

*“I don’t care if I don’t have sex for the rest of my life;
I’m never going to take it from someone.” – Danny*

TO THE SURVIVORS

Robert Uttaro

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Robert Uttaro does not give medical advice or prescribe the use of any technique as a form of treatment for physical, emotional, or medical problems without the advice of a physician, either directly or indirectly. This book is not a substitute for legal, medical, psychological, or other health care professional advice and treatment. Robert Uttaro cares about helping people impacted by sexual violence, but he recommends you see qualified lawyers, legal advocates, physicians, therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists and other health care professionals regarding your legal and individual health needs.

This book is dedicated to all who have been affected by sexual violence.

Some of the names and places in this book have been changed to protect confidentiality. Also, I will not use the real name of the organization I worked for as a volunteer. To protect confidentiality, I will refer to that organization as “The Healing Place” and “THP”.

A portion of proceeds from the sale of this book will be donated to rape crisis centers.

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March Fourteenth

Here is a list, God, of everything I'm never forgetting.

Burns on her legs.

Impressions of his hands around her neck.

The all over purple-ly skin.

She can not

will not

can not

will not

can not

will not do the internal part of that effing kit, no.

(I hang back in the waiting room as they implore her for hours and pray they will...oh-my-god...stop raping.)

She can not

will not

can not

will not

can not

will not

can not

will not say his name, no.

(She gives up, writes alphabet letters only kind of true; no matter love, I understand you.)

A 72-hour psych hold.

Cops and detectives.

My brother-in-law in rare tears the morning not-one-of-us-slept after.

Silence all these years.

And the prize for speaking? A brand new horror show.

Doesn't seem worth it now or ever.

She never feels clean.

She'll never.

Not after a hundred hospital showers.

Her fear of the past.

Her fear of today.

Her fear of tomorrow and every hour before and after this moment.

Overwhelming.

The questions.

The shaking.

The stares of strangers and remembering when.

(I'm struggling not to vomit. We're trying not to live this.)

*“Can they see it on me?” She wonders like before.
“Why can’t they see it, the secret I can’t say?”*

She says prayers, but not like the ones she prays when he comes home to decide, “I miss your mother” and “You know, you’re so pretty.”

Try again. I see a light in the sky.

Your heart is broken.

My heart is broken.

Our heart is bro-ken.

(But... try them again.)

-A poem Jenee wrote in response to visiting her friend in the hospital who was beaten, choked, burned, and raped.

INTRODUCTION

“This book is not about statistics.”

I never thought I would volunteer at a rape crisis center. I always knew rape and sexual assault existed, but for most of my life I did not seriously consider ways in which I could help those affected by sexual violence. I could not imagine that a large number of people actually experience such an evil and detrimental horror as rape is, but unfortunately many do. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would help play a positive role in the healing process of rape and sexual assault survivors, educate people, and be active in the fight against sexual violence, but often times our lives go in different directions than we plan or expect.

Sexual violence is very complex. Given that, I will not speak for every human being who has been affected by this crime. This book is by no means a blue print of how all rapes and sexual assaults occur, nor will I tell you how to feel. I do not have all of the answers to the many difficult questions that arise when discussing sexual violence, and I obviously do not know everyone who has experienced sexual violence. This book is about my experiences as a rape crisis counselor and the survivors I have met who felt strong enough and comfortable enough to share their stories with me and you. I have my opinions and ideas about different aspects of sexual violence, but neither I nor the people you will soon meet speak for humanity. Everyone's story is his or her own. Everyone's story is different. Growth and healing is different for everyone.

Sexual violence is not only a violent crime, but it is also a serious health issue. It affects people's bodies, minds, hearts, and souls. I do not wish to name anyone's experiences or claim knowledge of all the effects people may feel as a result of sexual violence, but I do know some things. I have learned that many survivors of sexual violence feel shame. Shame directly causes a variety of negative health issues, including mentalities about one's self and behaviors. I hope to attempt to alleviate some of that shame through this book.

I have always cared about people and the world we all live in. As long as I can remember, I have been intrigued by the complexities of the human experience and questioned what it means to be human. It is fascinating to me that some people are happy, fulfilled, or loving, while others

are unhappy, unfulfilled, or hateful. Even as a young boy, I questioned, *Why is there so much hatred and violence in the world? Why do some people hate other people? Why do some people hurt other people? Why do some people rape other people? Why do some people kill other people?* I have come to understand that I may never know the answers to these questions and many of the other difficult life questions that people contemplate, but one thing I do know is this: There are far too many men, women, and children who are sexually violated. It is my opinion that we are foolish if we do not take the issue of sexual violence seriously and help play a positive role in the healing process of individuals who experience it, as well as those indirectly impacted by it.

Throughout my life, I have been very empathetic toward the suffering of others. I contemplated the effects of violence, but I never did enough about the problems that I saw because I felt insecure. I didn't think my voice mattered. I could easily discuss the variety of life issues with family and friends in my own home, but I did not have the confidence within myself to step out of my comfort zone. I had the passion deep down inside of me to help in some kind of way, but my insecure illusions about myself and my abilities crippled me. Given my insecurities, I never once thought I would join an organization whose purpose was to help any person affected by sexual violence at no cost to him or her, but I'm glad I broke down my own ridiculous barriers. Ultimately, making the choice to volunteer at The Healing Place changed my life and allowed me to impact the lives of some.

Volunteering at THP has been the most fulfilling aspect of my life. The work has allowed me to teach and help people on their healing journeys. I have even managed to inspire some people to get active and volunteer. One of the most meaningful things I have done in my life is plant a seed in people's minds about THP's existence. I look at it like this: How can people get the help and services they need if they don't even know those services exist in or near their community?

Some people think that volunteering at a rape crisis center is morbid and depressing. For me, that has been true at times given the severity and intensity of the work. However, in my experiences, the good has far outweighed the bad. I have met some of the sweetest, most compassionate, caring, talented, and strong individuals while doing this work. The people I have worked alongside and the survivors with whom I have interacted inspire me in a variety of ways. They have helped me to become a better listener, counselor, and public speaker. Because of their

example, I have learned a tremendous amount about these issues and gained more confidence in myself. I am blessed to have been accepted by THP and become a part of their family.

My experiences as a counselor have been painful and fulfilling. My heart has been broken and uplifted many times, but my spirit and faith have never left me. I've seen a lot of pain and heard a lot of horrible stories. I have listened to some of the most disturbing things possible. Sometimes what seems like a lie and impossible is the truth and possible. Some people experience vile crimes and live with painful memories that others cannot believe could even happen. Yet in such adversity, the strength of rape survivors is incredibly inspirational.

It is at times incomprehensible to acknowledge that such disturbing crimes are committed against others and then meditate on the damaging effects of those crimes. My journey as a rape crisis counselor and the stories you will read in this book are less than a fraction of the whole picture of survivors, perpetration, and sexual violence. But at least this is something. I hope this book can give anyone who reads it some sense of clarity, strength, and hope, as well as another opportunity for growing and healing if needed.

This book is not about statistics. The statistics are certainly out there; you can research and read them for yourself if you want to. I, however, will not share or focus on statistics because I do not want to treat people as numbers. Also, I believe rape and sexual assault are the least reported violent crimes. If it is true that these are the least reported crimes, then that means most of the people who experience these crimes are not represented in those statistics. To me, giving flawed and inaccurate statistics of rape and sexual assault is a disservice to those who do not report.

I believe there are many justified reasons why most people do not report, but I will mention two major reasons: First, many survivors do not report because they fear they will not be believed. Many have an image in their head about what a victim should look like because of the media and therefore will not report. Second, it is extremely difficult to report a violent crime against someone that is known to the person. Most survivors know their perpetrators, and the relationship between them makes reporting even harder than it might have been if the crime were perpetrated by a stranger. The bottom line is none of us will be able to understand the full extent of how common sexual violence is based on statistics because the statistics are only a fraction of what really occurs.

My simple truth when discussing the prevalence of sexual violence is this: I don't know. I simply do not know how many people have been raped or sexually assaulted, nor do I know how many instances of violation have occurred in a single person's life. I also do not know how many people have been indirectly impacted by sexual violence or how many cases of indirect impact have occurred in a single person's life. No one knows.

I have to warn you before you continue reading that this book is graphic at times and may be triggering if you are a survivor. You will read people's own words about their rape or multiple experiences with sexual violence. You will also have a chance to hear how the crime has affected them, how they have dealt with it, and how they have grown in their healing process. This book will be hard to read at times, and again, I have to stress that it may be triggering for some. With that, however, I encourage you that this book reflects and offers immense strength and hope.

In this book you will read the real stories of real people. I believe these stories will incite emotions and possibly painful memories. I highly suggest you read this book with a loved one near you, either in person or on the phone. This of course can be a family member, friend, therapist, religious or spiritual guide, or anyone else. Stay close to someone you love and trust. However, I also completely understand if you want to read this alone and not share with anyone. I just want to provide you with all possible options of ways to read these pages moving forward. Please take care of yourself, and do whatever it is that makes you feel better before, during, and after reading this book.

You do not have to read this book if it is too personal or too hard. There are resources and trained professionals that can help you or anyone you know. If you find you need help or information, I implore you to search for rape crisis centers in your area on the internet. For example, through a simple online query, I located sixteen rape crisis centers in Wyoming in only ten seconds. If you can't read the whole book or even parts of it, please try to find a rape crisis center in your area and make that phone call. I want this book to be helpful, not hurtful.

I believe it is imperative to mention that you will read the word "survivor" throughout this book. I use this term because that is the term I was trained to use when referring to people who have been raped or sexually assaulted. Many people embrace this term and identify with it. However, not everyone identifies with this term. In fact, some people hate the term "survivor", including those who have been raped and sexually assaulted. This word does not reflect how everyone chooses to identify themselves, but I will use it for the purposes of this book.

This book is dedicated to all who have been affected by sexual violence. I have learned throughout this journey that anyone can be raped or sexually assaulted, regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status or sexual orientation. This is true from infants to the elderly. Sexual violence is very detrimental, and I hope to alleviate some of that detriment. I hope that anyone who has been affected by sexual violence will seek out help if they need it. I hope people will become more educated on the realities and prevalence of sexual violence. I hope to challenge rape myths and have people think about this crime differently than they may currently think about it. I hope people stop blaming survivors for being raped and start believing and listening to them. I hope this book helps empower those who feel lost and disempowered. I simply hope this book somehow helps, however you may define help for yourself if you need it.

Chapter 1

CHILDHOOD

"I cut myself when I was a little kid. I do not label myself a cutter, but I have cut. I took a kitchen knife and brought it into the bathtub with me, where I proceeded to cut my whole left forearm. I did not cut deep enough to leave scars, but my whole forearm, from my elbow to my wrist, was covered in red cuts. I told my friend Aaliyah that I fell in thorns. She believed me."

People often ask me, "Why did you join The Healing Place?" A lot of people think that I was raped, which I guess is a decent assumption given that I volunteered at a rape crisis center. I wasn't raped. At least not that I know of. Later in this book you will meet Don, a man who was raped by his uncle at the tender age of four. He didn't even know he had been sexually abused until over fifty years later. Sexual violence is very traumatic and memory loss is real. So is it possible that I experienced sexual abuse as a child? Yes. Do I have any memory of it? No. So as of the writing of this book, I would say the following to those people: No, I have not been raped or sexually assaulted.

I was born on April 4, 1985. Two months prior to my birth, Cardinal Bernard Law of the Boston Archdiocese visited my parents' local church. My mother, being the devout Catholic woman she is, went to her church with genuine excitement to meet Cardinal Law. She hoped to receive a blessing for her fifth and final child from the Cardinal. My mother waited at the end of a long line in the back of the church for this special moment. When she finally met Cardinal Law, he could obviously see my mother was seven months pregnant. Cardinal Law touched my mother's stomach and said to her, "I'm going to bless you for a healthy baby and for you a quick, easy delivery."

The water came out meconium-stained when the doctor broke my mother's water. My mother feared that I was dead. The doctor said, "I think the cord is around the baby's neck." When they delivered and my head came out, the doctor unraveled the cord from around my neck three times. I swallowed a lot of meconium, so they alerted the pediatrician immediately. As soon as I was born, attendants rushed me to a table so that the pediatrician could suck the meconium out of my throat with a tube. Thankfully, the meconium did not enter my lungs and I did not die. Afterwards, the obstetrician said, "By the color of the placenta, I think the cord was wrapped around the neck for two months." My mother thinks it is ironic that the umbilical cord began to wrap around my neck at the same time Cardinal Law touched her stomach and "blessed her". I think it's more than ironic.

I was born on Holy Thursday. Holy Thursday is a day celebrated by Catholics and other Christian denominations to commemorate the Last Supper. In the Bible, the Last Supper is the story of when Jesus ate dinner and drank wine with his friends, better known as his disciples, before being arrested, imprisoned, beaten mercilessly, humiliated, and crucified. My parents left the hospital after three days on Easter Sunday, which is celebrated by Catholics and Christians as the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and brought me to Sunday mass. I was in a Catholic Church before I was in a home.

I grew up the youngest of five in an Italian/Irish/Scottish American Catholic household. Religion was always a big part of my life mainly because of my family and the fact that I had to go to a Catholic school for seven years. When I was in the first grade, my parents attended a teacher conference where my teacher at the time told them, "The old nuns would point to Robert and say he has a vocation." Some may think that statement means I should have become a Catholic priest. Who knew the old nuns were actually right, except my vocation was not to be a Catholic priest; it was to try my best to help rape survivors.

In August of 2007, I completed my training to be a rape crisis counselor with the sole purpose of helping rape survivors in any way possible. I didn't care if I organized files, swept the floors, or cleaned the toilets – I just wanted to help. I never thought of the possibility that I was sexually abused because I never had memories of being sexually abused, but I learned over time that some people thought I had been. The seed became planted in my head when a full-time rape crisis counselor disclosed to me that an older relative had sexually abused her. After she disclosed, she looked at me like it was my turn. It seemed like she wanted me to disclose, even

though I never once thought I was sexually abused myself. I say that based on her eyes, facial expressions, and the inquiring silence that hung between us after she spoke. I had never experienced an interaction like this before – an interaction that is impossible to truly describe through words.

To not have memories of being sexually abused, and then have a certified counselor instill the possibility of me being sexually abused was disturbing and frightening. A certified counselor planted the worst possible seed in my mind, which to me is blatantly unprofessional and morally abhorrent. Because of this counselor, for the first time in my life I asked myself the question: *Did it happen to me?* That night really fucked me up in my mind and I started to go crazy.

I began to spend a lot of time in deep thought contemplating my past, but specifically my childhood. I cut myself when I was a little kid. I do not label myself a cutter, but I have cut. I took a kitchen knife and brought it into the bathtub with me, where I proceeded to cut my whole left forearm. I did not cut deep enough to leave scars, but my whole forearm, from my elbow to my wrist, was covered in red cuts. I told my friend Aaliyah that I fell in thorns. She believed me.

During this time of adult reminiscence, I called Aaliyah.

“Aaliyah, do you remember when I fell in thorns?”

She did.

I asked, “How old was I?”

“Bobby, you were in the fourth grade.”

On a different night I asked, “Aaliyah, do you remember when I became an altar boy?”

“The fourth grade.”

I broke down and cried that night, which historically was very hard for me to do.

Memories started to come. I hated the Catholic school that I went to as a little kid. After the first day of first grade, I said to my mother, “Ma, I’m ready to go back to my old school.” I had to attend this school for seven years until my parents listened to my pleas and finally let me leave. I didn’t even care about graduating with my best friends; I just wanted out. The school that I went to taught me valuable life lessons on hypocrisy. For the purposes of this book, I will only write about the allegations of priests breaking their vows of celibacy, sexual abuse, and an arrest of one priest.

Priests and nuns lived next to the school, which became known to some of us as a transition school. The priests used to get transferred in and out, to and from different parishes. For some

reason the nuns never did. When I was in the second grade, the most popular priest was transferred. The people loved him and expressed sadness at seeing him leave. Some people questioned why he left. Much of the information that circulated on his departure suggested he had been sent to help poor people in the ghettos. Many people seemed upset because they believed they had lost the coolest, funniest, and most charismatic priest: Father Jackson. Father Jackson was rumored to have had sex with a lot of women even though he had taken a vow of celibacy.

I do not have proof of Father Jackson or any of the other priests at my school breaking their vows of celibacy or sexually abusing children. I will however mention one rumor of Father Thompson and one arrest of Father Tim. At the time, Father Thompson held the position of head priest, which meant he controlled the parish. He drove a Mercedes and reeked of alcohol every day. A rumor persisted that he had had a "relationship" with a young boy. I do not believe that an arrest ever occurred, nor do I know if the allegations were true. Father Tim, however, was arrested.

As adults, my friend Tito said to me one day, "Dude, did you hear about Father Tim?"

"Who the hell is Father Tim," I said.

