What Good is a Month?

This February is Black History Month. It is also American Heart, Children’s Dental Health, Marfan Awareness, Library Lovers’ and as of this year, Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Month. As a leader of Break the Cycle, a national abuse prevention organization, I don't want to discount the effort it takes to get the federal government to declare a national awareness month. Yet, I can't help but wonder, now that we've got one of our own, what good is it going to do us?

Last year at this time, the media was cluttered with the horrifying and very public act of violence perpetrated by Chris Brown against Rihanna. Overnight, every major media outlet jumped on the awareness-raising bandwagon. Even Oprah and Tyra got together to host a special show about teen dating violence. The groundwork was laid for a national dialogue on the issue.

However, just one month after the infamous incident, the Boston Herald published an article identifying a disturbing trend: those of us in the field were already witnessing—teens were pointing fingers at Rihanna assuming she must have done something to “deserve” the attack. Which begs the question, where did we go wrong?

Somewhere, among all of the hoopla and hullabaloo, we failed to get the message across. Or perhaps worse, we got the wrong message across.

Most of the coverage about Chris Brown and Rihanna focused on the shocking nature of the violence and that it involved celebrities. There was even a gruesome PSA created in which two teenagers reenacted the crime to an ominous narration of the actual police report. It seemed as though response to the issue was funneled exclusively through tabloid sensationalism.

Sometimes abuse isn’t that dramatic or apparent. It’s easy to recognize that severe acts of violence are abusive. But helping teens realize the subtle ways abusers use power and control to manipulate their victims requires a lot more than any single PSA, magazine article or television episode can deliver.

Focusing so much attention on this one example of extreme violence has no meaning without the context of how abusive relationships develop. The story overshadowed the details—what are the patterns, warning signs and reasons people stay in unhealthy relationships? If you’re already in danger, what can you do to protect yourself? As a society, what can we do to reduce the number of young people who experience abusive relationships?
Frankly, the statistics about teen dating violence are shocking enough -- without the sensationalism:

- Every year, 1.5 million high school students are physically abused by their dating partner and two-thirds of those who experience abuse never tell anyone.
- One-quarter of high school girls are sexually or physically abused by a dating partner.
- Of female homicide victims over age 15, one-third are killed by their husbands, ex-husbands or boyfriends.
- Half of young victims who report both dating violence and rape attempt suicide.

And nowadays an abuser can insult, attack, stalk, harass, text, call, email, spy, invade and threaten a target without even leaving the comfort of his or her own home. Nationally, there are some key players making significant strides on this issue.

Corporations like Mary Kay and Liz Claiborne have stepped up to work alongside organizations like Break the Cycle to push forward critical legislation, mandating that schools provide domestic violence prevention education. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Blue Shield of California Foundation have joined forces with the Family Violence Prevention Fund to launch community-wide pilot programs in 11 cities around the country. Web sites like loveisrespect.org and Break the Cycles thesafespace.org now offer crisis intervention and vital information for teens.

In spite of this progress, the majority of services for domestic violence victims are designed to help adults. If we're going to tackle this issue, teens need specialized services that address their unique situation. In many instances teens face unequal protection under the law, limited access to transportation, shelter or legal assistance, and schools that lack adequate policies to deal with dating abuse on campus. What's more, adults who are in a position to help often dismiss teen relationships for "puppy love" and overlook the seriousness and real danger of teen dating violence.

If we're sincere about helping young people foster healthy relationships, we need comprehensive educational programs in schools nationwide. But the lessons can't be limited to the teens. We must also educate parents, teachers, doctors and law enforcement on how to make young people safer.

We need schools to establish dating violence policies that ensure confidentiality and safety so teens can speak up when they are being abused. We must call on our lawmakers and political leaders to ensure that minors have equal access to safety and justice in every state. We need to examine the messages we send youth through television, film and radio. And we should be brave enough to ask ourselves, "Am I modeling healthy relationships for the young people in my life?"

The truth is, a month isn't enough. It's going to take a commitment from all of us, every day of every year, until the violence stops.