



# From the Inside

What We Can Learn From Rape Survivors





# How It All Started: My Own Story

Rape in 1990: Where were other survivors?

Media blotted out faces, names

Literature used pseudonyms

Aha! moment: “The power of tissue and chocolate”

*Enter The Voices and Faces Project. 5 women in 2003,  
300 strong in 2009*





# My Grandmother's Question: "Why In The World Are You Doing This?"

To make the "unreal" real

To challenge media stereotypes

To show other survivors what is possible after violence

*"If you can't **see** it, you can't **be** it."*

Marian Wright Edelman



# What We Do, How We Do It

Our survivors have:

- Lobbied for policy change (Jenny's Law, VAWA)
- Shared stories with the U.N., Supreme Court, U.S. military
- Spoken in dozens of states and on two continents
- Shared their stories on [voicesandfaces.org](http://voicesandfaces.org): a resource for victims, families, communities





# What Survivors are Telling Us

And What We Should Do About It



*“We call each other ‘mother and daughter by choice’ – two women separated by a generation but united by what we have lived through. People sometimes find it hard to believe that both Helen and I are rape victims.”*

*- Karen Pomer*





# Helen and Karen's Story is Instructive

Rape does not discriminate by age, race, class or gender

Our project participants range in age from 14 to 91

- The youngest was 3 at time of assault
- The oldest was 87

512,000 incidents of sexual assault took place in Canada in 2004

- This figure does not include the thousands of females under 15 sexually assaulted each year
- At least 1 in 3 Canadian women will experience sexual assault in their lifetime

*Sexual violence is a 'cradle to grave' public health and human rights issue*



## The Silver Lining in Karen and Helen's Story?

The powerful bond that can emerge between survivors

Helen, especially, reminds us that we are never too old to speak up:

*"We need to go on living. If we don't he may as well have killed us."*

*"I am so sorry that you went through this when you were so young."*

*“On TV, it was always a stranger jumping out of the bushes. But this was someone I knew, so I didn’t call it rape.*

*If only I could have known what had happened to me was rape, maybe I would have told someone.*

*Maybe I could have those 14 years back.”*

*- Holly Hughes*



*“Hearing my roommate say that what happened to me was rape was the beginning of me realizing it wasn’t my fault.*

*The word made it real.”*

- Laura Taylor





# We Need to Call Rape Rape

We often treat as “real rape” only stranger rape

Yet 80% of rapes are committed by someone known by the victim

In cases involving drugs or alcohol, the public is doubly hesitant to acknowledge that a crime was committed

No more euphemisms for rape:

- Rape is not “the night things got out of hand” or “that time you both drank too much”
- It is a crime, regardless of the relationship between victim and perpetrator

*Words matter: Our discomfort with the word rape = discomfort with rape survivors*

*“One of the reasons I am speaking out about surviving childhood sexual abuse is because I want to make the world safer for my daughter. My advice to other survivors? Speak. Just speak.”*

*Someone will hear you and help you.”*

- Christa Desir





# There Can Be Healing Power in Speaking Out About Rape and Abuse

With three critical variables

- Being believed
- Being heard
- Not being blamed (never ask “why did you ...”)

Our Project’s level of openness is not the best option for every survivor. But every survivor needs a place to tell her or his story

How we respond to a survivor’s disclosure makes all the difference

*Not sure what to say? No one has ever gone wrong saying “I’m so sorry. How can I help?”*



*“Even when the bruises were gone, all I saw when I looked at my arm were bruises. Even when I wasn’t crying, all I saw when I looked in the mirror were tears.*

*That was the day I knew I had to leave the man who was abusing me.”*

- Angela Moseley





# The Social Services Safety Net Matters

When survivors seek help, they need somewhere to go

Discussions about health care, welfare and social programs must consider survivor voices

We can disagree about solutions - but must be honest about the challenges survivors will encounter without social support





# The Social Services Safety Net Matters

Rape crisis centers are much-needed and often under-funded

Faith-based communities must be more effectively engaged to bridge the gap

*We are not “just” funding social programs –  
we are changing lives*



*“I was scared to tell anyone (about the sexual assault) because I thought the military would not believe me. I was scared that they would call me a liar.*

*But I told my fiancé because ... if I did not tell him I would destroy the only good thing in my life.”*

*- Danielle Beyer*



# What is the Truth About the False Reporting of Rape?

Reliable research shows that only 2-8% of rape reports are demonstrably false

Yet we often disbelieve those who come forward, and that disbelief silences other victims

The result? Rape is one of our most underreported crimes: only 1 in 10 victims will ever report