"Are you serious? He was a priest at our school. He got arrested for following a guy into the woods and sexually assaulting him."

"Get the hell outta here."

"Dude, check it out."

Tito pulled up the news article on my computer. Father Tim had been arrested for indecent assault and battery, but the charges were eventually dropped. I started to remember Father Tim once I saw his face from the article. My initial reaction was rage. I wanted to stab Tim in his throat with the sharpest knife I could find. My own reaction scared me. I'm not saying I'm proud of my anger or right in how I reacted, but this is how I felt in the moment.

It is important to note that there are some truly amazing Catholic priests throughout the world, but I do not believe they existed at my school or the church where I served as an altar boy. I believe that some of the priests repeatedly moved in and out were guilty of sexual abuse, but my beliefs ultimately don't matter. I have no proof or evidence, so I cannot say anything with any certainty. But just because someone is not found guilty in a court of law does not mean a crime or multiple crimes have not occurred or will not occur in the future.

Sexual abuse exists in every religion, but the sexual abuse scandal within the Catholic Church that became known to the public started in Massachusetts. Catholic priests accused of sexual abuse were moved from parish to parish to parish under the supervision of Cardinal Law. Instead of punishment, the Catholic Church chose to welcome Cardinal Law into Vatican City. Cardinal Bernard Law, the man who “blessed” my mother for a healthy birth of me, was never incarcerated for his role in allowing little boys to be raped and sexually assaulted.

The sexual abuse scandal within the Catholic Church has always affected me. If I’m honest with myself, I have to acknowledge that I served as an altar boy before the scandal came to fruition. This makes me question the possibility of being sexually abused given that some (not all) altar boys were raped and I started cutting myself at or around the same time I became an altar boy. However, I am of the firm belief that I was not sexually abused given that I have no memories of ever being sexually abused.

The more I contemplated on my past, the more memories came. Sadly, the same certified rape crisis counselor who made me think I was sexually abused, along with others, has questioned my motives for volunteering at a rape crisis center. For some reason, these insecure and confused individuals didn’t have the decency to attempt to think of how I have been affected by sexual violence without being raped or sexually assaulted.

Throughout my life I have seen sexual violence in movies, TV shows, on the news, in music, and in music videos. I have been listening to music that deals with issues of sexual violence since my childhood. Listening to intense music, screams, or reading emotional lyrics has always affected me. I remember listening to a song about child rape, and I immediately said to my friend, “Do you hear this? Do you fuckin hear this?” I have always been affected by sexual violence and I always cared. Even since a young age, I questioned what it all meant.

Not only have I seen sexual violence in music and in the media throughout my life, but I have known rape and sexual assault survivors as well. One of my good friends was molested by one of her family members. She and I have never spoken of it, but I always cared. In the only way I knew how to speak about such vileness, I wrote a heavy metal song for her and for anyone else like her when I was in high school. The song was solely about rape. I excitedly gave my lyrics to my other guitarist hoping that he would like what I had written. I actually believed he would be just as excited to create a brutal heavy metal song and speak out against such sickness. Unfortunately, he laughed at me and thought I was crazy. He didn’t get it. We did not create

music to the lyrics and I never tried to write lyrics again. I felt alone in my thinking and continued to feel sad for my friend who had been abused.

It saddens me to acknowledge that those individuals who have questioned my motives for volunteering at a rape crisis center did not attempt to understand me, my loved ones, the people I spoke to, and the people I will never meet. They only seemed to think that I had been sexually abused and questioned my motives for reasons I do not understand. They somehow did not even seem to consider my care for others. That kind of thinking is simply ignorant and ridiculous, and they are wrong. However, their beliefs about my potential sexual abuse confused me and made me go crazy for at least two years.

Chapter 2

GETTING INVOLVED

“I did not call for this work, but rather, I was called to it.”

Whether I was sexually abused or not is ultimately irrelevant. The truth is you don't have to personally experience something to care about something. I care about gang violence, but I've never been in a gang, nor do I want to join one. I care about prison reform, but I've never been incarcerated. I care that children die of starvation, but I've been blessed that my parents were able to put food on the table for my four siblings and I. I think and care about many things, such as the existence or non-existence of God. I often contemplate what it means if God exists, as well as what it means if God does not exist. I personally believe “good” exists, and I believe “evil” exists. I think about evil, because I see a lot of evil in the world. To me, rape is one of the most evil crimes in existence, and I felt a calling to combat that evil in some way.

In my last semester at college, my professor assigned a book that taught me a lot about rape and the aftermath of what can happen to survivors. Thankfully, I became more educated on the reality that is sexual violence. My commentary on these learning experiences is short and simple: I've always known people hurt people. I've always known rape exists. I've always believed evil exists. What I didn't know, and learned over time, is that many rape survivors are treated horrendously by others. What I didn't know is how much victim blaming occurs to survivors. The victim blaming that I began to learn about drove me insane. I felt disgusted, horrified, and sad, yet this ignited a passion deep within to do something about it.

During class, our professor told us that staff from THP would come and speak to us. He also said there would be volunteer opportunities for anyone who wanted to volunteer. I didn't know if I would volunteer or not, but I knew I had to attend that class because I really wanted to listen to people who chose to do this kind of work full-time.

After a few minutes of lecture from my professor, Carmen and Aila walked into the classroom. Carmen led the Community Outreach Department and Aila led the Legal Department. They both spoke so gently, yet I heard strength in their voices. They looked and sounded like

some of the sweetest people in the world. I sat in my chair and listened to them speak about sexual violence and THP. I watched them in awe and admiration of the fact that they dedicated a part of their lives to educating the public and helping anyone affected by sexual violence.

For the first time in my life, I heard about “The Healing Place”. THP offers free and confidential services to survivors of rape and sexual assault, as well as their family members and friends. THP’s services include a 24-hour hotline, 24-hour emergency room accompaniment, counseling, legal assistance, case management services, and educational workshops. I thought this place was amazing. I truly admired THP’s existence and presence in communities.

I thought to myself, *I’m twenty-two, and I just heard about this place now. Why? Why doesn’t everyone know about this place?* I then thought to myself, *How the hell do Carmen, Aila, and everyone else at THP do this kind of work on a full time basis?* I then contemplated how strong these women must have been. To say I was impressed by this place is an understatement. I felt deep respect, gratitude, and some sense of kinship with all who made the choice to join and actively participate at THP.

Carmen told the students she was going to have us watch a DVD. She warned us that the DVD contained disturbing material and that we could leave the room if we wanted to. Carmen explained to us that the DVD was a re-enactment of an interview with a rapist. I sat back in my chair not having a clue as to what I was about to watch.

The rapist in the DVD was in a college fraternity. He and his frat brothers would scope out women throughout the week and then invite them to one of their parties. While at the party, he and his frat scumbags would purposely get the women drunk. Once they were hammered, he and his frat criminals would rape them. Their attacks were premeditated, conscious, and violent.

It is important to note that this DVD does not speak for every fraternity member, nor does it explain how all forms of sexual perpetration occur. This was just one DVD of one criminal in one fraternity, but it was enough to drive me crazy.

My rage came out while I watched in horror. I became a lunatic. I wanted to lunge through the TV screen and choke this pathetic excuse for a human being. I literally wanted to squeeze his throat until he couldn’t breathe, worse than what he had done to his victim when he held her down and raped her. I wanted to stomp his head on cement over and over. Again, I’m not proud of my anger, but it’s how I initially reacted. My rage then turned to disgust. I felt nauseous and thought I was going to throw up on the floor. I thought, *How could anyone do this?*

I cringed in my chair throughout the whole DVD. I couldn't believe I was watching this scumbag easily talk about a rape he had committed as if he were causally discussing cooking cod fish in a white wine sauce with roasted potatoes and asparagus. I couldn't believe some people commit this kind of crime and think nothing of it. All I could think of after my rage and nausea was, *This is so fucked up. This is not okay. This is too fucked up. I have to do something about this. I have to somehow do something.*

Carmen and Aila answered our questions and then continued on with their training. They explained to us that rape is really more about power and control and not about sex. I had never heard anyone say that before. I thought about what that meant.

They also explained that many survivors aren't even believed when they are strong enough to disclose their rape to someone. Sometimes even family members don't believe survivors. That horrified me. I got the sense that survivors are more apt to heal when they are believed, listened to, supported, and not blamed. In my mind I found myself screaming, *Are ya fuckin kiddin me! They aren't believed?! Why wouldn't you believe someone?! How sick is that! People blame rape survivors?! For what?! For being raped?! How can you actually do that?! I was psychotic in my mind and probably looked like a maniac in my seat.*

Carmen and Aila said THP promotes healing. These two women taught me that just listening to a survivor truly helps them in their healing process. I thought to myself, *I would believe someone. I would just listen. I know in my heart that I will give unconditional support to people affected by sexual violence.* Based on what Carmen and Aila said, I thought I could somehow help by the simplest means of listening, not judging, and not blaming.

Toward the end of class, Carmen and Aila described various volunteer opportunities to us. I sensed a calling to volunteer, but I can't fully explain how nervous I felt. I knew I wanted to ask, but I was terrified. My own insecurities immediately came into play. An overwhelming list of negatives filled my mind. These negatives included:

- 1 I'm a man. They might not even accept men.
- 2 I won't be good at counseling.
- 3 I'll make someone feel worse.
- 4 I'll somehow hurt as opposed to help.
- 5 My voice doesn't even matter.

6 I can't do it.

7 I suck. What the hell makes me think I can actually help rape survivors?

I was hard on myself, but that's how I thought at the time. I could only think about how bad I would be as opposed to thinking, *I actually can help rape survivors*. As nervous and sweaty as I was, I said, "fuck it".

Shaking, I walked up to Aila and asked, "Can I volunteer?" She said, "Of course! We'd love the help, but there is an interview process. Write down your contact information and someone will get back to you." Saying the words "fuck it" and just doing it turned out to be the best decision I could have ever made.

THP contacted me a few weeks later for an interview with Aila and Joan, the Case Manager. As soon as I saw their faces and looked in their eyes I felt at peace. Their kindness erased all of my very intense anxieties. I knew instantly that I had made the right choice.

Aila and Joan talked about THP and the case management internship for which I intended to apply. After they explained more about their work and what the position entailed, they asked me why I wanted to volunteer at THP. I spoke from the heart. I told them that I think it is wrong to blame people who are raped. I told them that I will always believe people, listen to them, and never blame them no matter what. I told them that I wanted to just help. I simply stressed I wanted to help in any way, shape, or form. That was it. That was all I cared about.

A few weeks later I got the call. I became ecstatic once I learned that I ended up beating a few people out for the case manager internship. I couldn't even believe it. It shocked me that I had been picked over other women and that THP would choose me over other people. I was excited, but terrified. I thought to myself, *I can't believe I'm actually doing this*. Turns out I joined only a handful of men to ever work at THP, which I think is sad.

I never once thought I would be a rape crisis counselor. I did not go to school with the ambition of getting involved at a rape crisis center, but the class I took in college began a life change for me, and my vocation started unraveling from there. I did not call for this work, but rather, I was called to it. That may be hard to understand, but I will try my best to explain it.

This book is not about religion. I am not preaching God to you. People can and do believe what they want to believe. Billions of people believe in some kind of Higher Being. We all have the choice to believe in something greater than ourselves or not believe in something greater than

ourselves. I personally believe God exists, and I believe God communicates with all of us through different means every day. This can be through music, art, nature, people, suffering, and other means. I believe that God spoke directly to me once I started reading the book that was assigned for class, and especially on that night when THP made their presentation to us. I believe God asked me to join THP in that moment, so I listened and chose to act on that request. I'm very thankful that I did and that THP gave me an opportunity. The six years following that decision have been extremely emotional, difficult, fun, educational, and more fulfilling than anything I could have ever imagined in my whole life. I've truly been blessed, and I try my best to share those blessings with others.

Chapter 3

MARY

“Can I be your first client?”

Before you can volunteer at THP you have to first complete an intense training. I didn't know what the training would entail, how many people would be there, or how I would even handle listening about rape for forty hours. I was excited about what the future held for me even though I felt nervous and terrified. This would be the first time I had ever done something like this in my life, and the seriousness and sensitivity of sexual violence only increased my fears.

I went to a party the night before the first day of training. I drank all night and somehow came across a woman named Mary. Mary spoke about her career goals of helping people, so I naturally, and probably rudely, interrupted her to join the conversation. It turns out Mary wanted to help children for her career. We ended up having a very interesting conversation about her goals, societal problems, and humanity.

I told her that I too wanted to help people, and that I was really interested in the criminal justice system and prison. I then said, “I'm actually going to work at a rape crisis center. I start my training tomorrow.” Her whole demeanor changed.

She said, “Are you serious?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “I'm nervous as hell.”

She said, “Can I be your first client?”

I blanked. “Huh? What do you mean?”

I didn't get it at first. I didn't understand what had happened, but then I did. Mary then disclosed to me that she was raped in college.

Mary and I kept in touch over the years. I called Mary one day to tell her about my progress on the book and asked her if she wanted to share her story. She was so excited! I asked if she wanted to speak or write. She said she would rather write, but she didn't know what to write about. I told her she could write about anything she wanted to. During our conversation, Mary told me that she was in the best place in her life. She described being happy and fulfilled. I

couldn't have been happier for her. I told her she should write about the fullness of joy in her life. She agreed and seemed to be looking forward to it.

I did not hear back from Mary for awhile. I sent her text messages and emails, but she did not respond. I didn't want to push her, but I really thought her story should be in this book. I felt a little confused as to why she didn't respond back. I wasn't sure if she had forgotten about writing, or become uninterested in writing. I was wrong on both. Mary texted me and told me she had decided not to contribute. She said that she was in a really good place and was hesitant to re-open up.

Mary, I support your decision and am happy that you are in such a good place. I wish you all the best. Keep doing all that you do for yourself and for the children you help in your job. Love and peace girl. Be well.

-Bobby

TRAINING

“I knew sexual violence affected people, but I did not know to what extent. I didn’t fully understand that there really is a larger health issue at play.”

I felt sick to my stomach before my intense training as I nervously walked into the training room. I sat in the back of the room and glanced around. No men. My anxiety grew worse by the seconds. More and more women kept walking into the room. No men. We started the training at 9am. Still no men. Me and about thirty women ranging from ages eighteen to sixty-five were about to spend forty hours over the course of a week together. I sat there shaking and sweating profusely, but I soon learned I had nothing to worry about.

The women in that room were some of the kindest and gentlest people I have ever met. I felt comfortable and accepted within ten minutes of being present. It is hard to explain this, but I felt a sense of camaraderie even though I had never met these people before. I even felt a sense of peace with these strangers. It was special to be a part of something larger than ourselves, and I found it inspirational to be with so many people who cared about the same issue and wanted to actually do something about it. I used to talk a lot. It was nice to finally do something.

The training was educational, intense, emotional, depressing, comical and enjoyable. The counselors amazed me. I remember listening to them give their presentations and looking at them with the utmost admiration. I was in awe of everyone and fascinated to meet other counselors who worked at a rape crisis center full-time. I wanted to learn so much from them because I valued their expertise and experiences.

The first day consisted of ground rules, expectations, ice breaker exercises, confidentiality, rape trauma, and empowerment. I learned on this day that some survivors actually expect to die during an assault. I also learned that some people dissociate during an assault, and most, if not all, have the goal to survive. The immediate impact after an assault can cause self-blame, shame,

confusion, denial, persistent re-experiencing of the assault, and memory loss. This is not true for every person, but these are some common impacts post-assault.

I also learned of all of the potential effects a survivor may feel, either post-assault or even years later. This is not true for everyone, but here are some potential effects that result from sexual violence:

1 Shame.

2 Guilt.

3 Depression.

4 Sadness.

5 Loss of Control.

6 Vulnerability.

7 Fear.

8 Anger.

9 Anxiety.

10 Shock.

11 Disbelief.

12 Embarrassment.

13 Becoming suicidal or committing suicide.

14 Isolation.

15 Distrust.

16 Self-medication or self-harm in a variety of different ways such as substance abuse, cutting or burning.

17 Changes in eating patterns.

18 Changes in sleeping.

19 Startle responses.

20 Nightmares.

21 Confusion.

22 Difficulty concentrating.

23 Safety concerns.

I knew sexual violence affected people, but I did not know to what extent. I didn't fully understand that there really is a larger health issue at play. At the end of the day, we had a check-out question where the presenters asked what we were going to do for self-care when we went home. I found it interesting to listen to so many different people explain the different things that put them at peace. I needed to learn some for myself. I was thankful we did such a great exercise because the first day was emotionally and mentally draining. THP stresses the importance of "self-care". I started to understand what they meant because I needed some.

