, it's not necessarily her decision at the moment, so she's still hanging onto that fear and those threads. She comes to the shelter, so it is critically important that during the first seven days of her stay, she visits with case managers, with counseling, with the clinic. There is a school for the children. All of those services surrounding her, coming to her rescue, begin to relieve, and there's an exchange of fear for trust. [\(18:12\)](#)

**MOLLY:** The perpetrator, the person who is doing the abusive behavior, you began pulling those people into your work. I assume that has something to do with understanding abusive behaviors in parents and children, but now understanding abusive behaviors of the perpetrator themselves. I'm curious why, what made you make that shift, and how that's been... I can imagine somebody being, how you were just explaining, somebody taken from their home against their will, I wasn't ready to make this jump, and now you're including that person in this work. How does that work? [\(18:51\)](#)

**MARTA:** Well, about the perpetrator abuse is normal.

**MOLLY:** For that person.

**MARTA:** For them, it's very normal. They come in groups, and they sit around and introduce themselves. They mention the first name of the victim very respectfully have to refer to her. Many times, they will say, when asked why are you here, "this blipity judge sent me here. I have no idea why I'm here. I slapped my woman. I guess I was a little rough, but after all she's my wife. It's not the neighbor's wife." So, it's again, this proprietorship over the woman that is being expressed right there. For him, he was born into that environment. His parents were born into that kind of environment. His grandparents before, so this is the generational education, social template that I speak of, where parents, and mothers, and fathers are simply on a daily basis writing messages, and at the end of the time when the child is 15, he already has a complete book of instructions on how to relate to others. [\(20:29\)](#)

**MOLLY:** The question I think that might be difficult, what do we do about it? As we are seeing, right, San Antonio, Bexar County, trend of family violence is going up. The child abuse rate, we



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know it's happening across our community, I think that's another myth to debunk. It's happening in all zip codes across our community.

**MARTA:** One in three.

**MOLLY:** Right. What do we do about it? [\(20:57\)](#)

**MARTA:** I am not naïve. I am realistically optimistic, and cautiously optimistic, again this began many, many centuries ago. It's going to take some time until we see it resolved where we want it resolved, where the 2 persons involved in the relationship have an equal footing. So, talk about the future, Family Violence Prevention Services, we are doing wonderful work around counseling and therapeutic services for children. There is the work that we are doing with the community. There was this commission that was formed ordered by Judge (inaudible), co-chaired by Judge Monidiaz and Dr. Bridger of the City of San Antonio, that is bringing together stakeholders to precisely identify those areas where we all can participate to address domestic violence. For many years now, I've been involved in public policy discussions in Austin. One of the things I know we've been able to do is bring the healthcare system around the issue of domestic violence because many times they are the ones who see the victim first, and have an opportunity to ask questions. We wanted to have the medical schools include domestic violence training for the future doctors. Many times to that, Molly, we've been reactionary in many instances in the creation of these programs because these are things we here from the clients that comes. [\(23:20\)](#)

**KIRAN:** It brings us full circle back I think back to the way you articulated yourself as a colleague and sort of wanting to break down what it means to be President and CEO because if we are respecting the knowledge and experience that exists with everyone we are working with, and especially those we are serving, in this instance, we know that women hold the knowledge and experience of I know why I'm not leaving, and how can we create responses proactively rather than reactionary. [\(23:47\)](#)

**MARTA:** Absolutely. We need to hear them. We need to listen to them. I say many times, I am their voice when I need to be their voice. Right now, in this conversation we are having, I am speaking on behalf of the 198 women and children that are at the shelter today, record number. So, I speak on their behalf every time I find the opportunity, but yes absolutely. They are the ones who hold the knowledge. [\(24:23\)](#)

**MOLLY:** I appreciate so much that you are a colleague in this, that you are marching so squarely forward, even cautious optimism, of saying we can do this. We can certainly do this if we break down silos. Everything that has been shared today can be found online at [klrn.org/thestorygoes](http://klrn.org/thestorygoes). I encourage you to find out more information about Family Violence Prevention Services.



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**MARTA:** The one element I always go to in a relationship, a respectful relationship, there is one emotional component that has no place, and that is fear. If you are being respected, truly loved by the person, you will never be afraid of that person. So, if you are afraid, that is your test. (25:17)

**MOLLY:** I appreciate so much that you are doing this work. I appreciate when you come in and talk. You're kind of one of my favorites and whatever. Just kind of putting that out there. We will go from there. Thank you, thank you, thank you for being here.

**MARTA:** We will do it altogether. Thank you.

**KIRAN:** (whispers) Listen to women. (25:34)



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