

Chesler, Cordell show concern about violence against women

By Mary Ann Seawell
Times Tribune staff

Shelters for battered women are "refuges from patriarchy" and outposts of "free feminist soil," according to feminist psychologist and author Phyllis Chesler.

Chesler spoke Sunday afternoon at a benefit for the Midpeninsula Support Network, which provides shelter, counseling and other services to battered women and their families. The benefit was held outdoors at the Midpeninsula YWCA in Palo Alto, where guests sipped wine, sampled hors d'oeuvres and listened to a string quartet before gathering to hear Chesler and Santa Clara County Municipal Court Judge LaDoris Hazzard Cordell. The pleasant garden setting, with the sun shining brightly, contrasted sharply with the harsh topic of violence against women.

Tracing her involvement with battered women, Chesler recalled that in 1971 she had seen a woman being beaten in a New York bar and had tried to intervene on the woman's behalf. The woman thanked her, but said that she shouldn't bother, that it was "too late." She was reminded, Chesler said, of a concentration camp victim who has given up all hope.

In 1977, while at a conference for battered women, a pregnant Chesler heard a young mother say that when she was pregnant, her husband

always went for her stomach, instead of hitting her in the face. Chesler recalled bending over in an unconscious attempt to protect her own unborn child.

Chesler, who is the author of "Women and Madness," "About Men" and "With Child: A Diary of Motherhood" is working on a book about mothers who lose custody of their children. Violence against women can take many forms, she noted. "The poverty of mothers is astounding," she said, noting that the phrase "feminization of poverty" is in danger of becoming a cliché. There is a double standard at work, she said, when judges don't seem to regard men's non-payment of child support as a crime but do act like it is a crime for women to go on welfare. Women's very poverty, she said, is often used as justification for removing children from a mother's custody.

In a dialogue with the audience, Chesler asked "How are we going to move over our defense budget to women and children, thereby placing our money on life rather than on death?" Suggestions for action included voting, civil disobedience and running for office.

"Let's say we save the earth. What are we going to do about the poverty of women?" Chesler asked. "Where will we get the good jobs,

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Times Tribune photo by Norbert von der Groeben
Judge LaDoris Hazzard Cordell urged women not to let themselves be divided.

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good pay, lots of security? What about pay for motherhood?"

No one had the answers, but in her speech LaDoris Cordell told women that they should never be satisfied. "Progress is measured not by how far we've come, but by how far we have to go," she said.

It is important to know the issues and to vote, she said. And, she added, judges, most of whom are men, must be educated about the seriousness of domestic violence and crimes against women. "No man who has been convicted of violating a restraining order has left my courtroom without being sentenced to jail," she said.

She also urged women not to let themselves be divided. "There has yet to exist in this country a strong women's movement of both white women and women of color," she said. The Midpeninsula Support Network is an organization capable of pulling women together across color lines, she said. "I give you my pledge that I will do all I can to help you cross those lines."

Concern about violence must extend to women in other countries, Cordell said, noting that in India, for example, women are often beaten and even burned when a husband's family does not receive a promised dowry.

Ending on an upbeat note, Cordell said, "A woman has to be twice as smart as a man to get the same things a man does. Fortunately for us, most men aren't too smart."

CORDELL (cont.)