The second day started with a check-in question, followed by a presentation on how to support male rape survivors. The presenter asked us, "Where does male rape occur?" We gave answers such as "Prison, in some churches (abuse scandal), and in homes." It was eye opening to learn about male survivors because I did not often hear people speak about the issue. I have often heard joking statements like, "Don't drop the soap in the shower", referring to men incarcerated. The truth, however, is it is completely irrelevant whether an inmate can hold the soap or not. A male inmate will find a way to rape another male inmate if he wants to. Prison rape is very real. Some inmates are gang raped. Some inmates become property of other inmates and are bought and sold. It's not funny; it's actually quite disturbing and more common than we know. The United States of America currently has the highest incarceration rate in the world, which has led to overcrowded prisons. Prison rape for both men and women is a severe problem that should be taken seriously.

After our training on male rape, we spent three hours learning about counseling and coping skills. We learned that coping skills can be positive and negative, helpful and destructive. For example, healthy coping skills can develop into strengths, such as doing well in school, in sports, at work, or being self-sufficient in a variety of different ways. Unhealthy coping skills, such as substance abuse or self-mutilation can be self-defeating and fatal. We learned that many survivors are hard on themselves and feel ashamed towards the way they coped during or after the crisis of rape. However, any coping strategy, either healthy or unhealthy, is not to be ashamed of. People most often do what they have to do in order to survive.

The third day started with another check-in question. We then participated in a training on suicide led by Madelin. All of the counselors were special in their own certain way, but Maddie was the most beneficial for me personally. She has the ability to make you feel better about yourself. She can make you feel comfortable when you are uncomfortable. She can inspire you

when you feel uninspired. She can strengthen you when you feel weak. She can break down the insecure illusions you have about yourself and help you to see the truth about yourself. Maddie is one of the best counselors I have ever been around.

At this point in time, I would say the largest emotion I had was fear. I was scared for many different reasons. I was scared I would be a horrible counselor. I was scared I would make Joan and Aila look stupid for selecting me. Simply put, I was scared I would fuck up and be a fuck up. Maddie shut me up in my mind and calmed all of my fears. She made me understand that I would be a good counselor, and that I have already helped someone just by attending the training. Her encouraging words and faith in all of us made me realize that I *can* help survivors and make a difference in their lives. I believed I could be a good addition to THP, and I believed I could play a positive role in part of the healing process for people. My fears went away and I felt stronger and more confident.

The day continued with a presentation by a local detective who talked to us about the Sexual Assault Unit at the police department. After that, we then learned about legal issues and legal advocacy, followed by a training on domestic violence. Our last training was on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) survivors, and then we ended the day with another check-out question.

As usual, the fourth day started with a check-in question. The first training of the morning focused on working with adolescents and the second was on supporting significant others. After lunch, we had a three-hour training on childhood sexual abuse and incest. This turned out to be the most disturbing for me to hear. It was very difficult to listen to. I thought I would throw up on myself while contemplating the fact that some children are sexually abused. Thankfully, we ended the day on meditation and breathing exercises. Both were severely needed for all of us because the material we had just listened to was the hardest to deal with. The exercises worked for me and other volunteers I spoke to. I walked out of there happy and relaxed as opposed to depressed and angry.

The fifth and final day started off again with a check-in question. We then received a training on SANE nurses and evidence collection. SANE stands for “Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner”. SANE nurses are specifically trained to adequately treat rape survivors. Some survivors are treated horrendously and blamed while being in a hospital, so I think it is vital that trained

professionals treat survivors, should they choose to go to a hospital. THP does not force anyone to do anything. The choice is solely up to the survivor.

After our morning break, we were introduced to a survivor speaker and listened to her share her story. This turned out to be the most memorable experience for me throughout the whole week of training. There was nothing quite like hearing a survivor share her own story in her own words. While listening, I learned about the awful thing that happened to her and how it affected her life. I also learned that she has grown, and lives a very normal and functional life. I sat on the couch in awe of this woman as she calmly spoke and answered all of our questions. I thought to myself, *If she can experience rape and be strong enough to speak about it to others, then I believe anyone can.*

Overall, I loved the training and cared for all of my fellow volunteers with the work they would soon be doing. I felt a real connection to those around me and THP as an organization. I left the training thinking about what all of us had been through and accomplished together. I couldn't wait to start volunteering and looked forward to impacting those affected by sexual violence in a positive way.

That week of training was educational, intense, depressing, fun, and inspirational. I learned a lot. The more I listened, the more I learned and the more prepared I became. Some people in my life wondered how I could focus on sexual violence for a full week. Over time, more people have wondered how I even deal with working at a rape crisis center. They say things like, "Isn't it so depressing? How can you deal with that all day?" I think these are valid questions, but our training did not consist of misery for forty hours. In fact, THP is great at making you feel comfortable, helping you find coping skills, and offering support when needed. Volunteering at THP is not as depressing as one may think, mainly because THP staff and volunteers truly help people. What better gift is there to give and be given?

It may sound weird, but that one week meant so much to me. I've never done something like that in my life. I used to go to basketball camps, but all I did was play basketball. I've never been part of an organization whose sole purpose is to help anyone affected by sexual violence at no cost to them. To be in a room with so many people who cared about changing an evil in the world was special to me. I felt connected in a different way from anything I've felt before. I personally gained spiritual strength and growth. I believed the women I trained with, the staff and volunteers I have worked with, and anyone else who has done this work or contemplates

doing this work is called to a purpose of prevention, education, and healing. It is a calling worth taking if you feel it inside.

CASE MANAGEMENT

“Any reaction to an abnormal situation is normal.”

Men were not allowed to work as hotline counselors or medical advocates when I first joined THP in 2007, so case management is the work that I did. I didn't even know what case management services were before I joined THP. I never thought about the financial losses survivors endure as a result of sexual violence. For some reason it never occurred to me. At the time, I was stuck on the violent aspect of the crime and all of the horrible aftermath. Finances or lack thereof did not enter into the equation for me. However, as nervous and uneducated as I seemed, I also realized I was one of the luckiest people at THP because I got to work directly with the case manager, Joan.

Joan and I first met when I interviewed for the internship. I remember praying that I would get the internship because I really wanted to volunteer at THP, but another part of me wanted the internship because I wanted to work with Joan. I enjoyed hearing Joan explain all that she does for survivors when we first met. I just loved being around her.

I quickly learned that Joan is a special person. Her kindness, empathy, patience, and listening skills are some of the best of anyone I know. I knew I had a lot to learn about case management and how to talk with survivors, and I knew Joan was one of the best people to learn from. I couldn't wait to team up with her and get to work.

I was nervous as hell when I started at THP and also learned that I was the second man to ever work in the THP office. It saddens me that I was only the second man to ever work in the THP office. There were a couple of male volunteers in the Community Outreach Department who had started this work before me, but I thought it was pathetic and unfortunate that only one other man worked in the office and only about six of us in total since the beginning of THP's existence. The majority of perpetrators are men, but the majority of men are not perpetrators. To all the men out there who are reading this: We have a responsibility in this issue and we need more men getting involved to help out in some kind of way. I believe it is imperative for more

males to become involved in rape crisis work because it helps women and men. Some women begin to trust men again when they see that not all men are monsters. And men coming forward to get counseling increased because of the few men volunteering at THP. Guys, you have no idea how much it means to some people when they see a man care about this issue and try to do something about it.

The first couple of weeks at THP were spent learning about Joan's case management work and what my role would be. Joan taught me about what her job entails and explained what she wanted me to do. Initially, she did not have me speak to any clients. Joan wanted me to feel comfortable, which worked out great for me because I was not comfortable. I used to answer the phones, learn about financial resources, and organize the case management program. Speaking to clients did not become an option until I felt ready and knew what Joan actually does.

Joan works with survivors around housing and financial needs. She has brief consultations with them, which usually entail her answering questions about financial resource options as a result of sexual violence. She also assesses survivors' financial situations based on resources that are available, and explains where survivors can go to obtain other resources if necessary.

Safety is a huge concern for survivors, so Joan spends a lot of her time trying to help survivors with housing needs. Most survivors know their perpetrators, so safety in housing is critical. Joan helps with both immediate/emergency housing and long-term housing. She explained to me that domestic violence shelters are always a last resort, but necessary at times. Joan would rather send her clients to family or friends because she can never guarantee where someone will be placed. Survivors lose a great deal of control when they go to domestic violence shelters, which isn't always helpful when someone has already lost control from being raped against his or her will.

I would like to believe that anyone in need could go to a shelter and their life would be so much better, but that is not always reality. Joan explained to me that most clients do not go to DV shelters because of the lack of beds, or the area is too far from their job, therapist, or children's school. So what does Joan do when her clients do not want to go to a shelter, or can't get into one even though they live in fear? She validates their experiences. She is empathetic and provides the counseling that is needed. She will also tell her clients the system unfortunately sucks, and sadly, there just aren't enough resources.

Joan also helps her clients with moving expenses and long-term housing resources by working with housing specialists. She accompanies all survivors to appointments and will speak up for them if they have a hard time speaking for themselves. Joan does so much to try and meet the needs of her clients, but there are many obstacles. Long-term subsidized housing is difficult to acquire given the long waiting lists in the United States. Also, public housing authorities have certain preferences for rental assistance, and sexual assault is not one of them.

Finding alternate housing because of rape can be very difficult. Most survivors know their perpetrators, and the perpetrators may be controlling so much of their lives. For example, some of Joan's clients have spouses who raped them and control all of their finances. What do they do in that situation? Other clients of Joan's get evicted because their perpetrator stopped paying their rent. They cannot afford rent themselves, and therefore are left with the choice of being evicted or staying with their perpetrator.

There aren't many resources for survivors in these kinds of situations, so Joan educates her clients on other possible financial resources, such as public benefits, food stamps, disability, and cash assistance. Other aspects of case management involve helping survivors obtain victim's compensation, trying to obtain general resources for college students such as education grants, and helping with privacy concerns for college students.

I felt impressed and inspired by Joan's efforts. Over time, I felt ready to sit in on a call with a survivor. I'll never forget the moment when Joan called a woman and said, "Do you feel comfortable if a male volunteer listens in on this call with us?" I thought to myself, *Really? Did Joan really just ask that? Do women really not feel comfortable talking around me, even if I'm not saying anything and just listening? She can't even see me. She's just on the phone. Can she really not feel comfortable?* The answer is yes. Yes, there are women who do not feel comfortable talking when a man is present, even if he is on the phone and doesn't speak a word. And I had to accept that.

It is perfectly normal for some female rape survivors to not want to work with men. I also learned that this does not just pertain to women. There are men who would rather speak to a woman than a man. There are people who just don't feel comfortable speaking to certain people, and I think we should try to understand and support their decisions. I don't think we should judge or question, but rather empathize, listen, try to understand, and support in any way possible. The reality and intensity of working at a rape crisis center really hit me at that moment. To know that

a woman does not feel comfortable speaking about anything related to her rape or her course of action going forward in her life proved to me how powerful the effects of this heinous crime really are to some people.

This particular woman did not mind that I listened to the conversation. She was raped in her apartment by a friend. I remember being horrified knowing that her friend could rape her, but I kept my comments to myself and listened. I thought to myself, *Do friends really rape their friends?* The answer is yes. Friends can rape their friends, partners can rape their partners, and family members can rape family members. I learned a very sad but important fact while volunteering at THP: Anyone can be raped or sexually assaulted, regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status or sexual orientation.

I watched Joan in total admiration. She treated that woman with such kindness and gentleness. She listened to her, and allowed the survivor to speak, as opposed to telling her what to do or what to say. Joan simply listened, and I could see how effective and powerful that was for this particular woman's experience. As horrified as I was by all I had listened to, I learned a lot from that one conversation. Listening is one of the best things we can do for people, and I think it means a lot to survivors when we just listen to them. I learned a valuable lesson: Listen, validate, provide options, and support the one who is in need. This is how we can help others and play a positive, sometimes life-changing role.

All I cared about was helping others. But as passionate as I was, I was limited in the work that I could do, and I became frustrated by those limitations. In fact, I barely worked with clients while working in the THP office because most women did not feel comfortable working with me. It frustrated me, but it was something I had to accept. I just kept doing what staff asked me to do.

I came into THP one day and sadly learned that Joan's father had died. She flew to Ireland to attend her father's funeral and be with her family. I and everyone else at THP felt badly for Joan and her family. Obviously, it was an awful time for Joan. Everyone in the office thought about her and missed her. We didn't know how long she would be in Ireland for.

I couldn't help but think about Joan's clients while she was away. I decided to call them and let them know that Joan had had a family emergency, which was why they hadn't heard from her. I told them she would be back at some point, but I did not know when. I also told them I could help them if they felt comfortable speaking to a man. I didn't want Joan's clients to think

she had forgotten about them, and I wanted to be able to help if someone needed it or if an emergency occurred.

One woman I spoke to did in fact feel comfortable speaking to me. She said, “I can’t even believe I’m talking with you right now. I never would have been able to talk with you two months ago.” However, not everyone was okay with me calling, and trying to help someone can also hurt someone.

There were many times that I thought more about THP than my actual job. My boss at the time supported my volunteer work with THP and was extremely flexible with my work schedule. He allowed me to leave the agency at a certain time to volunteer at THP, and I would make up my hours either at night or on the weekends. Occasionally, I would call clients from a conference room at the agency during my lunch break. So I continued to call Joan’s clients, but from my job, not from the THP office. I will never forget what happened one afternoon when I called one of Joan’s clients.

A woman picked up the phone and said, “Hello?” with very broken English. Her name is Veronika.

“Is Veronika there?” I asked.

I could barely make out her telling me that she was her.

I said, “Hi, my name is Bobby. I’m calling from The Healing Place. I work with Joan.”

She immediately started speaking Russian. About fifteen seconds later a man came on the phone.

“Who is this?” he said sternly.

“Can I please speak with Veronika?” I responded.

“Who is this?”

“Can I just speak with Veronika?”

“What do you want?”

He sounded pissed off. I didn’t know who he was. Given Veronika’s file, I thought this man might have been her perpetrator. My mind started to race with questions and potential scenarios. I thought, *Is he her perpetrator? Is she safe? What do I do? What do I say?* I didn’t want to tell him that I was calling from THP. I couldn’t tell him the reason for my call because she may not have told him, or anyone else in her life, about the rape. I also didn’t want to endanger her, given that he might be her perp.

“This really won’t take long. I just have to talk with Veronika briefly,” I said.

“What the hell do you want!”

“Sir, can you put Veronika back on the phone?”

“Who the fuck are you!”

I was so confused and didn’t know what to do. I decided to hang up. I figured the best thing was to just hang up and not piss this guy off anymore. I thought about Veronika all week. I didn’t know what had happened, and didn’t know if she was safe or not. *Did I just set off her rapist?* That situation was all I could think of for a week.

The following Monday I went into THP to volunteer. A clinician came in and said, “Bobby, there’s a rapist at your job.”

“What?” I responded, shocked. “There is? How do you figure?”

She said, “I spoke with Veronika, Joan’s client. She said her rapist called her from your job. She’s terrified. She hasn’t been able to sleep in a week.”

Some clinicians and staff members stood around us. I said, “I called Veronika from a conference room. I just tried to talk with her to tell her Joan will be gone for a while. Then some dude got on the phone and started getting pissed at me. I didn’t know who he was so I hung up.” It didn’t hit us at first, but then it did. My voice had triggered Veronika. She thought I was her rapist. Everyone’s mouth dropped.

Something like that had never happened at THP. I was devastated. I felt sick for a while. I couldn’t believe that my voice could trigger such a horrible experience for someone, but it did. I never thought my voice could terrify a woman for a week and affect her sleep, but it did. I never thought trying to help in a simple way could turn out so badly, but it did.

The clinician called Veronika back and explained the situation, and thankfully Veronika no longer felt scared. Veronika was relieved. I was still in shock. I went home and pounded vodka by myself until I passed out in my living room chair.

I do not believe human beings fully understand the powerful effects of sexual trauma given our limited knowledge as finite beings. It is my opinion that even our medical professionals do not fully understand the powerful effects of sexual trauma. The brain is extremely intricate. As advanced as we are with our knowledge of the brain, we still know so little.

A female survivor once said to me, “I suffer in my soul.” Another man once said to me, “You have no idea the anger I have in my soul.” Given the limited knowledge we have about our

brains and souls, I question why some people think they have all of the answers to what survivors should feel and do. It's great to offer knowledge and support, but those who may think they have all of the answers of what someone should do in a crisis may actually disempower and confuse that person.

Why do some people tell survivors to *get over it*? Why do some people say things like, "That happened two years ago, it's really time to move on"? Why do some people become angry at survivors when they are triggered? I pose these questions because I have heard them by many different people. These questions deter and sometimes cripple someone's growth and healing. If you get triggered, I want you to understand that you are not weak, crazy, or haven't *gotten over it*; you are normal. There is no timetable to grow and heal, and growth and healing is different for every survivor.

