

Shatter the Silence and Thrive!

A Keynote Speech by Susan M. Omilian, JD

Take Back the Night Event
Monday, April 12, 2021
at Southern Connecticut State University,
New Haven, Connecticut



History. Looking back on our history tells us a lot about ourselves. It tells us about who we are as a people, as a culture, as a nation and a civilization.

It tells us if we have been willing to stand up for the vulnerable, the disenfranchised and for those who have no voice. History sets the standards against which we shall be judged in the long term as a society. Good or bad. Compassionate or cruel. For-thinking or late to the game.

Tonight, I want to share a little of the history of the Take Back the Night events over the years. It's a review of what they have been in the past and what I hope that this event could mean to all of us tonight.

We're not too far back in history. Because in doing research recently on the history of the women's movement in the United States for another presentation, I was reminded that:

- *First public speak outs against rape were held in NYC in 1971.*
- *The first Rape Crisis Centers in US were opened in 1972.*
- *"Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape" by Susan Brownmiller was published in 1975.*

Going back then four decades, I do remember the first Take Back the Night march I attended. Either that means I'm pretty old or that these events have in fact happened within my lifetime.

In the same year, 1975, as Susan Brownmiller published her ground-breaking book on rape, the city of Philadelphia or in 1976 the city of Brussels, Belgium held the first Take Back the Night march. (There is a dispute on the Internet as to which city was first.)

I was in my twenties when I attended my first Take Back the Night march. I was not much older than most of you are now. I remember thinking, hoping that something good would come of all of us women marching with candles lit through the streets in the dark of night.

I remember the march being a way for us to protest the violence that women could experience while walking in public at night. That seems like such a limited concept

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today. Because now we know and acknowledge that women ... and men... can be targeted for violence at so many other times and places than on the streets in the dark of night. We know that violence and abuse can occur in our own homes, in our schools or in our workplaces. It can happen on college campuses, in the military and even in our churches and places of worship.

But we gather for Take Back the Night events for the same reasons today as in the past. Tonight is an opportunity for us to speak out as a community against violence and to raise our community's awareness of its scope and impact. It is a protest and a direct action against the violence that we want to stop.

But there has always been another part to these Take Back the Night events. Almost from the very beginning, I remember hearing victims speak and shatter the silence about what had happened to them, how they have been impacted by violence and to find some healing from that experience.

Likewise at this event tonight, victims of violence will be asking us to bear witnesses to their stories. In hearing their testimony, let us see them not just as survivors of all that they have endured. Let us embrace them as THRIVERS, women and men ready to move ahead despite what has happened to them.

What is "thrivers" you may ask? It's a concept that I know something about from my own life experiences.



Maggie (1980-1999)

You see once again within my lifetime – twenty-one years ago to be exact – my 19-year-old niece Maggie was the victim of a dating violence. She was killed in 1999 on a college campus in Michigan by her ex-boyfriend who killed her and then himself.

Prior to Maggie's death, I had worked for years as an attorney advocating for women's rights and to end violence against women, but with Maggie's death this work more personal and very immediate for me. If this could happen to Maggie and my family, it could happen to anyone. But what was I being called to do?

Slowly I came to see that for those of us who face a "life-altering event" such as violence and abuse or the death of a loved one by violence, there is either a road to recovery that brings new vigor and purpose to our lives or a spiraling down into anger, depression and hopelessness.

Suddenly I realized that I had stumbled onto a more productive path, one where I could:

- ***discover opportunity in what felt like loss,***
- ***focus on positive emotions to move me forward,***
- ***celebrate the life I had, living in the present, not past, and,***
- ***dare to create the life I so richly deserved.***

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Today my work is to help other survivors (both women and men) take this journey from victim to survivor to Thriver! I conduct workshops and have published workbooks and even novels that contain materials and stories about this journey beyond abuse to thriving.

