

Domestic violence advocate honored in Duluth for her work

Ellen Pence was honored Friday for her more than 20 years of advocating for the victims of domestic abuse in Duluth. She helped found the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project and is credited with creating the Duluth Model of intervention in domestic violence cases.

By: [Mark Stodghill](#) , Duluth News Tribune

The day in 1980 that Ellen Pence came to Duluth to work on behalf of battered women and children, she went to a local theater to see "The Deer Hunter," a movie about a trio of Russian-American steelworker friends and their infantry service in the Vietnam War.

Pence remembers a scene in the movie where a man sees his girlfriend dancing with another man at a wedding dance. He breaks into the dance by tapping the man on the shoulder and then slugs the woman. Pence said the audience around her laughed.

"I stood up and said, 'I can't believe you're all laughing at this,'" Pence said. " 'The collective IQ of the people in this room must be about 106.' I said a few things and sat down. The next day I kept hearing, 'I hear you made a scene at the theater.' "

Pence went on to make a difference during more than 20 years of advocating for the victims of domestic abuse in Duluth.

She helped found the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project and is credited with creating the Duluth Model of intervention in domestic violence cases, which uses an interagency approach involving police, probation, courts and human services. The primary goal is to protect victims from ongoing abuse.

Duluth Mayor Don Ness proclaimed Friday "Ellen Pence Day." Police Chief Gordon Ramsay and Chief City Prosecutor Mary Asmus took turns reading the proclamation during a ceremony at City Hall.

Ness was out of town Friday.

Pence, 62, entered the Mayor's Reception Room wearing a surgical mask to protect against germs. She has terminal breast cancer and her resistance was down after completing her latest round of chemotherapy three days ago. She said she isn't going to be around much longer, but remains enthusiastic about her latest project, the St. Paul Blueprint for Safety, a domestic violence intervention funded by the state Legislature. Pence calls the project the "Duluth Model on steroids."

The Duluth Model has received worldwide recognition. A nationwide study found that batterers who complete programs based on the Duluth Model are less likely to repeat acts of domestic violence than those who don't.

The new model will deal with more issues of mental illness and social problems and differentiate between various forms of battering, she said.

Pence said she was one of "those lefty hippie dropouts" until she found her calling in the 1970s. She landed a job with the Minneapolis Housing Authority helping relocate people who had emergency housing problems. She also assisted women who were running away from battering husbands.

She immersed herself in the study of domestic violence and came to Duluth and helped develop the model of handling domestic violence that she says is seen as the "gold standard," around the world.

"Before Duluth did what it did [domestic violence] was strictly a social problem; police went and mediated and left," Pence said. "Duluth said, no, it's a crime. So they dumped it into the criminal justice system and said everyone has to get on board. ... Duluth has got an experimental attitude and a lot of leadership that wants to try and do things. They are not a foot-dragging kind of criminal justice system."

Pence works for Praxis International, a nonprofit research and training organization that works toward the elimination of violence in the lives of women and children.

"Her influence is global," said Scott Miller, team leader of the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project in Duluth. "I'm not sure anyone has influenced the work in responding to domestic violence more than Ellen. ... She has stayed at the cutting edge of this work for as long as she has been in it."

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