Sexual trauma can affect people in a variety of different ways, and people can easily be triggered or affected throughout different points in their lives. I have heard many absurd, illogical, and ignorant statements made to survivors about how they should *get over it*. I usually can't shut up when I hear certain statements. Depending on the situation, I ask some people, "Can you remember a good moment in your life? Do you remember your prom, your graduation, your wedding day, or the birth of your child?" They always say yes to something good in their life. I continue. "Imagine your wedding day. Do you remember your dress? The people? The music? The food? The weather? The dance floor?" They can always give me a vivid description of many things. I've heard people be able to describe the smell and taste of food they had twenty years ago. I continue. "So, if you can remember the smell of the steak twenty years ago, why can't a rape survivor remember a part of the rape two years ago? Why is it okay and normal to remember the smell of food, or the beautiful weather, or the song that people danced to, but rape survivors are weak if they remember a part of a horrific trauma? Why can people only remember good things, but can't remember the bad? I'm not saying people should dwell on the past, but why can't they at least remember part of it?" David Lisak writes:

The memory of a traumatic experience is not encoded in the same way as is a normal experience. The powerful neurochemicals that trigger the fight or flight response have far-reaching effects, including dramatic effects on the manner in which memories are encoded. Often, a traumatized person cannot generate the kind of narrative memory

that we can normally muster for an important experience. Their memories are often fragmented, out of sequence, and filled with gaps. They may recall very specific details for particular aspects of the experience, and recall little or nothing for others. It is for this reason – the neurobiology of traumatic memory – that great care must be taken in interviewing trauma survivors. The fact that a traumatized person recalls a detail which they earlier had not is not prima facie evidence of fabrication; it is the characteristic way in which these types of memories are stored and recalled. The fact that they can recall the texture of the rapist’s shirt, but cannot recall whether he was wearing a hat, is not evidence that something is being hidden; it is a product of how the brain encodes information during a trauma (Lisak, 2002).

Megan had multiple experiences with sexual violence by multiple perpetrators. I once accompanied her for a speaking engagement at a college years after I worked as a case management intern. Megan told everyone in the room, “Any reaction to an abnormal situation is normal.” This is a poem she wrote that I believe is fitting when thinking about triggers and the possible effects of sexual trauma. It is entitled “*no subject*”.

[no subject]

*(no subject) emails terrify me.
Half seeing him in a person I half see as I walk the city streets
leaves me breathless and weak
And I wonder who gave him this power
Because, certainly, I did not.
At least, I don't remember doing it.
Perhaps between the I love yous
and the million things that got put aside for him.
Perhaps somewhere stuck among the silent grimaces
and the way my life molded around him.
Perhaps therein lies the power he holds.
Perhaps he knows he holds this power over me
As he moves through his life in this place and that
Doing all of the things, being all of the people
And moving along as if I never
existed.
Because that's what he wanted in the first place
Is it not?*

*A year ago.
This shouldn't ache
a year later.
It shouldn't force me under covers
and into dark rooms.
Shouldn't make me fear my own shadow
as I carry on the life that I somehow happily built
Before this came knocking again.
Again.
And it aches. It rips and roars through me
with the sound of a sobbing, hopeless little girl
who wants only for the pain to stop.
She needn't understand -
sin como, sin cuando ni de donde -
Just that it should stop now.
As she crouches beneath the covers
Her forehead sweaty with the tears and the heat
of a summer night beating on the blanket
asking her to come out and play.
Come out and play.
Come out and PLAY!
COME OUT AND PLAY!
A demand now.
And all she wants is sleep
Sweet, glorious sleep*

If you are a survivor and get triggered, I want you to understand that you are more normal than you think. I have received many rape disclosures throughout my life by both men and women of different ethnicities and ages, and I can tell you survivors can easily get triggered at different points in their lives. Are people weak because they become triggered and still have painful memories? No. They are normal for having the reactions and memories they have. They are the ones who unfortunately have had to endure horrific trauma. Why do others tell them they shouldn't remember and just *get over it*? What does *getting over it* even mean?

I never spoke to Veronika again, and I stopped calling Joan's clients after that incident. I continued to work, but was limited in what I could do. I wanted to do more in the office, so I asked if I could help out with the Legal Department. The Legal Department had more clients than case management had and needed the help, so I thought it would be perfect. Turns out there were a lot more women who felt comfortable working with me while I helped with legal cases. The legal cases also allowed me to work with more men. These men usually called on behalf of

their female partners. One story I remember was of a man who spoke with me because his girlfriend could not. I thought he might break down bawling after every sentence. Sexual violence not only affects a survivor; it affects his or her loved ones as well.

For nine months, I was blessed to be able to work under the direct supervision of Joan as a case management intern. While nine months may seem like a short amount of time in the grand scheme of life, the lessons I learned and the experiences I had changed my life for the better. Joan is a special person. She taught me how to be a better listener, counselor, advocate, and human being. Her passion for helping survivors is truly inspiring. She loves her job and continues to look for ways to do more meaningful things for survivors.

OUTREACH & EDUCATION

“She said she never told anyone before, which means she has been keeping that all to herself for years.”

The original agreement was for me to be an intern for a year, but I was frustrated by the lack of work and felt that I was not contributing as much as I would have liked to. I sat in the office with nothing to do for periods of time because most women did not want to, or could not speak with me. It is hard for me to be at a job and not work, no matter which work environment I am in. Not only did I feel discouraged, but I was emotionally drained. THP fulfilled me, but it affected my mind, heart, and soul. I loved being there; however, I needed a break. THP stresses the importance of “self-care”, which was something I didn’t often do and desperately needed. I decided to stop my internship three months earlier than we had discussed because this is what I had to do at the time.

THP had a goodbye meeting for me and the other interns who ended their internships at the same time. It was very sad and emotional because all of the interns had formed relationships with staff and each other. The staff also took us out for a farewell goodbye dinner, where they gave us plaques for the work that we had done. It was a beautiful end to our time in the THP office.

My internship ended, but I knew deep within that my work at THP would continue at some point in time. I needed a break, but it was only a matter of time before I got back involved. It’s kind of hard to explain this, but I could not walk away from THP. Working at THP did not leave me. I didn’t forget it. It changed me for the better. It became a part of me, and I became a part of it.

I stayed in touch with Joan, Aila, and others at THP over time. Even though I was no longer an “official” volunteer, I occasionally visited the office and talked about THP to people around me. People I met or knew still disclosed their stories to me, or sometimes people would ask about which services were available. I always sent everyone to THP if they needed help or had questions. I also raised money every year for THP’s annual fundraiser. My siblings, parents,

relatives, friends, and co-workers donated generously to my page every year. I raised over \$2,000 every year solely due to the generosity and kindness of others.

At the time, Laureen was the boss of the Outreach and Education Department. She and I had many discussions in the office about sexual violence. We discussed strategies on how to prevent this crime and how we could educate different communities. She must have seen my passion and recognized something I did not see in myself because she always told me I would be great in O & E. She believed in my speaking skills when I did not believe in my speaking skills. She believed in my teaching skills when I did not believe in my teaching skills. She wanted me to join O & E, and she is the only one who even gave me the idea to join.

I knew I wanted to get back involved with THP, but I wasn't sure how. I never thought I would join O & E because I thought I would be a horrible public speaker. I didn't think I spoke too eloquently and I hated public speaking. The course I hated most in college was a required public speaking course, so the thought of being a public speaker seemed absurd. But I cared and I knew my work was not done. After deep contemplation, I decided to say "fuck it" again. I called Laureen and said I would like to be a part of the O & E team if she would allow me. She easily and excitedly welcomed me into the group.

My first day in O & E consisted of a short training, followed by a meeting led by Laureen. I learned that O & E volunteers travel throughout different communities and facilitate prevention and educational workshops about sexual violence. O & E volunteers train some college Resident Assistants and accompany survivor speakers, which is when a survivor shares his or her story with people. Also, O & E volunteers table community health events and provide the public with THP information.

O & E volunteers are the face of THP to the larger community. They plant a seed in people's minds about the organization and the services THP offers. They teach, listen, empower, motivate, heal, and bring the existence of THP to people who do not know THP exists. I loved what they do because I believe traveling into different communities is very important in spreading the word. I also loved the fact that O & E volunteers heal in the streets. They never know what comes up for people when speaking or just sitting at a table with information about sexual violence. People can and do get triggered, so O & E volunteers have to be able to react to anything.

As usual, I felt nervous as hell. I did not know what I had gotten myself into, and I thought I would be a horrible public speaker. I did not have much confidence in myself or my speaking abilities, but I tried my best to believe in Lauren's words about me and gain a little confidence. As insecure as I was, I knew that I had something to offer. Deep down inside, I believed that my experience in the office working directly with survivors and significant others would benefit the team and the public with whom I would soon be interacting. That turned out to be true.

My first O & E engagement turned out to be a great learning experience, but also very intense and sad. Lauren and another volunteer co-facilitated a training to college RAs. This was my first time at an O & E speaking engagement, so my role was to sit back, observe, and learn. Thankfully I got to learn from Lauren.

As soon as I walked into the classroom I could see a woman looking very uncomfortable. She did not look happy or even content, and her leg could not stop shaking. Most of the students seemed to be fine, but this woman did not appear comfortable throughout the whole engagement. Another student, a man, had tears in his eyes.

About halfway through the engagement, a woman left the room. I noticed right away and thought something must be wrong. I was freaking out in my own mind. *Is she okay? Should I go out there? What is wrong! Dude relax, she might just be getting water or using the bathroom. Chill out.* Five minutes went by. I didn't know what to do. Thankfully, the other volunteer went out to check on her. They were both gone for at least a half hour. Lauren continued as if nothing had happened. She facilitated a difficult workshop like a true professional by herself. The woman eventually came back with Lauren's co-facilitator and seemed to be doing just fine. I asked her if she was okay. She smiled and said, "Yes."

This engagement taught me some valuable lessons. First, both Lauren and her co-facilitator taught me how to speak to an audience about such a difficult topic. They were articulate, intelligent, confident, and very personable. They connected with their audience. Second, I learned that people can become extremely emotional while listening to anything that has to do with sexual violence. Third, I learned that some people leave the room, and that an O & E volunteer should try to attend to that person and give them whatever help they may need at the time.

My first tabling experience to provide the public with information occurred at a festival outdoors. It turned out to be uneventful. We barely had anyone come over to the table. Some

politician running for office came over to our table to speak about her campaign and how she cares about violence against women, but for some reason she didn't even care to ask about what THP does for women and men. Throughout the day, I noticed a young girl look over to our table multiple times. I wanted to walk over to her and give her a THP brochure, but I didn't know if her family was around or if she even wanted to interact with me. I made the best decision by staying away because I didn't believe this young girl was ready to hear about THP at the time, even though she was curious and kept looking.

Facilitating educational workshops and tabling community health events can be fun, exciting, boring, depressing, and life-changing. I have had many good and bad experiences while traveling into different communities as a THP volunteer. Bad experiences include organizers who keep us separated from the crowd, language barriers, and seeing people become triggered and cry. It's not an easy job to talk about such a sensitive issue as rape is, and the discussions, cards, and brochures do ignite many different kinds of emotions and sometimes painful memories.

No matter how many bad experiences I have had, the good has far outweighed the bad. I have truly had insightful, educational, and spiritual experiences while being a THP volunteer. People thank O & E volunteers for the work they do. The people smile. They grow. We laugh together and we have fun.

Some of my favorite times are when someone discloses for the first time. For example, a woman came up to the table early one morning at a farmer's market and asked us what we do. We told her that we were from THP, and then explained what THP and O & E does. She had never heard of THP. This particular woman became emotional and disclosed to us that she had been raped many years ago. She said she had never told anyone before, which meant she had been keeping that all to herself for years. I asked this woman if she wanted to talk. She did not want to, but she seemed relieved that she had disclosed to people who listened to her and who cared. I told her that we would be sitting at the table for hours, so she could come back to us if she wanted to. She thanked us for the work we did and left to check out the rest of the farmer's market. She never came back, but it was a special moment.

Being a part of O & E has allowed me to interact with, learn from, teach, and help a lot of people from different walks of life. Simply put, it's been a blessing for me. I have truly been blessed and I try my best to share my blessings with others. There have been ups and downs over the years, but I wouldn't change my experiences for anything in the world. Being present in the

community and teaching and interacting with others is incredibly important. I hope that more people become community activists because that is one of the ways we can create real social change.

REBECCA

“I didn’t tell you my story to get sympathy; I told you my story to show you that it does happen.”

Some of the most memorable moments for me as an O & E volunteer have been when I accompanied survivor speakers at a particular college for two consecutive years. The first year’s event barely had any participants when I accompanied Megan. Only six of us were standing in the freezing cold, walking up and down streets, talking about sexual violence. There were more dogs walking around us than people who attended. It was small yet emotional and beneficial. Towards the end of the event, Rebecca, for the first time in her life, bravely shared her story with us. This was the first time she had ever read her story to a group of people, and it was the first time her school ever had this particular event.

Rebecca spoke again the next year to about fifteen people. The event took place in doors, and clearly, there were more people than the previous year. The night started with me speaking about THP’s services. I then sat down while Alexis stood up to speak. After Alexis finished and answered questions from the students, Corey stood up to speak. After Corey answered questions, another student shared her story, and then other students read stories of other survivors. Towards the end, as in the previous year, Rebecca was the last speaker. This is Rebecca’s story:

Becca: This is only the second time that I’ve told my story to a group of people, so please bear with me if my voice shakes...

Just about everyone knows the statistic people tell you before you head off to college that one in four college women will become a victim of sexual violence before she graduates. On December 2, 2010, before I’d even finished my first semester of my freshmen year, I became that statistic. What no one told me about that statistic was that it wasn’t the creepy man in the bushes that I couldn’t see coming that I had to worry about; it was someone I saw to be a friend that I had to worry about.

That night was supposed to be a relaxed night drinking and listening to music with a bunch of kids from my floor. But what really happened was a friend of mine who lived two doors down followed me into another room in my suite and started jokingly trying to tickle me. I told him to stop, and when he didn't, I went into my suitemate's room thinking that he would get the hint when I went in there to talk to her. But when I walked in, she wasn't there.

He came up behind me and trapped my arms at my side while he forced his hands down my pants and up my shirt. I couldn't tell you how long I was in there with him. I know it was only for a few minutes, but everything was happening in slow motion... it felt like forever...I finally broke free from him and ran away. I slammed the door to her room thinking, "If he's going to chase me, he's going to have to slow down long enough to open the door."

Now I think it's kind of funny how your brain works during trauma. It's funny that I couldn't tell you what was going through my head the rest of the time while I was in that room with him except that one phrase. He texted me afterwards and asked, "Where did you go?" and "I'm sorry if I went too far. I hope I didn't hurt your feelings."

I expected the people around me to be supportive of me. I mean, the whole floor of my dorm were criminal justice majors, so I thought they would believe me. I was dead wrong. My friends were supportive to begin with, but it didn't last long. People who were supportive to begin with wouldn't testify on my behalf at the school's misconduct hearing. I dropped the criminal case after the male special victim's unit detective on my case told me that a discrepancy in my statement versus his would mean that I would be torn apart on the witness stand. Before I left, the male detective said, "I hope you learned your lesson about how you should act towards male friends because not all of them are going to take joking around the same way."

To make matters worse, the school didn't have the hearing until mid-February, which would have been fine except they allowed him to continue living two doors down from me until then. During the second semester, I was diagnosed with acute trauma based depression and I suffered from the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). I came to realize that the fear I felt that night stemmed more from the terror at the helplessness of knowing I couldn't do anything about what was about to happen. Some people thought, "Why didn't you initially run or scream or fight?" Until that night I would have said the same thing as them, but when

you're in that situation of being paralyzed by fear and shock, everything you said you would do goes out the window.

If I could go back and tell my freshmen year-self something, I would have told myself to be more careful and not let my guard down around anyone. I thought it was something that would never happen to me. But even more importantly, I would have told myself to keep my head held high against everyone at the school that didn't believe me and talked about me. I tried to hide myself whenever I was out around campus. I dressed in baggy clothes, and I hardly went out of my room. I would have told myself that it wasn't my fault and that no matter what anyone said, I didn't deserve what happened to me. It's easy to look back at a situation and say I should have done this and I should have done that, but what's more important is to look at what you do with the situation after the fact.

I didn't tell you my story to get sympathy; I told you my story to show you that it does happen. It's not just something that happens on TV. It really can happen to anyone. If you don't think about my story any time after today, please just remember this: If someone comes to you to tell you a story like mine, don't judge them and don't tell them you would have done something different. Just listen and give them support. Thank you.

All of the participants in the crowd stood up, formed a circle, and held candles after Rebecca finished sharing her story. Every person who stood in that circle had the opportunity to share any words they wanted or needed to share. Heartfelt words and deep appreciation for the night and the survivor speakers came out of many mouths. Plenty of tears strolled down many faces. It was one of the most intense experiences I have ever had as a THP volunteer.

