

Community Legal Aid

A non-profit law firm serving the legal needs of low-income individuals and families
in central northeast Ohio



www.communitylegalaid.org

An open letter to survivors' advocates - and an invitation

By Jeanne Charles, managing attorney

Dear Fellow Advocates,

Lately, my work with survivors of violence has felt particularly heavy. I'm tired. I'm weary. Maybe the same is true for you?

The news. I've had to stop listening to my NPR, flipping instead to pop music or lighthearted podcasts. The Deshaun Watson story is a recent cause - turning my stomach and clouding my brain - but there have been many, many more. Another story of a broken person breaking someone else. Someone who has everything to lose pitted against someone struggling to speak a difficult truth. Another overwhelming societal response blaming the survivor.

We know this: survivors already struggle to be believed. Believed by their families, their friends. Believed by the justice system, law enforcement. When this struggle happens in the public forum, its impact cascades.

Retraumatization lurks around every corner. Not only for the survivor who came forward, but also for the countless other survivors who are witness to the spectacle. This reminder constantly under the surface: survivors are not to be believed and their abusers and rapists must be glorified, defended, and celebrated.

When the talent (or good looks, wealth, or status) of a famous perpetrator is overvalued by society, our collective vision is blurry.

This failure to believe makes our work on behalf of survivors even more challenging.

As advocates, we are all trained to “start by believing.” This mindset is at the core of what we do. To see survivors actively, viciously, publicly disbelieved can feel like too much to bear - leaving us exhausted. It may also leave us silenced at a time we feel a deep duty to speak. What we want to say, what we need everyone to understand, is that there is credibility in the very act of stepping forward. Because there is a great cost in doing so.

The whole system revictimizes the survivor, over and over, doubting their stories, questioning their motives, and blaming them for being victims. This causes many survivors to begin questioning their own experiences and realities. After all, survivors are members of the same culture as the rest of us. Many fall prey, taking on self blame in the same way society puts it on them: Why didn't I fight? Why didn't I run? Why didn't I say no? Why did I drink that much? Why did I wait to report?

As the stories from the news swirl in my mind, and I think about all the ways they could impact my next survivor, my stress mounts. It's easy to forget all the tactics I've learned to take care of my body, mind, and heart.

So today, there are some things I am reminding myself, and you.

We are not alone. It's hard to get a true count, but some sources suggest there are over 8,000 victim (survivor) advocates in the US. Surely the number is much higher — as there are so many ways to advocate for survivors in a myriad of jobs and volunteer positions. And there are so many allies out there. Even when it comes to Deshaun Watson and the avid Cleveland Browns fans - don't forget, more than half of Browns fans didn't want Deshaun. Many boycotted season tickets and refused to watch games. Donations to nonprofits like the Cleveland Rape Crisis Center skyrocketed during his acquisition.

Our work is hard, but it changes lives. Working with survivors is hard. The very nature of trauma creates inherent hardships around communication, rapport, trust, and credibility. Survivors are carrying grief and often want us to help them fix their partners — something we can't do. And so many people need help. Especially when stories of sexual and domestic violence are in the headlines, it can feel like no matter what we do - this never ends. But let's remember, there has been progress. Federal and State laws created protection where there once wasn't. The "me too" movement has changed perceptions and actions in a dramatic and public way. The people and organizations who help survivors are not in the business of touting our successes - but imagine how many hundreds of thousands of people we help every year.

We must redouble efforts to take care of ourselves. I recently was asked to share my top self-care tips in light of my job serving as an attorney representing survivors and supervising a team of others who do the same. To be honest, I struggled. It's so easy to get mired down in this work. We may have tried tactics that failed. We may feel we don't have the bandwidth to keep trying. But we must. One of my favorite books on vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue is "Trauma Stewardship" by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky and Connie Burk. They remind us: "We can do meaningful work in a way that works for us and for those we serve. Taking care of ourselves while taking care of others allows us to contribute to our societies with such impact that we will leave a legacy informed by our deepest wisdom and greatest gifts instead of burdened by our struggles and despair."

To that end, I invite you to join Community Legal Aid and its survivor-serving community partners for our SAFE Day training. This training is coming at a good time for me, and I suspect the same could be true for you. SAFE Day's full-day content is dedicated to trauma and our response to it. The morning will focus on how trauma impacts the survivors with which we work — how it changes how a person remembers or tells their story — and what we can do to better serve those survivors. The afternoon will focus on us — innovative techniques advocates can use for self care. We encourage our attendees to come in comfortable clothes and with an open mind. Wear your purple and teal!

It's okay to feel the weight of what we do. It's okay to be tired. It's okay to be weary. But we must stay focused on the work, together. Let's do it in spite of, or because of, stories like Deshaun Watson's. We must continue to believe survivors, to stand alongside survivors — for our survivors and for ourselves.

This article is part of Legal Aid's "Big Ideas" series.

Sidebar:

SAFE Day 2023

Wednesday, September 21st from 9:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

In-person at the Holiday Inn Belden Village, 4520 Everhard Rd. NW, Canton

Cost: \$25 (includes lunch)

Registration

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