

## The Sheila Wellstone Institute, Wellstone Action Fund

*It's time that we tell the secret,  
It's time that we all come together to work toward ending the violence.  
It is no longer an issue just for women; it's an issue for women, an issue for men,  
an issue for children, an entire community's issue.*

The Sheila Wellstone Institute was established as a core component of the Wellstone Action Fund with the goal of continuing Sheila's work to end violence against women and children. Sheila began her work soon after Paul Wellstone was elected to the United States Senate in 1990. She chose to use her role as a public person to advance an issue that was increasingly making headlines and for which few solutions were offered: domestic violence. Having read countless articles while working in the Northfield High School Library, Sheila recognized that women, children, and families were experiencing outrageous levels of violence, and that abuse and homicides were being identified as crimes with no attention at all to ways to prevent or intervene in the violence. She was determined to work for solutions and to change the public understanding of this issue so that it would become a focus for strong programs and bold policy solutions. From the beginning, Sheila approached the work as a strategist, an advocate, and an organizer. Her engagement in work to end the violence advanced in ways fully consistent with Paul's approach to social change. He was convinced that social change required good policy, good politics, and good organizing. Sheila worked on all points of what we now call this three point strategy: the "Wellstone Triangle."

**Building a strategy:** For the first twelve months of her work on violence prevention and intervention, Sheila built an agenda around key questions: What is the nature of the problem? What can we learn from survivors, advocates, and the research community? What forms does the violence take and how do we recognize the likelihood of a relationship becoming violent or escalating? How does the violence impact victims, children who witness, whole families, and communities? She traveled the state, meeting with survivors, family members, violence prevention and intervention professionals, advocates, police and fire "first responders," judges, educators, clergy, and physicians. She had willing teachers and was welcomed by organizational leaders and engaged individuals throughout the state, including rural places and tribal reservations. And this year of learning prepared Sheila to define her strategy.

Sheila knew that she could bring people together to promote the importance of seeing domestic violence as a problem of concern to the entire community, and she knew that she could work with Paul and other national leaders to promote and pass policy and systems changes that would lead to preventing violence, protecting victims, and ending the violence. Such change, she understood, would be a long term effort to change public understanding and tolerance for the violence. And she knew that she could be a force for building the political will to advance change.

**Good policy:** As an advocate, Sheila worked with Paul and his colleagues, aiming for the introduction and hoped-for passage of major changes at the national level. Together they worked on landmark public policy changes, including

- The Violence Against Women Act 1994 and (2000)
- Legislation Preventing Domestic Violence Offenders from Carrying a Gun (1993)
- Violence Reduction Training Act (improved training for health care professionals) (1993)
- Child Safety Act (for supervised visitation centers) (1993)
- Children Who Witness Domestic Violence Protection Act (1999)
- Battered Women's Economic Security and Safety Act (1999)
- Health Benefits to Abused Family Members of People in the Armed Services (1999)
- Trafficking Victims Protection Act (2000)
- National Domestic Violence Hotline Enhancement Act (2000)
- Expanding Federal Assistance for Victims of Dating Violence (2001)
- The Victim's Economic Security and Safety Act of (2001)

Sheila's advocacy extended to testifying across the nation for state and local funding and appropriations, for increasing awareness and promoting prevention measures, and for ensuring that all components of the community understood the implications of domestic violence for the quality of life and safety in communities. She advocated with Paul and to the Clinton Administration for the appointment of judges, loving called "Sheila's Judges," whose records and work reflected a deep and lasting understanding of the violence and a commitment to end the violence.

**Good Organizing:** As Paul said, "moving a progressive agenda requires not only good policy. It also requires effective organizing and political engagement." Sheila was masterful at organizing. She linked people from diverse perspectives, programs, and places to find their common ground: working for changes that would lead to an informed public, safety for families, improved practices and policies, and broad public insistence on stopping the violence. She said on every possible occasion: "We will no longer tolerate the violence, and we will no longer say that it is someone else's business."

Sheila worked with Paul to organize allies and form bipartisan coalitions of political leaders to pass the Violence Against Women Act and subsequent proposals. She brought together the research initiatives, violence prevention, intervention programs, sexual assault programs, shelter programs, business interests, medical practitioners, county health programs, media, clergy, and always the advocates and survivors and families to build the collective power needed to secure policy imperatives and funding needed for preventing and ending relational violence in its many forms. Her organizing expanded to national arenas.

Good organizers understand that they build leaders. Wellstone Action and the Sheila Wellstone Institute focus on leadership development. Sheila's leadership made it impossible to ignore the issue or assume that someone else would address solutions. She raised her voice in a sea of silence, denial, resistance, and secrecy- all of which resulted in the same end: nothing happened. Her willingness to be bold and speak out is core to the philosophy of organizing and of leadership. The fact that she always respected and acknowledged the leadership of others is also a critical element. Her strategy of listening before acting – not pretending to "represent" survivors but to provide space and support for their own voices is

yet another element of her strength as a leader and organizer. Her work, and the work of the Sheila Wellstone Institute, is not to speak for, but with others.

**Good Politics:** Political engagement was the third component of Sheila's strategy. She worked brilliantly in support of Paul's reelection in 1996 and for the 2002 campaign. And wherever she spoke, she touched people with the stories of what violence was doing to people's lives and to our communities. She wove into every speech a vision of how important it is to carry forward the movement to end violence. And she turned out people who believed in the core values that she espoused, not only to support Paul's work as a Senator, but to raise the issue of violence with local candidates and to hold them accountable based on whether or not they acted to end the violence.

*As Sheila reminded us: In a just society, we come together with a common goal of making sure that everyone is safe. In a just society, we are not going to tolerate the violence and we are going to be a part of the fundamental change of attitude that is going to stop the cycle of violence. Hennepin County Medical Center, Oct. 25, 1995.*

The Sheila Wellstone Institute and Wellstone Action are committed to carrying forward Sheila's work for change through education, supporting sound policy strategies, and, above all, strengthening this critical social change movement with effective organizing.