Rebecca's boyfriend, Todd, drove from a different state to be a part of this event. He was the one who actually helped Rebecca after the sexual assault. While standing in our circle, he began to break down bawling in a way that I haven't seen from a man since I started at THP. We gave him a safe space to cry and allowed him to have as much time as he needed to say whatever he wanted to say. Todd could not understand how someone could sexually assault Rebecca, how she could be blamed for being sexually assaulted, and how she wasn't believed. He sat up with Rebecca for hours after her assault. He listened to her, talked with her, watched movies with her, and supported her in whatever way she needed at the time. I believe Todd's actions that night are examples of how to best support someone who has been sexually assaulted.

There is power in our words. There is often more power in our own voices than we can fathom. Rebecca proves what can happen when someone speaks up. Any student has the power to create an event at their school, empower others by speaking, give others a voice, and educate others in hopes of joining a cause. The first year, there were only six of us. The second year, there were fifteen of us. Who knows what the third year will bring. What about the fifth year? What about the twentieth year? How many other college students out there can do what Rebecca did?

Chapter 8

PUNK ROCK

“Today has been life changing.”

Another memorable experience for me as an O & E volunteer is when I signed up to facilitate a workshop at a three-day punk rock music festival. The proceeds of the shows would be given directly to THP. I jumped at the opportunity to work at this event as soon as I heard music was involved. One of my passions is music, so I was really excited about the engagement. I loved the idea of having an educational workshop before a live concert, and then staying throughout the day to provide resources and information to the fans and musicians. That particular weekend turned out to be very special.

The festival lasted three straight days and consisted of over forty punk and hardcore bands. On Friday night, bands played at a house party which I did not attend. On Saturday, the fest continued at a school, and the final day ended on Sunday in a different location. I was not sure how many people would show up at 3pm to have a discussion about sexual violence before ten plus bands poured their hearts and souls into their music, but I couldn't wait to find out.

I'd say there were about one hundred people who participated in the workshop/discussion. At the time, that was the most people I had ever spoken to. We did an exercise at the beginning of this particular workshop to help everyone understand how common sexual violence is. I asked the audience to stand up.

“Remain standing if you've heard the word *sexual harassment*,” I said.

Everyone stayed standing.

“Remain standing if you've heard the word *sexual assault*.”

Everyone stayed standing.

“Remain standing if you've heard the word *rape*.”

Everyone stayed standing.

“Remain standing if you've seen sex in the media.”

Everyone stayed standing.

“Remain standing if you’ve seen violence in the media.”

Everyone stayed standing.

“Remain standing if you’ve seen sexual violence in the media.”

Everyone stayed standing.

“Remain standing if you know someone who has been affected by sexual assault.”

Everyone stayed standing.

“Remain standing if you know someone who has been affected by rape.”

One woman sat down.

“Everyone, look around,” I said.

Everyone started to look around the gym at each other.

“Only one person sat down. I want everyone to look around and see there are that many people in this one gym who know of someone who has been raped. Think about that for a moment...I ask that you think about this for the next hour and a half while we continue on with the workshop. Thank you for doing this. You can now sit down.”

I have done that exercise many times, but I have never seen that many people standing. This surprised me. It was very sad to see that many people stand and acknowledge that they know someone who has been raped. In one art school gym, ninety-nine out of one hundred people knew someone in their life that had been raped. What does that teach us? How common is this crime?

That experience got me thinking. *Have these people that they know of told anyone? If so, how were they treated? Were they treated poorly or blamed, or were they believed and offered compassion and support from the one they told? Have they sought out help or have they internalized? Do they speak or stay silent? How many of us know someone who has been raped? How are those people feeling inside? What do they think about themselves? How are we treating them? Do we even acknowledge or think about their pain? Are we helping them if they need help? What are we doing to attempt to prevent such vile crimes? Do we even care? If so, what are we doing about it? If not, how many more will suffer?*

I had dinner and drinks with Dave, a fellow O & E volunteer, a few weeks after the concert. Dave is another one of a kind person who teaches me a lot, keeps me motivated, and helps me to be a better facilitator and person. I didn’t think it was possible to get excited about a presentation

on consent, but he somehow managed to accomplish that goal. Dave is an incredibly gifted and passionate public speaker, facilitator, and healer, and he is an amazing asset to O & E.

Dave loves music as much as I do and we both play the guitar. I said to him, “Dude, come over some night. We can have some beer, play some music, and I’ll teach you how to cook.” We picked a night and I picked him up at his apartment. I drove him back to my apartment, guitar and amp in hand, and we had a few beers on my back deck. We started discussing THP and sexual violence as a problem throughout humanity. We talked about O & E and how we thought we could be a little more effective in our jobs. We discussed THP as an organization that we both love. I told Dave about the punk rock festival and about the exercise that we did.

“How many people do you think live on my street in all of these apartments?” I asked.

“I don’t know. A lot,” Dave responded.

“I’d say so. At least two hundred. Probably a lot more. How many people on this street that we are currently looking at have been affected by sexual violence? How many people have been raped, or know someone who has been raped? What do you think?”

“Probably a lot.”

“I agree. How many people on this street know THP exists? What do you think?”

“Not many. Maybe none.”

“I agree. How sad is that if that is true? Now, take that information to the next street over. How many people are on the next street over?”

“The same.”

“Correct. And the next street? The same. What about all the people in this one city? How many people live in this small city? And how many people in this small city actually know that THP simply exists?”

“I don’t know.”

“Neither do I, but I don’t think a lot know. Now take that throughout other parts of the city. How many people in the city have been raped or know someone who has been raped? How many people simply know THP exists?”

“I don’t know.”

“Neither do I, but I don’t think a lot. Now what about the whole state? What about the country? What about the world? How many people in the world have been raped or know someone who has been raped, but do not know a rape crisis center in their area or surrounding

area simply exists? How are people supposed to get help if they need it and they don't even know places like THP exist, or in areas that don't even have rape crisis centers? Can people seek help from friends, family members, or anyone else? Of course. But what if these people treat them poorly, or treat them well, but don't know how to help them? What if they want someone specifically trained in sexual violence? What are they to do? What are they doing now? What will they do in the future? And what about all the people throughout the world who do not live near a crisis center?"

Dave pondered the questions as we continued our night.

The exercise at the punk festival really stuck with me. As we continued on with the workshop, I noticed many faces in the crowd. Some seemed intrigued, some eager, some passionate, some nervous, and some had tears in their eyes. I remember one specific man in the crowd. I remember his whole being sitting in that chair. He sat there with his arms across his chest and hands in his arm pits, staring at me. His eyes seemed to penetrate me in a way that is hard to capture with words. It made me think of the very real possibility that this young man had never participated in a discussion like this, yet he may have wanted to or needed to for years. It broke my heart. He ended up following me later that night with tears in his eyes. He wanted to talk away from the crowd. He said, "Thank you so much." I told him he was welcome.

While walking down the street that night, a man I will never see again just said the words "Thank you". I have no idea what he has experienced in his life. I don't know if he is a survivor himself, or how he has been affected by sexual violence. And I don't know what the impact of that day has been on his life. But what I do know is he seemed relieved and happy. Tears can be quite healthy and freeing, and I believe they were for him that day.

His tears were tears of joy, I think, and he seemed appreciative of what THP did that day. I didn't want to push him to talk about anything serious, so I started talking to him about his life and his interests. He walked away with a smile, and hopefully a sense of peace. But what did I really do? Not much. All I did was get up, speak, stand behind a table, and listen to music. I just asked him simple questions about his life and his passions. Nothing too special, but to him it was. I think this story poses some questions. *What else can all of us do for others? How simple can it be to give another peace, even if it's for just a moment? But if it is for just a moment, can that peace last even longer?*

Throughout the day, there was one band that I enjoyed the most. I could hear their talent and feel their emotion as soon as I heard the first note. I enjoyed seeing them perform and express a part of themselves. Their last song truly struck me. All four members of the band screamed something in unison. They yelled from the depths of their souls away from the microphones. I wondered what they were yelling. *What did it mean to them?*

I went over to where the guys from this band were standing because I wanted to compliment them and buy their cd if they had one.

“You guys sounded awesome. For real, you sounded sick. You’re very talented,” I said.

“Thanks man. We really appreciate that,” they responded.

“Do you have a cd? I’d love to buy one.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah dude. Hook me up.”

“Cool man. It’s two dollars.”

“Are ya kiddin me? Dude, take a five.”

“Are you serious? That’s too much.”

“No it isn’t. Take it. Thanks for the cd.”

I don’t know how the act of me giving them \$5 somehow blew them away, but it did. To me it was nothing. If anything, I made out because I got a new cd for five bucks. But to them it meant more.

I asked them what they thought of the workshop. All of them really enjoyed it. I asked them if they had learned anything and they said they had. It turns out they loved the workshop.

“It was awesome. I didn’t expect to talk about sexual violence today. It’s a really hard topic to hear. We’ve never had this before,” one of them said.

“It is. But it’s really important to listen to and engage in. People are hurting and might not have anywhere to go or know where to go.”

“Sometimes all people need is just someone to listen to them.”

“I agree.”

“And there’s A LOT of people that need someone to listen to them.”

“I agree. It’s really unfortunate, but I’m trying.”

“You should travel and do this in other states.”

“I’d love to, but I wouldn’t even know where to begin. I think you should do this work in your state. Would you ever get involved where you live?”

“Yes, we definitely would.”

One of the band members later said to me, “Today has been life changing.”

The whole day was amazing. I really enjoyed some of the bands and felt like I got an education on punk music and the punk scene. I am thankful to all of the musicians and fans. A lot of the music is really intense, and some of the lyrics are about rape. I remember one singer in particular. She spoke in between songs, but I couldn’t make out all that she said. I do however remember her saying, “Rape is real. Believe someone if they tell you.” She is right. Rape is real, and some people experience some of the most disturbing things possible while others don’t even believe them. Unreal experiences to some are real experiences to others.

Day three of the festival occurred at a smaller venue. I still participated in a workshop, but there were far less people. There were only about ten of us in a little room, but it was just as important to have. After the engagement, I stood at a table with more THP information for the rest of the day. I listened to more music and talked with people for hours. I loved it.

Some people came over and told me how much they respect me for the work I do at THP. I thanked them but told them I am nothing special. I always tell people I just give a fuck about the issue. I care and I made a choice. I asked them if they wanted to do this kind of work and they said yes. So I talked with them and helped break down the barriers that were keeping them from getting involved. Usually, the only thing keeping us from helping others is ourselves. I believe that once we understand that, we are then able to break the negativity and insecure illusions we may have about ourselves or our abilities.

I explained to them how hard it was for a twenty-two year old man to ask if he could volunteer at a place that helps people affected by sexual violence. I told them that I was nervous and scared, but I contemplated, prayed, and then said “fuck it”. What was the result? I have helped many people in a variety of different ways. Also, my life has changed for the better. Would they want the same, if not more? I told them they can make even more of a difference than I can (and so can you if you want to). They understood, and they then put their names and contact information on our volunteer sign-up sheet.

The punks at this great three-day festival were kind enough to invite us back to have trainings and table the event the following year. They also kindly gave the proceeds of another three-day

festival to THP. I remembered some of the people and some remembered me. I thanked them for having us back a second time. They were happy to have us back as well.

The musicians and fans made a great connection with THP. Together, we taught each other, raised thousands of dollars for the people THP helps, and changed some lives. I am so thankful to everyone who participated and those who gave any amount of money they could afford to support a great cause.

To all the punks who may be reading this, know that I cherish these memories and I keep all of you in my heart. I want to say to all of the bands and fans “good luck”, and I wish you all the best with your music and lives. Love and peace. Be well.

-Bobby

Chapter 9

COREY

“The other reason that I pressed charges functionally is that I don’t have any control over what he does, but the main thing to me was making sure that there was a record. So even though the verdict was completely not, to me "just", at least there is a paper record of what he did to me.”

All survivor speaker accompaniments are intense for the survivors and O & E volunteers, but one very unique and powerful event occurred when I accompanied Corey at a rally. I emailed Corey to meet before the engagement, as I do before all survivor speaker engagements, so we could become acquainted with each other and form a game plan. Corey immediately wrote back, and we decided to grab lunch. While eating, Corey told me his story. His story is obviously sad, but I was truly horrified to learn that his perpetrator accepted a plea bargain for probation of two years and a \$250 fine.

Corey is a very soft spoken person, yet I could feel his passion when he spoke. After listening to his story and learning about the pathetic sentence that his perpetrator received, I felt compelled to ask if he would be willing to share his story for this book. Without hesitation, Corey agreed, but the rally kept our focus.

We met each other an hour before the march began. About two hundred people came out for the three hour march to help play a role in “ending rape culture”. The organizers of the rally were extremely disorganized and didn’t even get a permit, so Corey did not have permission to use a microphone. This pissed me off because his story is not something that is meant to be screamed. Thankfully, they gave him a megaphone. My anger continued once Corey started speaking because instead of listening to him, people talked and laughed. I thought it was ridiculous that these people came to a rally to “end rape culture”, whatever that even meant, and didn’t even

have the decency to just shut up and listen to the most important and effective speaker throughout the whole day.

Corey spoke honestly and passionately, and he captivated the audience. It is hard to explain the look on the people's faces, but the eyes of most of the people stayed fixated on Corey. In my opinion, the majority of the two hundred people were engaged, disgusted, horrified, saddened, impressed, and empowered by Corey's speech. The people began to scream and chant once Corey finished, and then the march began through the streets. Throughout the day, people came and spoke to Corey offering kind words and appreciation. He connected to the people.

After the rally, Corey said he wanted to record his story for this book, so we made plans for him to come to my apartment the next week for dinner. While having a few drinks over chicken parmesan and penne, Corey and I got to know each other a little more. I learned that Corey grew up in the Midwest and has been living on the east coast for over a decade. Corey looks like a woman, but identifies as a man, which I did not understand. Corey explained to me that he is transgender. For him, this means that while he was born and raised as a girl, he now lives his adult life as a trans guy.

I had only known Corey at that point for two weeks, but in that short amount of time we developed a strong connection. Corey is one of a kind and I am thankful that I have met him. His words matter, and his story, as with all of the survivors, should be told and spread. We started recording after dinner. This is Corey's story:

Corey: I'm glad to be a part of this project. I think it's really important. I'm going to try to answer questions and just talk about things. This is all my opinion and coming from my perspective of being a multiple sexual assault survivor. It's been ten and eleven years since both assaults. I think if you had interviewed me ten or eleven years ago, it would be an entirely different interview. But now I'm coming from a perspective where I really do feel like when we're talking about healing, and we're talking about things like being a survivor of sexual violence long-term, time really is the main thing. I don't really believe that you're ever healed from something like that because it leaves a mark on you, just like anything traumatic that you experience in your life. But I do believe in healing, and also in the power of transformation.

I'm going to use the name of the perpetrator that I use in my speeches. I'm going to refer to "Bill" as Bill, but like you saw in the documents, his name is not Bill. I call him Bill

because if I said his name during a speaking engagement, it might actually trigger me. It's one of those weird things. Someone will just say his name regularly, completely out of context, and I get triggered. So I like to refer to him as Bill.

Before I talk about Bill, I want to mention the first time I was assaulted. I was terrified at the time. The guy basically tried all night to rape me. I'm not sure whether he did or not because I was so afraid of him that I actually completely disassociated most of the time, but I do remember him and his weight being on top of me. When he wasn't, I just kept saying, "I want to sleep." I didn't say no, and later I kind of used that to think that I wasn't sexually assaulted because I didn't say no. But in the meantime when he wasn't trying to have sex with me even though I didn't say I didn't want to, he was holding me so tightly that it actually hurt my skin. It was a very intense experience.

Afterwards, the guy called me and said, "I'll give you anything. What can I do? What do you want? I'm sorry. Whatever I did I'll make it up to you." What I could do at the time was change my number. I don't think he actually gave me his real name, but I gave what I knew to be the name that he used, and his phone number, and a description of what he looked like to campus security. That was the best I could do. I did not press charges because I was very afraid of him.

That summer, I traveled to Philadelphia and moved in with Bill. I wanted so deeply and desperately to transform that experience in Massachusetts and do something positive. So I took an internship at an organization that worked to educate people about sexual assault. I wanted to reach out and support people who had this experience by doing this internship. Things were going okay for me. Everything seemed to be working out okay (it wasn't perfect but it was okay) for me, but Bill started to change over time.

It started off with hugging. That was the first thing. I noticed that when he hugged me it was increasingly longer and it felt intimate, but not from my end. After a while, I actually had to talk to him and I said, "Can you please not hug me so much?" I didn't say it made me uncomfortable because I was trying to be nice, which I regret. Not that I think that me doing that was the cause of anything, but I still have some hard feelings towards him. He would also make comments like, "If it gets too hot in your room you can come sleep in my bed." That was really inappropriate. I was like, "No, I'm not going to do that."

