



Working Against Abuse

By Cathy Sliwoski

Mason Murawski Photography

Leslie Jingluski says her job as Community Engagement Coordinator at the Avalon Center is “one of the best things that has ever happened” to her, yet she would gladly give up her job tomorrow if it meant that domestic and sexual violence would cease to exist. For the past four years, she has been speaking to community groups and the public and fundraising for Avalon, which works to break the

cycle of abuse through prevention, education, shelter and support services in the greater Williamsburg and Middle Peninsula communities.

“I spend my days doing presentations on services that Avalon offers, discussing sexual assault and healthy relationships, discussing domestic violence and the power and control wheel,” Leslie says. “Pre-Covid, I was sitting

at festivals and engaging with the community about what healthy relationships are and what Avalon does to help stop the cycle. I love how Avalon gives women such empowerment. It is important to me that we have the platform to let people know that the only expert in a victim’s life is the victim.”

Avalon Center’s support services are comprehensive and free of charge. They include



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a 24-Hour Helpline (757-258-5051), a Toll-free Helpline (833-537-0970), a 20-bed emergency shelter, counseling and advocacy for children and youth who are victims or witnesses of abuse, assistance with transitional housing, individual and group counseling, community outreach and legal advocacy. The pandemic has given rise to other services like remote counseling and a series of Podcasts on the website called *Responding with Hope*.

“The remote counseling has been so beneficial because it alleviates the transportation barrier for some victims,” Leslie says. “I have been given the freedom and blessing from my Executive Director to run with the Podcast. It has been amazing. The conversations are casual, but they are impactful.”

When discussing domestic abuse, the most often posed question is, “Why doesn’t she just leave?” Leslie has a love/hate relationship with that question.

“I think the better question to ask is, ‘Why does he abuse her?’ Having said that, I understand where the question comes from,” Leslie says. “This gives me an opportunity to address

a lot of concerns and give a great education. Abusers are not abusive all the time. The abuse often starts a long time before the first act of physical violence. It usually starts with isolation from friends, then progresses to isolation from family. Once children are added to the equation, their safety becomes a priority. Victims are cut off from finances.”

In addition to her work at Avalon, Leslie and her husband, John, own a small restaurant in Richmond called Honey Whyte’s, named after a jazz song by a band they both loved, that has “a Cheers-like atmosphere with good, simple food,” she says. They’ve been at it for nearly two decades, surviving the recession around 2009 and a global pandemic, making sacrifices to create a “little burger place” that is now a neighborhood staple.

“There were times over the years that we wondered if we would make it to the end of the week, but we stuck it out,” Leslie says. “I am extremely proud of John and the business we built.”

It was through her work in the restaurant industry that Leslie first became aware of the

physical, mental, emotional and economic impacts of domestic violence. She was asked to serve on the board of a different domestic violence center, but it really hit home when a close friend’s seemingly idyllic life began to unravel from abuse.

“From the outside looking in, my friend’s life looked perfect. Her husband was very likeable and charismatic,” Leslie says. “But she came to work late one day with bruises and abrasions, and I realized she was covering for him.”

Some of the domestic violence statistics are gut-wrenching. One in three women and one in seven men are affected by domestic violence and sexual assault. A victim may have to leave the abuser several times before leaving for good. Locally during the pandemic, hotline calls to Avalon were up 50 percent. The lockdown mantra of “safer at home” did not ring true for abuse victims. With the lack of in-person schooling, teachers were less likely to be able to intervene by identifying child abuse cases in their classrooms.

Leslie is eagerly awaiting a return to fund-

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raising efforts for Avalon that get the community back together in one place for important conversations. Ninety percent of funds raised go directly to programs and support services at Avalon with very low administrative costs, Leslie says.

Leslie grew up on a farm in Chesterfield, Virginia. The oldest of five, she loved to ride quarter horses. She calls her childhood on the farm “amazing” with its ample life lessons and learning the value of hard work. “When you get up and muck a horse stall before school, you can appreciate sleeping in,” she says.

As a youngster, Leslie dreamed of being a country singer, with thoughts of moving to Nashville in pursuit of fame and fortune. Her parents suggested a back-up plan, so she attended East Tennessee State University from 1995-1997, and then transferred to Middle Tennessee State University. She met John in 1999 when both were performing in bands. Music is an important ingredient in both of their lives.

In 2015, Leslie founded Virginia School of Vocal Performance with the idea of giving

children a chance to hear themselves in a studio setting, the way other people heard them. She discovered a tremendous desire for such a program in the area.

