



# Workshop assists abuse victims to rediscover love of life

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**NEW BRITAIN** — Belting out Sister Sledge’s “We Are Family” one late summer evening at Walnut Hill Park band shell, Vanessa Stevens looked and sounded like she’s on top of the world.

But it wasn’t always that way, for this 20-something lead singer of *The Happening*, a Connecticut cover band. After a series of abusive relationships — and one in particular — she had lost her voice. She never wanted to sing again.

“I happened to be with someone I was singing with; someone I met in college in a singing group,” she recalled. “I was singing love songs and cover songs in an acoustic working duo. He played the guitar. We were in love; our voices harmonized beautifully. And as all abusive situations, it started out emotional, verbal and controlling. One night he stalked me at my college and the campus police officers were called in.”

Stevens’ boyfriend was arrested and, with the help of police and domestic violence counselors, she found her way to safety.

But she couldn’t sing anymore.

“I began to associate our relationship with the music and the singing,” Stevens said. “Singing just reminded me of our relationship and was too painful. Something that I’d been doing since I was 5 just ended.”

That’s where attorney Susan Omilian and her My Avenging Angel Workshops™ came in. Omilian, whose niece Maggie was murdered at college by a jealous boyfriend, established a series of workshops for victims of violence to allow them to do more than just survive their experiences but learn how to thrive despite them.

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“I found a flyer for Susan’s My Avenging Angels Workshops™ and everything in me said I had to go,” Stevens remembered. “It was free and I was still trying to get through college. I felt very comfortable right away and could relate to Susan’s story of her niece Maggie and really started to find myself again through that group. I found my way back mostly through Susan’s workshops.”

A former deputy commissioner of the state Department of Children and Families (DCF), Omilian has run her My Avenging Angel Workshops™ since 2001 when she saw a need for what she called a third step in the healing process for victims of violence.

“For many years — a good 30 years — the domestic violence movement has been focusing on getting women out and getting them out safely,” Omilian said. “That’s a really important thing. But I came to realize we haven’t set the goal out far enough. We didn’t recognize there was a third step.”

Beyond helping individuals to recognize abuse and then escaping, My Avenging Angel Workshops™ assists survivors to rediscover their love of life, their old selves that, in many cases, have been lost after years of abuse.

“I just thought that was my job to get them out when I worked with women in trauma,” Omilian said. “But we are expanding the universe of possibilities. What I give these women is the language for it, the words, and a way to step into these words and live it.”

Bristol resident Tina Dubey found her way to Omilian’s workshops through a friend.

“I decided to try it and was so glad I did,” Dubey said. “Susan laughed so easily; she made me feel so positive, so good about myself. That really helped me find my way.”

Dubey started her own show “*Beyond Violence*” on Nutmeg TV five years ago with the goal of helping others who may be experiencing abuse to know that there is a way out. Dubey has since earned her associates degree from Tunxis Community College where her poetry and artwork were published and on public display. On the Dean’s list at Tunxis, she went on to earn her a bachelor’s degree in human services from Springfield College. She credits her success to the support from the My Avenging Angel Workshops™.

“Without the support of Susan, I wouldn’t have been able to have this show or stay as strong as I have,” Dubey said. “I still struggle, but I keep moving forward. That’s the best way; the only way.”

The workshops are open to all survivors of abuse — not just domestic violence. Plainville resident Jo-Ann Blanchette-Silverio, a sexual abuse survivor, found her way to the workshops through a Plainville librarian. She said she had no expectation when she attended her first workshop in 2011.

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“It was better than I could have ever imagined,” Blanchette-Silverio said. “What really hit me was that Susan was not afraid to address the issue. Not that we addressed each of our problems during the workshop, but we addressed taking our problems and making them into a positive. That was always my goal but now I had met somebody else who had the same dream as me.”

Blanchette-Silverio said when she learned that Omilian also was a writing coach, it was like divine providence. Always wanting to put her experiences in writing, she had met someone in Omilian who could empathize with her healing process and could help her put pen to paper.

“I have so much to write,” Blanchette-Silverio said. “I’m still going through the process of healing, but I want to make my life’s work to talk about sexual abuse. It’s an ugly subject but it needs to be talked about it. I’ve unlocked the cage and I’m running loose. I know that the universe is going to take me where I need to be and trusting in it every day of my life.”

For Stevens — who has since founded “*The Purple Song Project*,” where she creates awareness of domestic violence through her music — speaking about what happened to her helps to create an atmosphere for change.

“There was a time that I thought I was doomed to be abused the rest of my life,” she said. “But then I realized the control I could have over myself. It’s important that, if you have that story, it’s not going to define you. It may help create your life, but not define you for the rest of your life if you don’t let it.”

### BEYOND A SUPPORT GROUP

NEW BRITAIN — While typical support groups allow women escaping domestic violence to move through the safety issues they face, they can grow tired of telling their story over and over again. My Avenging Angel Workshops, run by West Hartford attorney Susan Omilian, gives these women a chance to move on from that step.

Susan Omilian’s two-day workshops are free and aim to help women reach a state of mind to tear down barriers that would keep them from thriving.

“I just give them the language,” she said. “They’re standing on the edge of this place and I give them a nudge to get them there.”

Two My Avenging Angel Workshops™ are scheduled for October and November. They are free and open to all victims of abuse. For registration and information, visit [myavengingangel.com](http://myavengingangel.com). More information on thriving after violence can be found at Susan’s website [thriversonline.com](http://thriversonline.com).

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