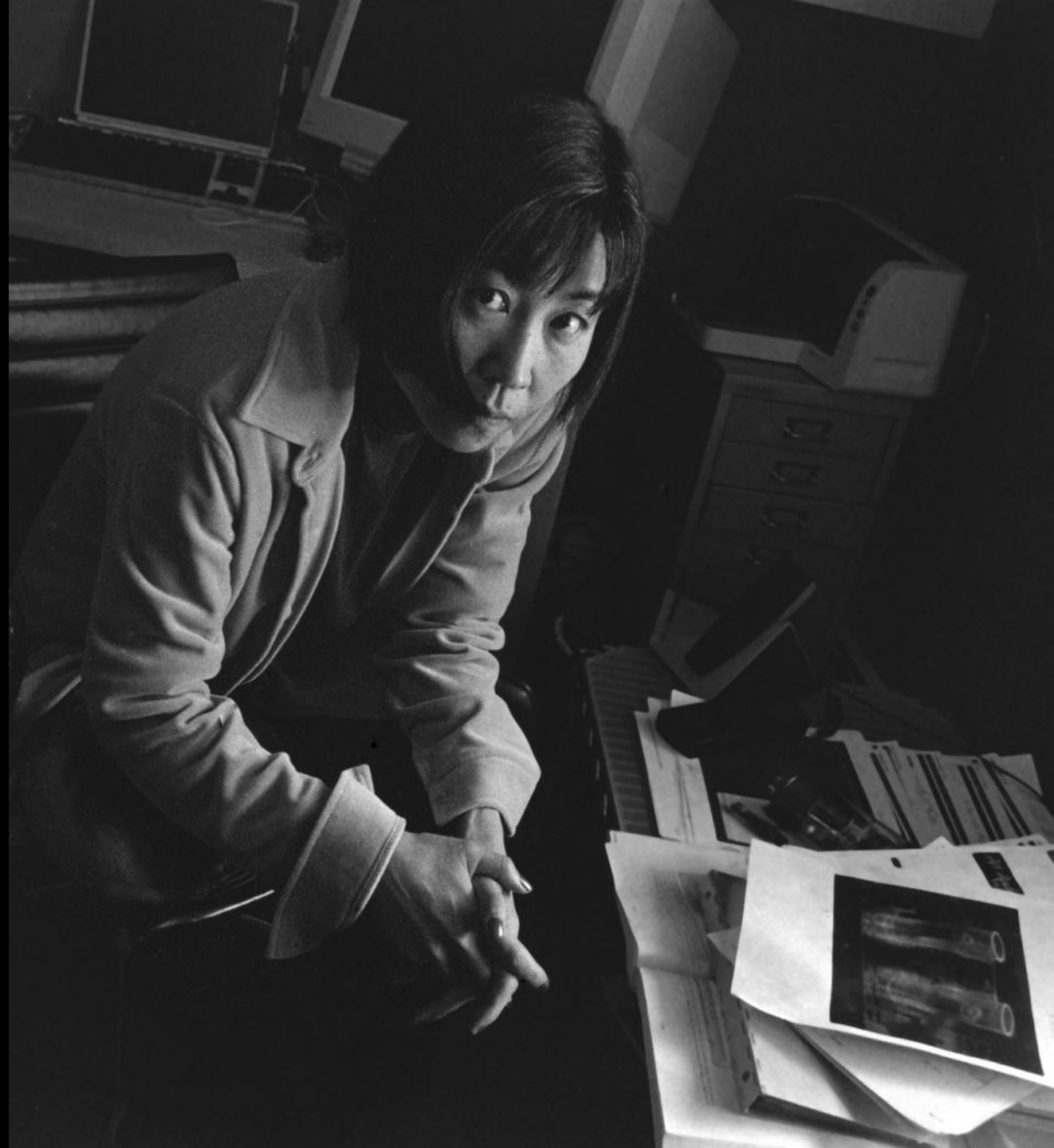
*This is a public safety issue: unreported crimes = rapists who are free to assault again*



*“I barely spoke English at the time, so page after page of the journal I kept after I was raped is in Japanese.*

*Only the word rape is in English. I had no other word for what happened to me.”*

- Nobuko Nagaoka





# Rape Spares no Culture or Community

We need to honor different cultures and perspectives if we seek to honor survivors

Being culturally sensitive means talking less, listening more

- Remember: respecting culture does not mean accepting violence against women because it is “normative” in other regions
- Our experiences must connect us to other women’s pain
- Our “local” voices can have a global impact. In this interconnected world, let’s use them!

