

Lawyer Finds Calling Counseling Domestic Violence Victims

Lawyer's workshops transform lives of domestic abuse victims

By Karen Ali, *The Connecticut Law Tribune*

February 13, 2015



Susan Omilian with photos of her niece Maggie (Photo by Gary Lewis)

Susan Omilian's life changed in 1999. Until that point, she had been a successful lawyer, working at a legal aid agency in Michigan and for a women's public interest law firm in Connecticut.

Then her niece Maggie was murdered. Only 19, she was killed by her ex-boyfriend in a domestic violence attack.

When Omilian heard the news that Maggie's attacker had also killed himself, she felt a need to avenge Maggie's death in some way. So she googled the word "revenge" and came up with the quotation: "Living well is the best revenge." With that inspiration, Omilian decided to devote her life to helping domestic violence victims live well again as her niece could not.

She's now in her 15th year of hosting My Avenging Angel Workshops™ to help women who have been abused permanently break the cycle of violence. The two-day sessions help participants uncover hidden talents, reach their creative potential and transform their lives. There were workshops this month in Wethersfield and March sessions are scheduled for Avon.

Omilian, who lives in West Hartford, acknowledges she could make more money if she were still practicing law. But she says she has no regrets. "I get to watch women transform. I get to do amazing work," she said.

Omilian received her law degree from Wayne State University Law School in Detroit in 1979 and was employed for a few years at the Legal Aid Bureau of Southwestern Michigan in

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Kalamazoo, where she often represented domestic violence victims in court as well as handled landlord/tenant disputes and unemployment benefit hearings.

She came to New England in the 1980s for a Women and Law conference in Boston and saw a posting for a job there in Connecticut. She took a position as a staff attorney with the Connecticut Women's Educational & Legal Fund in Hartford. While there, she provided training for businesses about sexual harassment and also represented victims of sex discrimination in employment cases in federal court. Right before Maggie's death, she had worked for the State of Connecticut for eleven years in the Office of Policy and Management (OPM) and as Deputy Commissioner at the Department of Children and Families (DCF).

After her niece was killed, Omilian returned to Michigan to help her family for a year or so. She also struggled to make sense of what happened. Ultimately, she decided that she wasn't going to let her niece's ex-boyfriend "destroy me or my family," and she became determined to have something positive come out of this tragedy. Suddenly she realized that this was why she had been helping women in crisis all those years before. "All my experiences working with victims was informing me for what was to come next with Maggie's death," she said.

Omilian returned to Connecticut and started her workshops in 2001 with the help of Hartford Hospital. She decided she wanted to go beyond helping women simply cope with being involved with an abuser. She wanted them to reach their full potential. "I really wanted to create a community of women who were not only surviving, but thriving," Omilian said.

She describes the workshops as motivational sessions that provide a vehicle for change in attitude and outlook for abused women. Omilian said she doesn't lecture, and that the participants don't share stories of abuse as they might in a support group setting. Instead, Omilian uses interactive exercises—ranging from surveys and checklists to writing prompts and arts and crafts activities—to get the women "to move to a difference place."

The end goals might be that the participants find hidden passions or rediscover long-suppressed talents. Some women go back to school, others find jobs or take up creative outlets such as painting or singing.

Omilian said the fact that her niece was murdered helps her connect with the women she works with. And her law degree pays dividends as well. "One of the things about a law degree that I never expected is that it's a good credential to have. It gives you credibility," Omilian said. "It gives you confidence."

Vanessa Stevens met Omilian in 2003. "I was a singer my whole life, but I wasn't singing when I met her; domestic violence stole my voice," Stevens recalled. "I was with someone whom I loved, lived with and sang with, but he was abusive and controlling toward me. When I left, he was arrested at our college. I associated the singing and our music instead with abuse and pain."

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On the night her abuser was arrested, Stevens was directed to a domestic violence shelter. There, she learned about Omilian's workshops.

"Susan held a retreat for her workshop-goers in 2003, and I attended," Stevens said. "She asked me to bring my guitar and to sing a few songs. I had no idea how freeing it would be, the encouragement from the other girls and women. At the end of the night, Susan said, 'You're a beautiful singer. I'm glad you found your voice again.'"

Stevens said she was able to continue with her musical career, writing songs and performing with bands.

Another woman who has attended Omilian's workshops, a woman named Susy who did not want her last name revealed, said it was through the My Avenging Angel Workshops that she began to rebuild her life. "Surrendering to my circumstances and educating my way out of the legal and emotional devastation were critical to my recovery," Susy said. "[Omilian] helped guide me through this process. I set goals, regained my confidence, established personal boundaries, and became an independent woman."

Before Omilian was a lawyer, she was a journalist for several years in Michigan. These days, she continues to write a great deal.

She has published a workbook based on her workshops called *The Thriver Workbook: Journey from Victim to Survivor to Thriver!* She has also written a novel that includes her niece's story. A second book is in the works. And Omilian has published books for the legal community on sex-based employment discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace.

Omilian said the landscape for abuse victims has changed a great deal since she began practicing law. More people understand post-traumatic stress disorder and how it afflicts abuse victims, she said. More people are aware that there is free counseling and shelters for domestic violence victims. "There are more options for you," she said. "There are more people who are going to believe you" are being abused.

In 2004, Omilian received a Woman of Character Award at the Bushnell Theater in Hartford. Vanessa Stevens was among the performers that night. She recalls the crowd clapping and singing along. She said she realized that if her songs could "reach out and touch others in this way, I might really be able to make a difference in survivors' lives."

It was a difference she wouldn't have been able to make until Omilian helped her find her voice again.

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For more about Susan Omilian's work, her books and speaking opportunities, visit www.ThriverZone.com.