

Courage in Bloom Memorial Garden Ceremony Keynote Address- August 23.2013

Good Morning everyone and welcome to what I believe is the ninth Annual Courage in Bloom Memorial Garden Ceremony. The Garden looks just as beautiful as ever and I don't know about all of you ...but it just feels good to stand here and be surrounded by its healing energy and all your good will.

To begin, I want to briefly thank all of the advocates and allies who have dedicated themselves on both the state and national level to support victims and survivors in Vermont. The passion and tireless energy and commitment you have for your work is unparalleled and the citizens of our state are deeply indebted to you for providing all that you do 24/7 and 365 days a year. I pray that the work you do lifts you up and that you find rejuvenation and inspiration in the healing and resilience of survivors. They are very special people.

I also want to specifically acknowledge the Vermont Center for Crime Victim Services. They have, as I am sure all of you know, provided thoughtful and compassionate leadership. It took leadership and vision to build this beautiful memorial garden. It takes leadership to bring continuous awareness to these issues. And it takes leadership to maintain collaborations with all of the numerous organizations and divisions of state government who work with victims of crime. They provide that leadership and a voice that that helps unify our actions in the service of victims and survivors.

I would also like to give special acknowledgement to Barbara Whitchurch who I just learned will be leaving the Center as of September 30 after 18 years of service.

I met Barbara for the first time a couple of years ago when I was invited to speak with the Human Trafficking Taskforce about my firsthand experiences with young adults. As you can imagine the information I had to share was heavy and had a profound impact on all of the taskforce members. But despite the gravity of the meeting and the somber tone, what I remembered was Barbara... because I knew I had met a kindred spirit and a true force of nature!

While I cannot speak for Barbara, I know she feels privileged to have been a part of so many important projects from the new directions sparked by Victim Services 2000 to the innovations of Parallel Justice and the New Neighbors Project, and, finally, the groundbreaking work of the Human Trafficking Task Force.

Barbara, I want to thank you for all of these past endeavors. And say that we all look forward to your future contributions as well. And I know there will be future contributions because I know how committed to this work you are.

Shifting gears, I would also like to tell you how humbled and honored I am to be standing before you here today. I was surprised when Aimee Stearns emailed me and asked me to speak. Being a decisive person, I was also surprised that I was unsure about accepting the request. Because being hesitant is not a trait I typically experience, but the reason for my hesitancy was not in my awareness.

I imagine that for some people, speaking here today might simply have been based on balancing work related scheduling issues ...but thinking about actually accepting the request had started to affect me deeply and I started to doubt whether or not I was up to the task. But...Like a lemming blindly running towards the edge of a cliff... I accepted anyway.

To prepare, I started to read about violence in Vermont and focused on the Domestic Violence Fatality Review Commission Report, which is not light reading... as most of you know. I debated whether or not I should base my speech on content that allowed me to cite these statistics and then passionately advocate for change. And then I decided that it goes without saying that we all want to live in a world free from violence and that we believe to do so is a human right. I decided that I was not going to talk about violence in the garden ...I was going to talk about survival, healing and life.

I also kept coming around to what had really been bothering me about accepting this opportunity to speak today and what had affected me most deeply.

The truth was that my discomfort with speaking here today was because it made me think about my relationship to this work, and who

I am as a professional and who I am as a human being. I knew that I needed to reconcile the boundaries of those roles to be able to stand here before you. I have done so and accept the honor of sharing my story of healing, strength, resiliency, and hope with you today. I am proud to stand here today speaking to you not as the professional many of you may know me to be but as a past victim, past survivor and now as a current "thrive-er".

Like many survivors my life took many twists and turns as I struggled with issues that non-victim/survivors do not. The ways that violence shatters you are innumerable and sometimes too hard to articulate. It is almost trite to just say that it affects your soul, your psyche and your belief in humanity. For me it was a dark spot ...a stain on my spirit...which for those of you who know me ... burns pretty brightly. That being said, looking back at that time period, I was half a person for many years.

I will share with you that one of my most frequent recurrent fantasies was that I could run a double blind randomized experiment on myself...Annie, the non-victim/survivor and see what she achieved in her life and who she became as compared to Annie the victim/survivor. I used to believe that in the first scenario I would have achieved more. I have not believed that for a long time.

And I knew that I had really made progress when I did not have that fantasy anymore. I knew that the absence of that fantasy was because I could fully embrace everything in my life. And for me that meant that I was free to fully embrace life.

I hope that what I shared with you today makes the meaning and purpose of this memorial garden become vibrantly alive. It is truly a symbol of both the circle and cycle of life. And while our work to end violence remains, standing here together witnessing the potential in each of us to strive and thrive is powerful and healing.

Thank you for allowing me to continue my healing with you.

The Commission data for 2010 indicates:

Between 1994 – 2010, 51% of all Vermont homicides were domestic violence related.

56% of Vermont's domestic violence related homicides were committed with firearms and 80% of the suicides associated with the homicides (i.e. murder/suicides) and domestic violence are committed with firearms.

In 2010, of the 9 homicides of adults, 3 were deemed domestic violence related thus 33% of our adult 2010 homicides were domestic violence related. Of the 3 adult domestic violence related homicides, one was committed with a firearm, one was a stabbing and the third homicide was the result of blunt trauma. A suicide that followed a domestic violence related firearm homicide was committed with a firearm as well.

The 3 domestic violence related homicides of adults and the subsequent suicide all occurred in residences. According to the 2009 VT Crime Report, approximately 60% of violent crime occurs in residences making the home the most frequent location for violent criminal incidents.

Of the 9 adult homicides, 4 involved elder victims with ages ranging from 78 to 89. Of those 4 homicides, only 2 were deemed domestic violence related. The 2 elder deaths that were not domestic violence related occurred at institutional nursing home settings but did not meet the Commission definition of being domestic violence related fatalities. See Appendix B for the definition.

The Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence received and responded to 4000 more hotline and crisis calls in 2010 resulting in a call increase of 37% from 2009.

Vermont Department for Children and Families, Family Services Division, received an increase of 18% in intake calls of child maltreatment that included co-occurring domestic violence.

Of the overall population of persons under Corrections' supervision (11,824), the portion of those persons whose most serious charges relate to domestic violence was nearly 11 percent (10.83%).