*“After I was raped, I knew that people wanted me to be quiet about it - they did not want to hear that this had happened to a man.*

*In a way, being deaf prepared me for what it was like to be a male rape survivor, because no one wanted to hear me speak up.”*

- Gabe Wright





## Male Survivors are Often Isolated and Alone

We are still uncomfortable discussing the sexual abuse of boys and men

In the past, we have treated men as the “problem”

Men who’ve lived through sexual assault need to be heard, helped

We need to encourage men to speak up -- and we need male role models



*“My priest told me I needed to find forgiveness and move on with my life. That response changed how I felt about my church and my faith.*

*I will never forgive my attacker.”*

- Tracey Stevens





# A Broad Range of Authorities Provide Support/Counsel

Many first responders are outside traditional rape crisis channels

Teachers, doctors, community leaders have the power to help - or hurt - survivors who confide in them

Many survivors turn to their communities of faith, yet

- Pastoral training on sexual violence is uncommon
- The language of reconciliation can be damaging for survivors

*It's time to prioritize outreach to faith-based communities!*

*“The least helpful thing I did was continuing to work and keep my life going as if nothing happened. It was too much.*

*Finally talking about it to my close group of girlfriends changed everything for me, for the better.”*

- Barbara Young





# The Danger of Trying to Become “Un-Raped”

Trying to act normal, cover up, forget, contributes to isolation

Rape and abuse are wounds that cannot be easily “healed”

The cultural language of “closure” often does victims a disservice

Victim vs. Survivor? Why not both?

# The Danger of Trying to Become “Un-Raped”

The truth about “recovery” is complex

Survivors heal on an individual timeline

*“Shouldn’t you be over this by now?” =  
“I need you to be over this now.”*

*"I am no longer the woman I was before I was raped... While I have integrated it into my life, it is and always will be a very important moment in my life.*

*It has helped to define my future, my destiny."*

- Karen Carroll





# Solidarity, Possibility, Purpose: Life After Rape

Many survivors live full lives after rape

The ability to do so comes from within, and without

Together, we create the conditions that make healing possible

- Cultural support
- Critical social services
- A community of fellow survivors



## Solidarity, Possibility, Purpose: Life After Rape

The link between activism and healing is real, but we do not share our stories because it is therapeutic

We share our stories because it is *necessary*:

- For a world that understands too little about sexual violence
- For other survivors whose lives can be changed when they see that they are not alone

*“We are speaking out about Jenny’s experience because we don’t want another family to live through this. Victims and veterans deserve better.”*

-Steve Bush





# Jenny's Law: a Father and Daughter Fight to Change Public Policy

Voices and Faces Project member Jenny Bush (and several other women) were raped by a Gulf War veteran

He was convicted and killed himself in his jail cell the night before sentencing

He was then buried with military honors, in accordance with U.S. policy

*The bottom line: this is a policy that dishonors victims and veterans*





# Jenny's Law (U.S. House Resolution 731) Would Change That

Denies military honors burials to those convicted of the most heinous sex crimes

This is a bill that would not exist without the voice and face of Jenny Bush and her father, Steve Bush

*“Jenny's Law” reminds us that a single story can change minds, hearts and public policies*



# WHAT WE BELIEVE

Final Thoughts



*“When I first shared my story, I experienced what I was unable to when I was raped 37 years ago.*

*The door, once locked, is now open.*

*There are good days and challenging days and I know this is okay. Whatever tears spill will carry away the debris.”*

*- Janet Goldblatt Holmes*





# It is Never Too Late to Speak, or to Listen

Coming forward, even if just to a trusted friend, takes courage

It can also take decades for a victim to disclose

Dare to “be the safe place” for those who need to talk



## It is Never Too Late to Speak, or to Listen

Remember: the way we respond to someone who discloses rape or abuse can change his or her life

Our challenge: to listen, and to *hear*

*Recovery is a moving target, and a lifelong exercise for many - if not most - survivors*

*“There were so many people, so many supportive actions.*

*Acceptance, compassion, kindness and thoughtfulness. That was all. And it was everything.*

*I was able to rebuild my life.”*

**-Katie Feifer**





## What We Believe

Individual acts of kindness are powerful. But collective action is *critical*

Our challenge is to listen to individual survivors in order to better understand larger truths about violence against women

*“All I have is a voice, to undo the folded lie.”*

W.H. Auden





## What We Believe

“The enemy of change is silence”



# What We Believe

But our survivor voices are not enough

We need your voice, too

- Stand up, speak out, dare to disagree with conventional wisdom
- Most importantly: support organizations that are supporting survivors
- Together, our voices can be a force for change and social justice

