



Tammi and Jim Burns show T-shirts sold by her apparel business, Break the Chain. SHARON ZWIERYNA/Lebanon Express

To change lives, break the chain

By Sharon Zwierzyzna, Lebanon Express writer

There are just some moments that change your life forever.

For Tammi Burns, it was one evening in 2006 when she was putting on makeup in the bathroom, getting ready to go out to dinner.

"Suddenly it hit me," she said. "Break the Chain! Break the Chain! I came running through the house screaming, 'Break the Chain! Break the Chain!'"

That was the birth of her new clothing line designed to break the chain of violence and abuse. Burns, who grew up in Lebanon, is the driving energy behind Break the Chain Apparel. She calls it "clothing with a voice," and it's being marketed around the country.

The inspiration for the line of trendy-looking T-shirts, sweat shirts, hoodies and soon-to-be-added caps was drawn from the years of physical and verbal abuse Burns experienced. Those 'horrific times' began shortly after she left Lebanon High School.

She and her family had moved to Lebanon from Idaho when her dad, Don Grove, landed a job as math teacher at LHS. A bit of a rebel teen anyway, it all snapped for Burns in 1979 or '80 when a series of tragic traffic accidents took the lives of several of her classmates, one after the other.

"Every month someone else was dying, someone we had known all our lives," Burns recalled. "It was horrible. I remember one day standing in the hall at school saying, 'Who's next?'"

She left school, left home and left town, and that's when the roots of the abuse began. A few really bad relationships left her battered and broken. It's not easy getting Burns to talk about those times.

"I don't play the victim," she said. "I've been through a lot of hell. And," she added slowly, "I've probably contributed to a lot of that myself. I'm not a martyr or anything like it. Just a regular woman whose life was out of control and out of my control. I don't want to talk about it. You don't want to think about yourself being controlled by somebody. It's an

ugly, degrading feeling."

In one relationship, it started with little things n being called 'stupid' all the time, told to go change her clothes because he didn't want to see her in 'those kinds of clothes,' told she was too fat, too thin, not pretty enough. Then it progressed. She was raped, hit, humiliated. When it got to a point where she feared not only for her own life, but for her two children's lives, she ran.

"Everyone thinks it's easy to leave an abusive relationship," Burns said. "But that person who's abusive to you is someone you love, or loved at one time. Plus the economics of leaving everything you own. My kids are the reason I left when I decided it was him or us. Thank God for children!"

She moved in with a friend for a while. Burns had a good career as a fleet car salesperson, and managed to get herself back on her feet financially after a time. About 15 years ago, she started up a clothing line called No Violence, but the No Fear line challenged the name in court n and won.

Discouraged and defeated, Burns gave up on the hope of changing damaged lives through her message of change. Ten years ago, she met Jim Burns. It wasn't easy for Tammi to trust what she calls her 'man magnet' and get back into a relationship again.

"She was broken," Jim explained. "We went through a lot of trying times, but I knew from the moment we got together it was meant to be. She didn't feel safe, not for a long time. I'm still not sure she totally does now. But she's an amazing woman."

On Tammi's website, www.breakthechainapparel.com, she explained, "I have had to retrain my brain, to think normally instead of thinking strategically. I no longer have to fear that my words or actions are going to cause me physical or emotional pain."

The Burns' are convinced that God has been pushing them into trying the clothing line again. Tammi said, "I prayed and prayed and prayed about it." That's when the inspiration for "Break the Chain!" trademark came bursting through.

With the creative help of Church Artworks in Salem, Burns' ideas come to life. One of the shirts with the words 'Make a stand against an angry hand' has hand prints hidden in the artwork. Another says, 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but sometimes words are worse.' Then there's the white skull on a black shirt, with the skull formed by the words 'Meth equals death.'

Last year Burns started up Project Change Reaction, which brings the message to middle and high schools. Once a school signs up, the Break the Chain! team speaks before the assembled student body, comes up with a social issue that the kids are facing, and then sponsors a slogan drive. The winner of the slogan works with the professional design team to create the art work. Local businesses are encouraged to sponsor the effort. Once the shirts are produced, with the school name on the back, students sell the shirts, with all the profits going back to the school. Salem's Stephens Middle School was the first school to participate in the project. Others in Mill City, Stayton and Albany have also signed on. Burns said she would love to bring Project Change Reaction to Lebanon schools.

"That would be the ultimate for me," she said.

Burns is passionate about getting her message out in public, getting abuse out of the closet.

"The one thing that people don't understand is that domestic violence and abuse doesn't have anything at all to do with income or status or job n it's a people issue. It can happen to a woman in any income bracket at all. Everyone thinks it's easy to leave that situation."

"It's not," she added.