I'm really into charity and volunteering. I always have been. One time we went on our trip to the Poconos to drop off toys for needy kids. He said something to the effect of, "I have some sort of urinary issue, and in an emergency, I might need you to hold my penis to help me pee." I was just like, "Well, I'm not going to do that."

Me: He said that on a trip when you were giving gifts to needy kids?

Corey: Yeah. In the Poconos. It was through his church. They were needy kids. THAT was legit as far as I could tell. I really believe this because I felt it at the time and I still feel it: part of the issue is that I didn't want to believe he was capable of doing these things. When I felt uneasy about things he did, I actually doubted myself because in my head I said, "He's a nice guy. He's my friend. He's a good guy. Because I was assaulted before, I'm being overly critical of him." I actually doubted myself more than I doubted him, which is a strange thing, but I was in denial because I didn't want to believe that he was capable of doing something like that. I wanted to believe that he was my friend and he would respect me. He did a good job of indicating that he would, or at least convincing me that he would because every time he did something inappropriate, he responded and said the right things and stopped.

We went to an art museum in Philadelphia together. We went to a famous outdoor garden with sculpted trees and fountains together. But to me, none of this had any sort of a romantic context. I had never been to Philly and I wanted to explore the city.

Bill at the time was fifty-eight. He is now sixty-eight. He was a good five years older than my dad. There was no way that I could possibly sexualize him in any way. But Bill took his hand, non-consensually, and put it down my shirt and started touching my chest. The next morning, he exposed his genitals to me.

In some ways that was just unbelievable to me because it was like a boiling pan. It was like the heat had gone on so high and everything was going so fast that I couldn't even...it was nuts to me. It was like standing on a train track and the train is coming, and you know the train is coming, but just the shock of everything that was happening was so crazy to me.

Bill was an older gentleman. He did a really good job of portraying himself as a nice guy, as a religious guy, as a real generous, down to earth guy. Unfortunately that was a mask. At least when it came to me, the guy he was is the guy that betrayed my trust and used that trust to sexually assault and expose his genitals to me.

I trusted Bill. I thought he was a friend. I explained what had happened to me in Massachusetts, and instead of honoring that, he sexually assaulted me and he used that as an excuse to justify it. He justified himself by saying, "I wanted to get you used to being touched by a man." What the fuck does that have to do with anything? You wanted to help me get over the fact that I was sexually abused by sexually abusing me? That totally makes sense, except not at all and it's completely disgusting and ridiculous.

I'm not saying that this is the right response but I really felt like on top of being sexually assaulted, the primary issue with what Bill did to me was that he violated our friendship; a friendship that I valued. He also violated my consent, but to me, the fact that I knew him and trusted him made it harder than when I was sexually assaulted by a stranger that I didn't know. In some ways while it wasn't easy, it was easier because it wasn't somebody that I had any affinity to. When you trust somebody, when you really tell someone intimate details about your life, spend time with them, and open yourself up, and they violate that trust, it's like another layer. It's another thing.

When I decided to file a police report, the detective kept saying, "Why are you angry?" It was kind of like, "I don't understand what isn't clear. I'm telling you that my roommate who I was friends with touched me not consensually, and then in the morning he exposed himself to me to show me that he was not sexually attracted to me. What is okay about that? What about that is normalizing?" Nothing. But I feel like under the guise of...I feel like under the guise of...No. Fuck that. I feel like what the detective was trying to do was establish if I was telling the truth or not.

Me: The detective was trying to do that?

Corey: Yeah. He was trying to understand if we had dated and were lovers.

Me: Do you mind if I ask what questions he asked? Do you remember?

Corey: I can give a rough sketch of what he said. This was ten years ago so it's not going to be verbatim, but he was basically asking if we had ever had sex, if we were lovers, if we had ever dated. Things like that. Sort of along the lines of, "Did you do anything that would suggest to him that it would be okay to touch you?" How do you answer a question like that? What I said to the detective, and in court, was that I only viewed Bill as a friend. But in fact I had told Bill that I did not want a sexual relationship with him (or anyone else). After having been sexually assaulted that winter, I wasn't in a place where sex felt safe.

This is something that I don't always talk about in my speech, but I will mention because we're having a more in-depth discussion. When you testify and when you go to court, people ask you all these questions. What they didn't take into account is how incredibly hard it is to talk about it. My mother was in court when I testified. My dad was not very much in the picture. I was sitting there in court with my mother who raised me, talking about how someone who is older than she is exposing his genitals to me to let me know that he was not sexually attracted to me. Do you know how crazy that is? It was surreal.

Basically in that situation he didn't have to testify. I had to testify. If I didn't testify, they probably would have thrown out the case. Did I want to testify? Oh my God no. If I think about it too much I'll probably get sick just thinking about it because it was so...it was so stressful. All of the burden was on me. A crime has been committed against me, and all the weight to show that it happened is on me.

Then you add to the fact that this guy was smiling the whole time. He was smiling like he won the lottery. He didn't stop smiling at all. He was smiling while I was talking about how he sexually assaulted and exposed himself to me. It was like a movie. It was surreal that my testimony is being recorded to decide whether they are going to press charges, and I'm facing this guy who sexually assaulted me, and he is smiling at me. It's unfathomable. It's like, "You have no understanding. You have no understanding."

I don't believe in suicide fundamentally or spiritually, but after it happened, it was probably the lowest point in my life. For me I feel like I have healed a lot, but I was REALLY angry afterwards. There were times when I didn't feel like living. I didn't feel like killing myself, but I just felt so...I had already been sexually assaulted. Bill knew that I had been sexually assaulted because one night after he was helping me with my computer he touched the back of my leg. I said to him, "You know, the reason why I'm doing this internship is because...." and I told him what had happened in Massachusetts.

I did not want to press charges just because I knew how it's pretty clear there's a pretty good, well-established notion that if you've been sexually assaulted it's very difficult to press charges and testify. It's relative, but for me...

Me: It is hard. That's why many people don't.

Corey: I felt like I was the one on trial. I didn't feel like he was on trial. I felt like he got to just sit there and smile at me and I'm the one that had to talk about what happened. I used the

word "molest" for a lack of a better word. He molested me and exposed himself to me. That is totally fair and balanced, right? That is totally just. No, it's not. People often say if you've been sexually assaulted, go to the police.

Me: Do you think he knew that he was going to plea bargain? Given potentially the pathetic punishment?

Corey: Yup. Of course he knew. I said to the prosecutor, "If he doesn't admit guilt, please try to put him in jail because he will do this to someone else." Of course he would plea bargain. It made sense because it was a misdemeanor. What he did to me was a misdemeanor.

Me: By the law in Pennsylvania.

Corey: By the law in Pennsylvania. Not obviously on its impact on my life. He was charged with three things. He was charged with harassment. He was charged with indecent exposure, which was him exposing his genitals to me. He was charged with indecent assault, in a misdemeanor way. The harassment was thrown out. In legal terms, they said that they couldn't fully prove that he exposed himself to me, even though I testified that he exposed himself to me, but apparently there was some minor detail I didn't get right. I don't know.

He got the maximum sentence, which in Pennsylvania at the time, and I think still currently, is two years probation. Also, on top of that totally inconsequential sentence compared to the maximum sentence I'm living with, he was also fined \$250 to the state, which doesn't make any sense to me but whatever. I'm guessing it was to cover legal fees or something. I don't know. I'm not a lawyer. But that is just ridiculous to me. And then also during his probation only, he couldn't rent out his house to anybody. Now he can, which sickens me.

Me: And he continues to pursue his Christian ministry out of his home?

Corey: I went on his website the day that I looked up the verdict. He does Christian counseling for people with troubled marriages and other people who need it. On his website it lists all the things he does in the house that he sexually assaulted me in. So people are coming to this house that I rented a room from him in, and getting counseling from him.

The other reason that I pressed charges functionally is that I don't have any control over what he does, but the main thing to me was making sure that there was a record. So even though the verdict was completely not, to me "just", at least there is a paper record of what he did to me. And that if he does try to do that to someone else, that there is an established record

that he did this to me. And that he pled guilty. It's minor victories. I feel good about it. I feel good about my decision to press charges. I just feel like the system is not equal. My hope is maybe that it's gotten a little bit better, but at least in 2002 I found it to be a very frustrating, very fragmented system.

There were resources I could have gotten that I didn't know were available. It was not about me in a good way. It was about me providing evidence of what he did to me so that there could be at least a preliminary hearing. There could be criminal charges and what he would get charged with, but besides that, I did not find it empowering and I did not find it to be a system that was set up to be supportive and help me through the process. I feel like the only thing that helped me through the process was that I was so angry and frustrated that that had happened and also concerned that it could have happened to someone else. That was what drove me. That anger and frustration and pain was the impetus, but if anything, the criminal process was more of a barrier for justice than it was a bastion. I know that's a fancy word but seriously.

The crime shows are like, "You're guilty of murder. You get the full sentence." I like to watch those shows. I like when the bad guy goes away. But it's not always that story. That story is sometimes just a story. If Bill had just punched me, or done some other non-sexual crime, I feel like it would have been a whole different thing. But because of the sexual nature of the crime, there was some subtext of, "What did I do to bring this upon myself?" And the answer was to the best of my ability, I tried to communicate every way I could that he did not have my consent because he didn't. There wasn't anything I did to bring it upon myself. I was in his proximity. That was it.

Me: There was nothing you did to bring it upon yourself.

Corey: Nope.

Me: He is also an intelligent man, right? There was a huge age differential and he knew what he was doing. Would you agree?

Corey: *Oh yeah. It's hard for me to say this because it's hard for me to think about, but I felt pretty certain that he had done this to someone before me. There's no certainty because there weren't any documented cases, but I just had a feeling that how he established trust with me and how he was, and how he always knew how to say the right thing when he did cross a boundary. Even if he hadn't, I know he could so easily...SO EASILY do that to someone else.*

It's still painful....ten years of my life...it's still painful... sometimes I have nightmares about it. I've had nightmares about him. I think it is somewhat helpful for me to look at legal documents and think about it, but in other ways it brings up those old painful feelings. It's a mixed bag. There's a part of me that still feels that anger and frustration towards him.

I forgave him because it was about me. I haven't forgotten what he has done and I haven't completely let go, but I was so angry for several years. I needed to get to the point where I just let go of that. It wasn't about him. It wasn't about condoning what he did. It was just about me getting to the point where I could turn the corner and say, "Yes, what happened really did have a huge detrimental, negative, hurtful, and emotionally painful effect on my life, but I can't sit in that forever because I didn't choose to be in that place and I can't stay in that place." Bill: I don't forgive you because of you. I forgive you because I need to start changing directions.

I really did believe that doing that internship would help transform that scary experience I had. I don't think it actually did, but that was my hope. I was a very optimistic and hopeful person.

Me: That's the beauty of you. You still have it. That's a good thing.

Corey: I think I'm a little more cautious and reserved. People say to me sometimes, "You have a wall up." And I say, "Yeah, I'm doing okay. I'm slowly chipping away, but yeah, I will have a wall up for a while."

Me: The optimism is still inside of you. You just spoke at a rally in front of two hundred people.

Corey: I just lock it up a little tighter. It's still there.

Me: It's still burning inside of you.

Corey: It's a little more guarded because when you trust somebody that much, when you tell somebody things about your life that you don't really tell people, and you have that vulnerability, and you really share with them, that is...I don't know about anybody else, but I was not raised in a touchy feely emotional family. I was friendly and trusting, but I have never been super, "Let's talk about our feelings", because that wasn't the culture of my family. So when I did open up, and when I did let down those barriers, it was a huge deal. It meant that I really trusted and cared about you. So to me in some ways that was harder for me. Obviously, being sexually assaulted was hard, but it was that I really trusted him and let him in. That made it worse to me.

There was a period after that where I did not trust anybody. I didn't care what they were selling, how nice and wonderful they were, I just didn't trust anybody. I just couldn't. It was a loss. It was a loss of that part of me that had been so open, so generous, and so trusting that I just said, "Fuck it. I am not going to trust anybody. I don't care what they say. I can't trust it. They might say all the right things and then use it against me or hurt me." There was a long period when I didn't let anybody in.

When I tell my story, I do not talk about my family much, but after I left the internship I came home. So I come home and I'm a total mess. Emotionally I was a total mess. I feel like what happened was that my mom couldn't process what happened to me, so instead, because she couldn't deal with it, she would say things like, "I don't want to talk about it." Or years later she would say, "I don't want to bring it up. Get over it. That was a bad summer for everyone including you." No mom: I was sexually assaulted. I wouldn't call that a bad summer. I didn't choose to get sexually assaulted, but had to deal with the effects it had on me.

I wish I could say that my parents were supportive. My mom did go to the hearing and actually she was pretty good. But before that there was a period of maybe two months where everyone acted like I was completely irrational. I just had this terrible, traumatic, awful thing happen to me, and everyone seemed to be acting like it didn't happen. But I could not pretend it didn't happen because it was completely affecting my life. I don't want to be angry. But I was angry because I feel like I was sinking under the weight of this and nobody was acknowledging it or being supportive.

Me: I've only known you for two weeks, but I do not think you are an angry person. When I look at you and I hear you, the last thing I think of is that you are an angry person. Can you get angry? Of course. You're human. All of us can. But you're an incredibly soft-spoken person.

Corey: I'm not a particularly angry person, but I felt like it was a denial thing. In a limited way they could support me, but when I really needed them I didn't get it. I was really raw. I was sort of a mess. Like I say often in my speeches, there is no road map. We don't teach in schools, usually, or in societies, what to do when you get sexually assaulted. We don't even have the basic conversations sometimes, let alone the more serious ones. We might have a preventative, "Here's what you do to be safe" conversation, but we don't have the conversation of, "If you get sexually assaulted here are the resources in your neighborhood. Here are some things you can do. Here are some choices."

My dad doesn't know what happened because the one time I tried to tell him he said that he didn't want to know. I just said, "Okay, Dad." After we hung up the phone, I was just like, "I wish I didn't know. In fact, I wish this didn't happen to me." I can understand him not wanting to know, but I don't have that privilege. Why am I supporting you in not knowing? How about you support me. How about that Dad...

I don't know if you want to talk about family, but I think it's important because the criminal justice system is so hard, and having the support of your family, or partners, or community can mean the difference in the healing process. My family unfortunately supported me not talking about it. I hate that. I hate that whole frame. I am so against that, because it's putting the burden back on me saying, "I'm going to tidy things up. I'm not going to talk about it. I'm not going to acknowledge and share with you what happened to me because you can't deal with it." Well I'm sorry. If you love me, and I am your family, I am your child. I am your child that is a survivor of sexual assault and that is part of it. And if you can't accept it, okay. But I am not going to be silent. I love them. I love them for who they are, but it's been ten and eleven years since both assaults, and being sexually assaulted still impacts my life.

Me: You talk about anger. You said you were angry for years. Was there a switch? Was there a defining moment when you said, "Now things are going to change"? If so, what was that? And what did you do about it?

Corey: The first thing that happened is I had my first serious relationship in 2006. That was pretty good. I think that helped. I've never been in a serious relationship with anybody. I had these two experiences of sexual assault. I had close relationships with men and dated them, but I wasn't sexually attracted to men. I really wanted to be, but I wasn't. I had my first relationship with a woman, and it wasn't just that I was emotionally and intellectually attracted to them, but I was also physically attracted and felt safe with this person that I dated. That was good. It showed me that I could be sexual, that I could be intimate and vulnerable with someone, and they weren't going to be terrible to me.

Basically at that point I had my walls up high. My ex helped with bringing those walls down, but it wasn't right away. It took her a little bit of time to get her chisel out and chip through. But the fact that we were able to establish a loving, caring, intimate relationship where I felt safe, comfortable, and loved was really good because it showed that I could trust

people. I couldn't just trust anybody, but I could be vulnerable. I could tell my girlfriend very intimate parts of my life. I could really be open with her and trust her in a deeper way. I think that helped.

Me: What prompted you to become a THP survivor speaker? How did you hear about THP?

Corey: I learned more about THP when I heard Shira speak at the "Slut Walk", which is a march and protest against excusing rape by referring to any aspect of a woman's appearance, including the clothing that she wore during the assault. I knew a little bit about THP because I had done some activism work and met THP volunteers, but I hadn't heard a survivor speaker speak, and when I heard Shira speak...it was really powerful. I don't even remember exactly what she said, but I remember how I felt afterwards. I tried to find her and I think she was gone, but after that I looked it up.

It took me time because I was a little nervous, but I contacted THP and I got in touch with Carmen. Then last summer I did the training, which was intense, and we practiced writing down our story.

Corey wanted to take a break. After a few minutes we continued.

