

Storage unit gave victim a way out

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Tuesday, January 16, 2007

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Mary Contessa never thought her rented storage unit would become a safe house.

Like most people who rent space in similar facilities, her cubicle at Public Storage at 5440 Midlothian Turnpike was a place to keep things she didn't immediately need but wasn't ready to throw away.



Mary Contessa

But late last month, Contessa's hodgepodge collection of furniture, clothes, boxes and large stuffed animals became a stairway to freedom for a seriously wounded young woman who had been viciously stabbed and left to die in a locked, adjoining unit.

Today, more than two weeks after the attack, Contessa can't escape the thought that things would have turned out differently for the woman were it not for a series of seemingly innocuous events in her own life that facilitated the woman's escape.

The 18-year-old woman, whose name is being withheld by The Times-Dispatch, managed to break through the plywood wall separating the two units. Then she climbed to the top of Contessa's pile, where she propped her bleeding back against a large, white, stuffed rabbit and kicked an opening through the drywall above the door, allowing her to escape.

"I was in shock," said Contessa, 52, a local department-store employee who lives in Stratford Hills.

"There was blood everywhere. Handprints in blood. Blood on the big, old white rabbit.

"My very first thought was, what a survivor this is. Just the miracle of her being alive."

The incident also brought back memories of Contessa's own experience as a victim of domestic violence when she was young. She said she had been in an abusive relationship for a decade before escaping from her home in Texas back to Richmond, where she was born.

"I realized how similar it was," she said. "It scared me, and scared me for her.

"But when I heard about what had happened to her, I thought, no wonder she's alive. I had angels protecting me."

The woman -- an aspiring college student who moved to the Richmond area from Atlantic City, N.J. -- was released from the hospital a week after the Dec. 30 attack. She is recovering from a punctured lung and about two dozen stab wounds to her back, head and face.

Richmond police said her boyfriend, Kip Burns, 23, is under arrest in North Carolina and is fighting extradition to Richmond, where he faces malicious wounding and abduction charges stemming from the attack.

Contessa said she had rented the unit for the past 10 years, initially using it to store some items that didn't fit in her apartment.

The unit was never very full, until a year and a half ago, when a flood in her building forced her to relocate. She moved many items from her home and stacked them high in the rented space, a height that allowed the woman to climb to the level where she could kick through the drywall above the door.

Contessa said the space where the woman kicked a hole to enter her unit was about the only uncluttered area along the common wall of both cubicle.

And the pile that she climbed might not have existed if Contessa had gotten around to cleaning out the unit, as she had been planning to do in the weeks preceding the attack on the woman.

"My plan was to leave nothing in there," she said. "I was just waiting for the next good weekend."

"If all the pieces had not been where they were, not fallen into place, this girl would not have made it," said Contessa's friend, Jan Johnson.

Now that the woman has made it, a number of people in the community have extended offers of help. Callers have volunteered to contribute for an education fund for the woman, who dreams of becoming a doctor. And a plastic surgeon, Dr. Joe Niamtu, has offered to help repair the damage done to the woman's face from the stab wounds.

Detective Rick Edwards of the Richmond Police Department's major-crimes unit has relayed the offers of assistance to the woman, who is living in Chesterfield County with her mother and younger sister.

Contessa, too, has been impressed by the woman's courage and commitment to do

something with her life. Still emotionally strained, she has yet to meet the woman who broke through her storage unit and entered her life. But she's getting there.

"I'm a very spiritual person," Contessa said. "I think God has long plans for her -- and in many ways for myself -- that I have to explore."

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