“Within six months I had more students than I had time to coach, so I started a group performance program,” Leslie says. “The company morphed into a youth show choir, which was close to my heart because I had been in a show choir in high school. Unfortunately, the program lost steam in 2020. We had 58 performers ready to do an annual show and had sold over 600 tickets. Two days before the show was scheduled, Virginia shut down due to COVID. It was a devastating blow to those kids who had worked an entire year.”

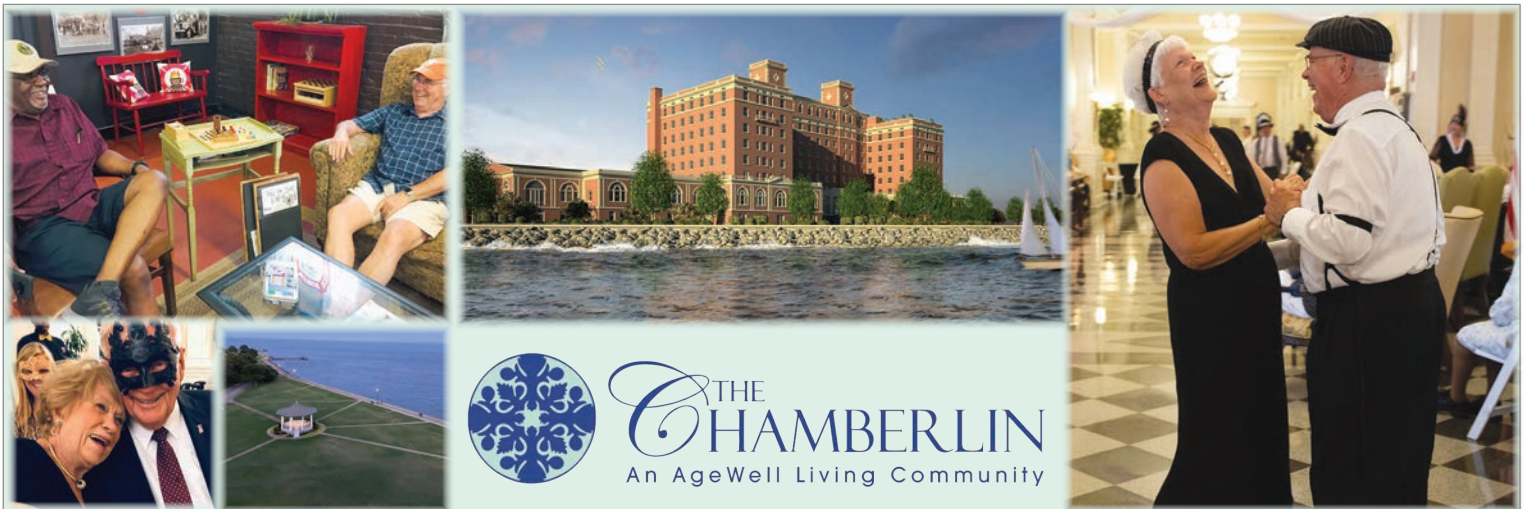
The Jingluskis have three children. John Michael, 15, a black belt in Tae Kwon Do and aspiring Olympian; Amber, 13, a competitive swimmer; and Wyn, 11, a soccer enthusiast. Four-legged family members are Betty, a rescued 11-year-old Basset Hound/Corgi mix; Penny, a three-year-old Golden Retriever; and Billie Jean, a 90-pound Poodle mix puppy. Family vacations, especially camping or travel

to the children’s sporting events, have been a source of happiness and adventure for the family. Because the family loves the water, they are building a home along the Rappahannock River.

“I think it’s so important for children to travel,” Leslie says. “We love the beach, and we really love visiting Puerto Rico.” Bucket list travel goals include Hawaii and visiting every National Park in the US. “We are starting off easy and trying to hit every Virginia State Park in the camper in the next few years.”

After her father died suddenly in 2019, Leslie turned to epoxy art as a form of therapy to cope with her grief. She admits that her hobby has become an obsession. “It is a great way to decompress,” she says. “Each project requires you to be very focused, but there is no wrong answer. It’s also very messy, which is fun.” Many of Leslie’s projects will find a way to benefit the Avalon Center by becoming items available in silent auctions. NDN

For more information on the Avalon Center, including registration information for upcoming fundraisers, visit <http://www.avaloncenter.org/>.



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