Corey: Something I want to talk about is filing charges. I feel really good about filing charges. When I look at the legal documents and know that he was found guilty even though his sentence was far from ideal, just having that validation that he was found guilty makes me feel good. But I really want to hit home the fact that for me, that was the right choice. But I think often that people try to police survivors' experiences and tell them how they should respond, and I do not wish to do that. I do not want my decisions to be generalized on other people. I won't say, "They should make that decision too," because it is a really hard decision to make. It's like experiencing a trauma and then being put through the ringer and being judged. Having to testify in a court of law is not a process that you want to do unless you have to.

In the first assault it was a decision I couldn't make even though I would have liked to. I just couldn't. Afterwards I did whole sweeps of my room to make sure he wasn't there. I felt so scared that because he knew where I went to school that he was going to come and attack me or stalk me. It's not an easy decision. We really do like to think of it as a just system and legal justice system, but I don't think it actually is a just system.

Me: It is for some.

Corey: Oh yeah.

Me: But it's not for all. And it may not be for most that experience sexual violence.

Corey: The system can be just. It's really the sexual violence that to me is the issue. I talk about my experience where I didn't feel like it was just. It definitely can be more just. I have hopes that in the last ten years it has become more just. I think and hope there is more awareness and sensitivity, but I did not experience it, unfortunately.

I find strength and hope in that I view survivors of sexual trauma as a community. People don't choose to be survivors of sexual violence, so this is not a community that would choose to be part of that community, but the root of my activism is identifying as a survivor of sexual trauma and being open about that.

One time this guy made a joke about molesting me. I was like, "ONE: You come near me and I'm kicking you in the shins, and TWO: That is not cool. That is not funny. That is not a joke."

I know our society loves to make jokes of things that it's uncomfortable with, but when you have been raped or sexually assaulted, it is not a joke. You are not going to say that around me without me saying something. Even if it's hard. Even if it's awkward. I will be the bad guy. I am not going to support someone normalizing rape and sexual assault. It is not okay, because that kind of behavior in some ways makes it more normal. You are not going to joke about rape and sexual assault around me. It's not visible that I am a survivor, but I feel comfortable in outing myself as a survivor when someone really crosses the line. I feel the need to let people know that stuff like that has a consequence. It has an effect. It's painful. It is PAINFUL to hear stuff like that.

This is not uplifting but it's important to me because I hear it a lot. When people don't know that I'm a survivor and they talk like that, it's just like, "You think it's funny, because to you I believe most often, rape is either sensationalized or this theoretical thing, but it maybe hasn't touched you, or maybe you are just compartmentalizing." It's like, "Rape, oh yeah, that's that thing that gets people all in arms so I'm going to use it to shock you." No, what you're doing is actually talking about something that AFFECTS a lot of people and acting like it's a joke, a novelty, a silly ha ha thing; it's not.

Rape, sexual assault, incest...these acts of sexual violence affects so many people. I just can't deal with people joking about them. It's not funny, and I can't support it. I know it's hard, but I challenge that kind of behavior. I don't do it in like an "Oh, you're bad" way. I do it like, "Hey, I'm not sure if you're aware, but when you joke about this it isn't okay. It just isn't. It's not cool, and here's why."

Sexual assault is not a theoretical thing. It is not some hypothetical conversation. It is something that happened to me twice in my life. It is something that has happened to people that I love and care about. It is not this thing that should be joked about like it's inconsequential because it isn't. It's so underreported.

I will use this word and I will own it. I think sexual assault is an epidemic. It is a crime that happens to a lot of people, but because of the shame around the sexual nature of the crime and because of how incredibly hard it is to come forward, that is why so many people do not come forward. The data is pretty high. Some say the numbers are one in four women and one in six men. But even these statistics, although shocking to those who don't know, are not completely accurate compared to how many cases of sexual assault are happening.

Me: I agree.

Corey: There are a lot of different factors. There is age, country of origin, language issues. Also, predators can be very good at putting fear into their victims. It's a problem when we don't have the conversation and we trivialize it. We talk about AIDS and other issues but...

Me: There are tons of issues, and all of the issues need to be talked about, but we're not really talking about rape. We're not really talking about sexual violence. It's fucked up.

Corey: The reason why I talk about it, the reason why I will stand out in front of a crowd of people and say, "I was sexually assaulted and I am not ashamed," is because we don't fucking talk about it. That perpetuates this environment where people who are sexually assaulted struggle. I really struggled. I had a really hard time and I didn't have the support I needed. I have more support now, and that has been part of my healing process.

Me: You say sexual violence is an epidemic. I completely agree with you. What do we do about that epidemic? It's difficult to reduce and difficult to stop.

Corey: I support the notion, but before we can even think about stopping sexual violence we need to really get real and honest and have these conversations. I feel like most often sexual assault is reduced to dramatic interpretations. The stories usually have very black and white,

very victimizing, very disempowering story lines. It is not survivors telling their own story; it's dramatized in the media, and that is sometimes where people get their information. That is not the worst thing ever, but it is not a survivor telling their own personal story and talking about their experience. It is a dramatic interpretation. It is a story produced for entertainment. I don't watch stories or movies about rape. To me, sexual violence is not entertainment.

Me: You say it is an epidemic. To me, you help the epidemic by speaking. By talking. By getting out there in the public. By letting people know it is real and that it happens to a lot of people. By letting people know they are not alone. And then things start to change. In my own experiences as a THP counselor, from what I've seen, things start to change when people start to speak. I was at the rally with you. I saw the looks on the people's faces. When you spoke, did you feel in that moment you were empowering other people for them to go out and speak for themselves?

Corey: Mostly people thanked me for speaking. And what I said to them was, "Thank you for being here and expressing a commitment to challenging rape culture." The whole point of me speaking is that I want the people to ask the questions. Even though sometimes the hard questions are really hard, I want to open up the dialogue. I try in my speeches to be the most human and open. I usually try to be funny because I want to show people that I am a survivor, I wear that hat, I fly that flag around, but I'm also just a person. And to me, I do think I helped create change even though it's hard for me to admit that.

I notice a relative lack of honest conversations about sexual assault, or the conversations stop, or they never happen. I want them to happen. I want people to feel like they can talk about it, because when we don't, I think it perpetuates sexual assault. It is disempowering survivors when we don't talk about it. I want to, in my own way, support survivors because while I don't know what individual people went through, I know what I went through, and I can at least sort of understand and want to be a part of a positive change.

It's really hard for some people when I say I'm a trauma survivor. They don't know what to say or what to do. Sometimes they just don't want to say the wrong thing, and I say to them, "It is okay. I may not know the answer, but there isn't a wrong question. Just ask me the question." Because we do not talk about this stuff enough. We do not. I would rather be vulnerable with you in that space and answer the questions and talk about things that are painful and be a real human being because I don't want the conversation to just be plot lines.

They are just stories. But I am not a story. I am a real, normal, relatively average, flawed human being. Just like most other people.

Me: Just like everyone. We are all flawed.

Corey: To other survivors: Know that things do get better. For me they have, but it's not like some amount of time goes by and erases what happened. While I have been able to do some things to transform, it is still hard. I want people to see those scars a little bit. I don't want to push them in people's faces and make the conversation more difficult, but I do want to show the effect. I want it to be personal and have people understand the effect. When there is a face and it becomes more personal, there is more understanding of the effects.

Someone once asked me if sexual assault made me gay. People have asked about my family. Someone once asked me if I ever lived with roommates again. The conversation we're having is valuable. That is my activism, and that is where my heart is. To me, there's pretty much nothing more important that I do than having these conversations because each conversation is speaking against that silence and that shame. Us not talking about it is part of the problem, and I will not be part of the problem when it comes to sexual violence.

I know how it feels. It is my story. I am Corey, and I am a survivor. It is my story. It is my story twice. Twice. I was sexually assaulted while doing a sexual assault internship. That is hard to say. That is hard to talk about. But every opportunity I have to speak through THP, I will go out and tell it. It helps me. It helps me to own it. I'd rather tell my story in my own words than someone else tell my story. As painful as it is to be vulnerable in that way, being able to say it in my way, in my own words and know that it is my personal story is empowering. It empowers me. It's not some monologue that I'm reading. It's everything that I've lived through. And just because it's painful and was a low point in my life, it isn't now. Hell, I can stand up and speak in front of two hundred people. Ten years ago? No. It was something that was brutally horrible in my life. But now? I am strong. I am fucking strong.

So often the narratives are, "You're a victim." No! I am strong. You can try to put whatever words you want on me. I do not care. I will not accept that. I am not a victim. There are some days when I don't always feel totally like a survivor, but at least the word "survivor" is empowering. I went through these terrible, traumatic experiences, and I've come through it. I don't believe I will ever completely heal, but I can be strong. I can be vulnerable, and I can also challenge a lot of assumptions and victim blaming behavior. One time during a speech

someone asked, "Is there anything you could have done differently to avoid what happened?" I said, "I did the best I could, but there isn't an answer there. You want me to tell you what I could have done. And there isn't an answer there. There is not an answer because it isn't what I did."

Bobby, you are the choir. Most of those people at the rally are the choir. I don't need to reach them as much as I need to reach the person that is trying to blame me for being sexually assaulted. People that are already active and doing the work get it. But I do also need to reach people that don't think about it, that aren't engaged, and that don't get it.

Me: Is there one final message you want people to take away?

Corey: For me, the main goal I have in doing this kind of activism and talking to you is letting people know that incidences of sexual assault are way more common than anyone would think. I think that is really important...focus on that... focus on the fact that this particular crime is happening to so many people. I have talked to so many people and I've heard their stories. I have listened to them tell me their story. I've heard so many stories, and every story I hear just adds to the main fact, which to me, is that it is so prevalent. Forget statistics. Almost every time I disclose that I am a survivor, several people disclose to me. It's hard to hear someone's story, or just hear that they are a survivor, because to me it's indicative of how vast the problem is, and how much we really need to start talking about it and have the hard conversations.

There are a lot of barriers to progress, but there are also not. What I do isn't that sensational. To me, it's just a matter of taking that risk and being vulnerable and not being ashamed to say, "I'm a survivor." I have transformed what that means to me and have come this far. Yes, I have a trauma history, but I am in a completely different place now. I draw power in that. I felt so good after my speech on Saturday. I felt really proud of myself. I heard the people roar. I do this kind of activism because I believe in it whole-heartedly, and it allows me to use what happened to me as tool to speak out against sexual violence.

JUSTICE

“The most important thing is that there absolutely are options there. There are a lot of different legal options that people might not know about, so it’s great to talk to someone who can help them figure that out. But there is no right or wrong decision. There really isn’t. It really is individual.”

What is justice? Is it just that Corey’s perpetrator received two years probation and a fine of \$250 for sexual assault? Is it just that some drug offenders spend more time in prison than sex offenders? Is it just that most rapists are not even arrested let alone incarcerated? I could not tell you how many rape disclosures I have received throughout my life, but I have received at least fifty. Of all the disclosures I’ve listened to and all the stories I know, there is only one person I know of who has been incarcerated for rape or sexual assault. How is that just? What does justice look like to those who have been sexually violated, but never seen their perpetrator or perpetrators punished in any way?

A friend of mine once asked me, “Hey Bobby, how is social injustice treating you?” This book is not about the criminal justice system, but I believe it is imperative to at least write about justice, or lack there of. None of the survivors sharing their stories in this book have seen their perpetrators incarcerated. What does justice look like to them and anyone else who has these experiences?

Megan wrote a poem that she would like to share with you called, “*And She Refuses Justice*”.

And She Refuses Justice

(I wrote this in response to someone asking what I would do if my detective came back to me and offered me a chance to put my molester in jail - a fate that did not await him when I was sixteen)

*Officer, you come to me
To tell me I've a chance
To show the world how right I am
And how wrong the Other was.
But what does that accomplish?
I ask you straight forward and plain.
What possible good will that do for me?
What restitution will that serve for agonies past?
So he finally gets what he deserves and I am left with
What?*

*A half decade's revenge satisfied?
The momentary bliss of knowing I was right?
Will it change the minds of those who still believe it was
All My Fault?*

*No. It won't. Because nothing shifts a tumor.
Nothing moves a dead tree that doesn't want to die.
Their minds were made up before the last word of the story
Fell upon their broken ears.*

*Long ago I made peace with the fact that I am not always
To be right.
To be righted.*

You want to give me justice for the pain and the anguish I suffered?

*Take from me my agonies.
This smoldering coal lump in my soul
And plant them deep inside of him
So he can never be whole.
Aside from that, oh mortal avenger,
There's nothing you can do.
Please feel not the strain of obligation
For a girl who won't say yes.
The world is so much brighter, clearer
Than it was before.
I don't struggle as my peers have done
for who I'm supposed to be.
I suppose
Spending so much time as someone else
From this, I learned to be free.
So, please take your vengeful offer
And file it away. Because, I'm sorry, Officer
There won't be justice today.*

For Tim - (my investigator)

*Blurry days with no sun
Moving through the motions*

*Marionetted and disjointed.
Unwilling to remember the slightest detail.
Unable to recall papered trysts
And promises.
Suddenly a hand grabs me by the collar
Yanks me from my darkened revelry
And demands a flood of memories.
Did he do it or did he not?
Explain further and in detail.
Please leave nothing out.
Clarity astounded me as I looked into Hand's face
And gave him what he needed.
Did exactly what he asked.
No matter fear weakened my knees
And shook my voice in sorrow.
Picked up a phone, continued on
Kept waking to tomorrow.
And why? What pulled me from my daze?
What forced me to see daylight?
A single hand reached out in aid.
A stranger sent to free me
Who soldiered on long after
To pull others from their darkness.
A gift from God? A job well done? Well, who will ever know?
But one small girl torn from the wash
And forced up to the sun.*

Working with Joan as a case management intern was great, but I found it just as helpful and fulfilling to work with Aila, the head of the Legal Department at THP. Aila is a compassionate, caring, sweet, empathetic, and brilliant woman. She is another special human being that is rare to find, but I'm thankful I did.

I loved helping Aila out with the legal cases and enjoyed learning about the legal system. She, like Joan, taught me how to be a better counselor and person. I admired her for the work she did, but also for the work she didn't do. Aila can do anything in the world she wants. She could easily be rich by being a prominent lawyer at a well known law firm, but she chooses to make a lot less money by working at THP as a legal advocate for rape survivors.

Aila was more than willing to sit down with me and have a conversation for this book. I wanted her to explain the legal options survivors have and to help sort out the question of justice. She is the expert, not me. I organized this so that she is talking directly to you. I want you to know what she and her department do and to fully understand many of the options survivors and

significant others have. I hope this helps if you have been affected by sexual violence and feel that you have not received your form of justice. Justice is different for everyone, and Aila can best explain what that means and what options people have going forward. This was our conversation:

Me: So what exactly do you do? What has your experience been like working at THP?

Aila: We try to make sure that survivors understand all of their options. We try to help them understand the benefits, and the possibly negative, or just consequences in general of accessing those options. And thinking through what it would mean for someone tomorrow, six months from now, two years from now in terms of what their participation is going to need to be, or how it's going to affect their lives or the lives of the people around them. So our main focus is to make sure survivors understand all of their options, criminal and civil legal options. We also make sure that they understand timeframes too, so that they understand that this may only be an option for them within a certain amount of time, and they don't have to take that option, but if they don't do that option now, it's not going to be available to them later. That really is an important thing that we do.

Depending on what a survivor wants and what their version or description of justice is, we will help them figure out how to get there if it's possible. Even for the legal issues, we work through the empowerment model and just accept that regardless of our personal thoughts around it, or whether we're concerned a survivor may want this option vs. another option, as long as ethically we feel like we can help them access it we will. That's the main thing that we do.

We will talk to some survivors for half an hour over the phone and that's it. They just want some information and then maybe they move forward with it or maybe they don't. Others want us to be there for them to check in with, but they want to do everything on their own. And then others really want us to be the main person helping them get there and just be there with them every step of the way. So our involvement is as little or as much as they want us to be there.

Me: In terms of percentages, do a lot of survivors who request THP's services go forward with the legal process? Or do most not? Is it hard to gauge?

Aila: My guess would probably be 50/50. And it might be that they are moving forward on one thing and not other things.

Me: What do you mean by that?

Aila: I think a lot of survivors do come to us because they want to know about the criminal justice system and reporting to the police, but it doesn't necessarily mean that they would move forward with that. But as we're talking to them, we may be able to help identify other issues that they haven't necessarily thought of as legal. This can mean in terms of their rights as an employee or their rights as a student. We may be talking to them about everything and they may decide, "Reporting to the police isn't for me but I really want to feel safe on my campus until I graduate, so reporting to my university is the way that I want to go." So I'll go with that option even though it wasn't something they were really thinking about when they called us.

Me: So we're not just talking about criminal or civil court?

Aila: Right. There are a lot of negotiations.

Me: Do you mind explaining what that means?

Aila: When we talk about civil legal issues, it may be that someone is filing a civil lawsuit against a third party or the perpetrator. And for those issues we would send them to a private civil attorney, and there are some really great ones that really focus on sexual assault issues and moving forward with those cases. But for a lot of survivors it's much more about, "I need to take three weeks off of work and I want to know how much I have to tell my employer under our human resources policy so that I can take that time without putting everything out there about what I'm going through", or "I just want to know what my rights are. How much time can I take off? Will they penalize me? Will it be used against me?"

Talking to them about those things that they can do is very important. They may not necessarily be in the legal system, but there are legal rights and obligations out there in terms of employers and universities and what they need to do. Maybe they're just having some financial concerns, so we can help them figure out what they can do around that, like applying for victim's compensation through the state, or finding other avenues available to them. A little bit of case management comes into that. They might need to apply for short-term or long-term disability. For housing, much of it is doing a housing search, but it may also be thinking about if they're in a private landlord/tenant situation; how do you break that lease? What are their obligations as a tenant? What are the landlord's obligations to them? So things like that.

And of course safety always comes up. They can apply for a restraining order and not do anything else. They don't have to report to the police. They don't have to report to anyone else to try and get a restraining order.

Me: Do the survivors talk about their perpetrators? Are they still present in their lives? Or do they not talk about that?

Aila: It depends on the situation. A lot of times we can help people figure out their options without knowing any details. We might need to know a little bit just in terms of whom the perpetrator is and the kind of contact they have on a regular basis, and what the perpetrator knows about them so that we can assess their safety options. We can figure things out such as, "Okay, if you tell your employer what happens, what is that going to mean to you in terms of safety because you work with the perpetrator?" Sometimes it's the perpetrator's best friend. So we may need to know a little bit, but often we don't get into details at all. There are some clients that I've worked with for years that I don't know the specifics at all about what happened to them. I just know generally who the perpetrator is and how we need to work around that to keep them safe and to maintain their privacy.

Me: In my opinion based on my experiences, a lot of people know about rape and think, "You have to go to court. You have to get a conviction. That person has to be incarcerated." I do not think that is what is going on in terms of percentages. Is that fair to say?

Aila: Oh that's absolutely true.

Me: Why is that?

Aila: The criminal justice system isn't really set up for sexual assault cases to respond well and appropriately. I think for some survivors it works really well, but for a lot of survivors, particularly when it's a non-stranger sexual assault, the dynamics that come into that don't play well for what the prosecutors need to move forward with the case. There's not a lot of evidence usually. There aren't things like a lot of physical injury. There aren't witnesses usually. The relationship that the perpetrator and the survivor may have had before the assault may have been friendly. There may have been some consensual sexual contact. So those are all things that make it very difficult for a prosecutor to look at and say, "I feel like I can move forward with this case and possibly meet the burden of proof and see this person convicted." For most cases that we see, they don't go forward.

Me: Is it mainly because of the lack of evidence?

Aila: I think that's part of it. I think that prosecutors feel like these cases are difficult to prove because often there isn't any evidence.

Me: So do some survivors really want to go forward, but then the prosecutor looks at all of the information and says, "We can't do it"?

Aila: Yeah. I would say anecdotally, the majority of people who do decide to report to the police, the concern ultimately ends up being that their case isn't going to go forward and the survivor wants the case to go forward. And it's not their decision to make because once you report you become a witness in the state's case against the perpetrator. So it ultimately is up to the District Attorney's office whether they are going to go forward or not. They will listen to what the survivor wants, but if they feel like they can't move forward with the evidence then they won't. And that's why these other avenues are so important for survivors to know about, so they can get some form of justice.

Me: In your experience and your opinion, why do you think people do not report to the police?

Aila: They are afraid that they will not be believed. They have this idea of what a victim should look like from the media.

Me: Which is what?

Aila: I think a lot of people think, "I don't look like someone who has been assaulted. I don't have any injuries. It wasn't a stranger. I'm not even sure if what happened to me is a crime. Even though I feel like it's a violation, I'm not sure if legally it actually is rape because I knew this person, because I consented to some things, or I spent time with them voluntarily. I trusted them." That comes up a lot. They are often worried about what people are going to think about their decisions before and after an assault. Maybe someone didn't tell anyone for a long time or didn't go to the hospital right away, or wasn't able to label it for themselves as rape for a long time. So those things will come up. Sometimes they are worried about the perpetrator. They're worried that maybe the perpetrator will retaliate, or they're in a community where they're worried that other people will retaliate because they've put this out there about the perpetrator.

Me: So not only is there a fear of not being believed, there is also a fear of potentially more victimization? More violence? More extreme violence?

Aila: Absolutely. Or just rumors being started, or people blaming the survivors and not the perpetrators. So if the perpetrator is in this tight community, probably other people look at this

person as a good person and wouldn't understand what happened. But sometimes too, they're feeling like, "I don't want the perpetrator in trouble." If there are some immigration issues going on, they might be worried that the perpetrator might be deported. They might depend on the perpetrator economically. The perpetrator might be a family member who the whole family depends on emotionally. Or just in general, they might feel like, "That's just not my version of justice. My version of justice is I want to move on with my life and just feel safe, but I don't want to see the perpetrator go to jail." I think there are a lot of different reasons why people decide not to report.

Me: What is justice?

Aila: That's the...

Me: Seriously. What is your...

Aila: I can't...I think just being able to move forward in a way that feels safe and healthy. And I don't think for a lot of people going through the criminal justice system will give them justice.

Me: Which is ironic given that the criminal justice system is supposed to entail justice and our safety.

Aila: And for some people it does and it will. But I really feel like you can't define it. Only the survivor can define it. For some survivors, it's really as basic as "I want to change my locks. If I can just get my landlord to agree to let me change my locks, I'll feel safe in my apartment and that's all I want from you. That's all I need to move forward." Or it might just be, "I want to change my shifts at work so I don't have to see this person anymore, and as long as I don't have to see them, that's it. I don't need anything else." And for others, it definitely entails a lot more in terms of, "I want to move out of the community", or "I want to get a new job", or "I want that person off campus while I'm continuing to go to school." So it can mean a lot of different things, but it doesn't always mean, "I want this person to be convicted or found responsible in a public way for what happened."

Me: I've always been interested in the psychological impact of crime, but specifically this crime since I've volunteered at THP. My opinion is that many people don't dig deep enough to understand the impacts. I think plenty of people just think about crime, arrest, court, incarceration or no incarceration, end of story. I don't believe we fully understand the psychological effects people have from rape. I say this because of my experiences interacting

with survivors, but specifically something that happened with a client I worked with at THP. This woman was so adamant about taking her perpetrator to court. I said, "That's great. We support you." And then a week later she called me and said, "I can't do it." I said, "That's okay. You have time. We're still here if you ever want to go forward in the future." What do you think happened? What changed for her? And what does that look like for the others just like her?

Aila: It might be a few different things. I think one thing is that going through the system can be really tough. There are a lot of great detectives. There are a lot of great District Attorneys out there that really do their job well and they care about the survivors they work with. But it's a difficult process, even if you have the best support in place. It's a long process. It takes a year to two years if it even got to trial. So it takes a toll on a survivor. They have to talk to a detective, an Assistant District Attorney, and have to provide explicit details. At some point they will have to testify before a grand jury, and then at some point they will have to testify in an open courtroom. So those things can all feel overwhelming and difficult, especially if you're on this track where you're trying to heal and it keeps being brought up in a way that doesn't feel healthy for that person. So that can be one thing.

The other thing could be that someone is reporting or thinking that they need to report because that is what you're supposed to do if you're a victim. And that's what everyone thinks you're supposed to do if you're a victim. There is a mentality of, "Of course you should report it to the police if this really happened to you." But it's not something that they feel personally they want to do or are ready for. I think sometimes people do it because they think they should. They think they need to protect other possible victims or they think they need to do it because everyone around them is saying, "This is what you have to do next."

But sometimes if they're able to take a step back and realize that that's really not what they want to do. It's not something they feel comfortable with. And hopefully they come to the realization that as hard as it is, that it's not their responsibility to prevent this from happening to anyone else. The responsibility is only on the perpetrator. So they might get to that place where they feel comfortable with that decision and realize that, "I don't want to do this." But the other piece could be that they may have had a negative interaction, or what they perceive to be a negative interaction with someone who is part of the system and it just made them realize that "This is going to be too much for me. It's not worth it."

Me: I've been fascinated by the disparity of our sentencing. I once sat in prison with inmates for class while I was in college. All of us sat in a circle and talked. Only two inmates admitted what they did. One guy received six years and another guy received nine years for selling drugs. The other inmates would not say what they did, but I later learned that they were convicted sex offenders. Some received two and four years. I thought to myself, *Something is seriously wrong with this. Something seems off.*

Aila: I agree.

Me: That was mind blowing to me, but as we've already discussed, if the DA even brings the case to trial.

Aila: Yeah, which for most cases you don't really see that many. There's a better chance it's going to go forward if it's a stranger assault.

Me: Given that most cases don't even get to trial, what is the next best thing for a survivor? I ask because the crimes still exist. The effects still exist. What is the next best option for them? We talked about justice for themselves, assuming they attain it. What else is the next best thing for them given that they may not get to a certain point in the criminal justice system?

Aila: I do think it's figuring what they, WHAT THEY, and only them, what they really want and need. And just making sure that there are agencies out there, people out there that can help them get to that, so that they can just live their best life, so that they can integrate this and heal and move on and get whatever they feel is justice for them. A lot of times it really is true: Justice can just mean being able to move past this in a way that they can continue to live a life they want to live, and not having this derail them in a way that is so detrimental to them in their lives because they didn't have the support that they may have needed to move on.

I think for most survivors that we work with, that really is the best thing for them. And it often isn't about a concrete, "This person was found guilty", or "This person was found responsible", or whatever it might be. It definitely is more than that. It can be, "I was able to stay in school and graduate and I'm in the career I always wanted to be in and that didn't derail me", or "I'm able to continue the relationships I have that were starting to fall apart afterwards because I wasn't getting the counseling that I needed." Whatever it might be.

Me: Is there anything that you specifically want to tell people about this issue? This crime? Is there anything else that you want to add?

Aila: The most important thing is that there absolutely are options there. There are a lot of different legal options that people might not know about, so it's great to talk to someone who can help them figure that out. But there is no right or wrong decision. There really isn't. It really is individual.

There are a lot of different things that people can decide to do that will work for them and be the best thing for them. No one should feel like they have to do something after an assault because they don't. They don't have to do anything they don't want to do or don't feel comfortable with. They don't have to participate in the criminal justice system that they may feel like is not going to be the best thing for them because they think it's their duty or they think they should. I think that's the most important thing, just so they know that there's just no right part when it comes to legal issues. It really depends on what they want.

VICTIM BLAMING

“All I know is that believing I was to blame was easier for them than accepting that this person they all revered was a pedophile. It was easier to blame a child.”

I have worked with clients on case management and legal issues, facilitated educational workshops at colleges and universities, and tabled health events in poor and rich communities, yet no matter where I go, I still hear victim blaming statements. Why are some survivors blamed for being raped and sexually assaulted? It sickens me every time I hear it, and I think it is worth thinking about and discussing. Some people wonder why survivors don't *get over it*. Part of the reason why some survivors don't *get over it* is because they have been blamed, as if they somehow are responsible for being raped or sexually assaulted. Victim blaming will often make a survivor feel even worse, which may make the healing process that much harder.

I believe it is illogical, disgusting, and slightly insane to blame someone who has been raped or sexually assaulted for being raped or sexually assaulted. I'm not sure if those who blame understand the impact of that blame on someone else, but the effects are very damaging. Victim blaming is arguably the biggest deterrent to one's growth and healing, and yet as simple as it is, believing and listening to someone can often times be the most important things survivors need when they disclose. If we believe, listen, and validate, we strengthen and help. If we blame, we confuse and hurt.

I once spoke to a college class of ten women. I asked the class if they blame women who are raped if they are under the influence of alcohol at the time of the rape. Fifty percent of the women raised their hands. I asked one student if she had ever drunk alcohol in her life. She laughed and said, "I'm Irish." I laughed and said, "I'm part Irish too. What do you like to drink? I love beer, Italian red wine and vodka." I then said, "Imagine the next time you go out drinking and your friend rapes you. Imagine you found the courage to tell someone, and the first thing

they said to you was, ‘Why were you drinking?’ How do you think that would make you feel? Do you think that would make you feel horrible?” I told her she blamed complete strangers for the exact same thing she did quite often. The only difference between her and the strangers she blamed is she didn’t get raped. She pondered my questions and statements and seemed to understand what I was trying to convey. I hope she did anyways.

Another woman in the class wanted to challenge me because she described herself as a non-drinker. I asked her if she had ever had a glass of wine in her life. She said she had. I then said, “Imagine you fall in love with a man. Imagine that you really believe in your heart that you have met the man you are going to marry. Now imagine that this man takes you on a romantic dinner. During dinner you have a glass of wine to compliment the delicious meal, as wine often does. Think about how beautiful the night is going and how much you love this man. Now imagine you go home after dinner and he rapes you. How horrible would you feel if we blamed you for having a glass of wine during dinner? Are you not allowed to have a glass of wine at dinner with the man you love?”

I then asked, “What if you didn’t have a glass of wine at all and he still raped you? What if you drank water? What is the difference?” I then explained to the whole class that it doesn’t matter if alcohol is involved or not. No one should be blamed for being raped while intoxicated. I then explained that some people are raped when they are completely sober. Drunk or sober, they are not to blame. They are never to blame.

A woman once disclosed to me that she wanted to take her rapist to court but was told by friends not to. They questioned her because she was drunk while it happened. They said she would ruin his life. They argued he was so smart and had so much going for him in terms of school and his career. They said he would be extremely successful and that a conviction would ruin his life. I told this woman that he had ruined his own life by raping a woman, assuming he even received a conviction.

I once met a man who thought a woman deserved to get raped if her thong hung out of her pants. I told this man that some women are raped whether they have a thong hanging out or not. I told him it doesn’t matter if a woman is dressed provocatively or not. No woman deserves to get raped. I then proceeded to say that men and little boys are also raped. He did not grasp the fact that male rape exists. I tried my best to explain to him that some men and boys are raped, regardless of the clothes they are wearing or not wearing, or regardless of any kind of clothing or

underwear that might be hanging out. He was disgusted by the thought that a man could be raped, but didn't seem to be disgusted by the fact that women are raped.

Other people blame survivors for hanging out with a rapist. They will say things like, "How could you hang out with him! What the hell is wrong with you!" These people don't seem to understand that the lunatic hiding in the bushes or under bridges accounts for a minority of rapes and sexual assaults. They don't seem to understand that most rapists are viewed as nice people. Rapists exist within every gender, ethnicity, religion, job profession, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation. Is a person not supposed to go on a date? Is a person not supposed to be with his or her spouse? Is an altar server not supposed to be around a priest? Is a child not supposed to hang out with relatives?

These are just some of the victim blaming statements I have heard in my life. I believe people should contemplate the fact that some survivors unfortunately have to hear and see it themselves. I believe people need to understand that victim blaming statements hurt survivors. Victim blaming statements can make a survivor feel bad about him or herself. They can make a survivor not want to open up and speak. They can make a survivor actually believe he or she is to blame for what happened to them, which isn't true because the survivor is not to blame. Victim blaming ultimately leads to more confusion, pain, and problems as opposed to clarity, healing, and growth.

This is the victim blaming that Megan experienced:

Megan: In the immediate aftermath of Mike being arrested and the prosecution going forward, I ran into his wife in a local shopping center. I hadn't seen her since everything had happened and I was desperate for comfort. In order to understand what happens next, you need to understand that Mike and Nikki (his then-wife) were like aunt and uncle to me. The two of them simultaneously molded my voice and encouraged my dreams of vocal stardom while contributing to my growth as a young adult. Nikki meant the world to me, so when I saw her coming out of a local Mexican restaurant while my mom and I were grocery shopping, I couldn't help myself. I leapt out of the backseat of the minivan and sprinted towards her.

"Nikki! Hi!" I said breathlessly.

"Hi, Megan." She was reserved and I found very quickly that this was not going to go in my favor.

"Um, how are you?" I was desperate. This woman who had once cared so much for me was looking at me with disdain.

"I'm fine, Megan. I can't talk to you right now. I need to go."

I have never had a more icy reception in my life. I walked with marked confusion back to my mother's car and closed the door behind me.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I have no idea," I managed before the tears began to flow.

A few days later we heard that Nikki and many of her close friends in our vocal studio were maintaining the belief that not only was the molestation my fault, but it was also my fault that their marriage was failing. I didn't understand the logic then and I don't understand it now. All I know is that believing I was to blame was easier for them than accepting that this person they all revered was a pedophile. It was easier to blame a child.

If you have been raped or sexually assaulted and you have been blamed, or fear that you may be blamed, I just want you to understand this: You are not to blame. There is nothing you did to make someone hurt you, nor is there anything you could have done differently to prevent or stop it. If we are to blame anyone, we should blame a person who chooses to rape.