What is a thriver? Here's my definition:

- A THRIVER is a HAPPY, PRODUCTIVE, SELF-CONFIDENT individual who BELIEVES that they have a prosperous life ahead of them.
- They are primed to follow their dreams, finish school, get a great job, start their own business or write their story. They believe in themselves and in their futures SO MUCH that they will not let what has happened to them destroy their futures or thwart our ambitions.
- They speak KNOWLEDGEABLY and CONFIDENTLY about their experiences and are NOT stuck in their ANGER or need for revenge. Living well IS the best REVENGE...

As poet and writer Maya Angelou, herself a survivor of violence and abuse, said: "Surviving is important. Thriving is elegant."

Yes, all human beings have the right to be free from violence, the right to be heard, and the right to reclaim those rights if they are violated. But tonight, I'm adding one more "right" to that list – the right to not only survive but to thrive after violence, abuse and trauma.

My niece, Maggie would have been outraged by the way she died. If this had happened to anyone of her family or friends, she would be advocating tirelessly right now in their memory, fighting against violence, abuse and trauma as we are doing here tonight.

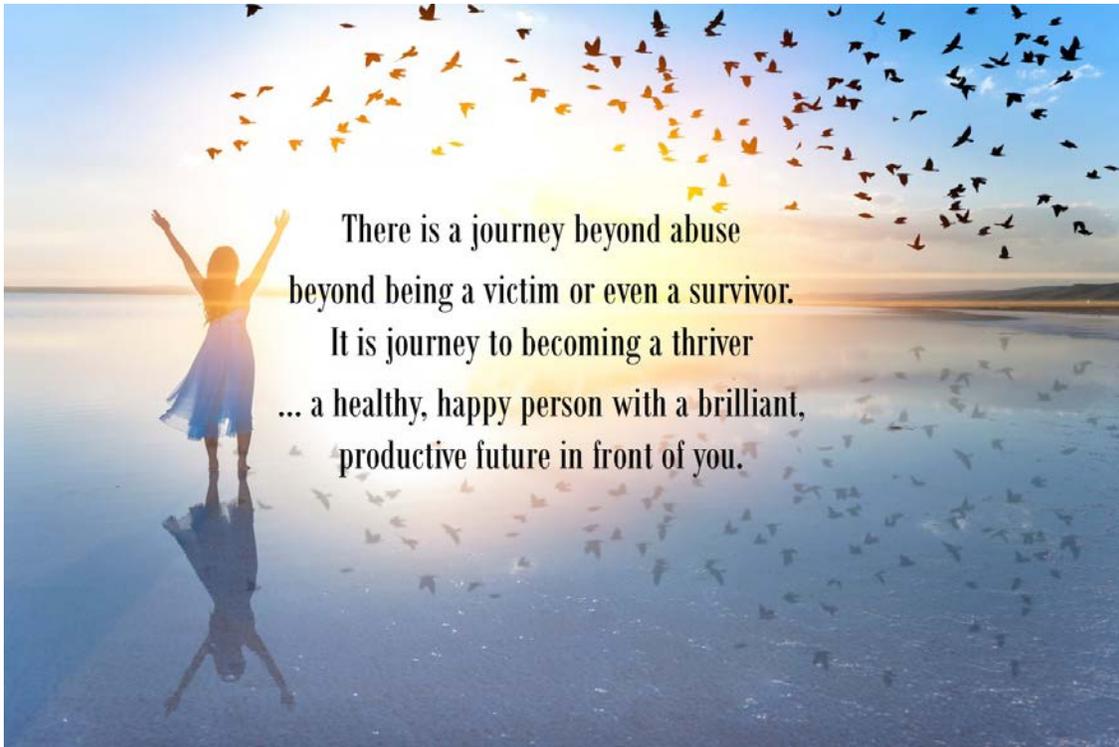
But she would also be encouraging us to take that critical "NEXT STEP" beyond surviving to THRIVE and find the VISION and PASSION to create an amazing new future for themselves. She would want us to live the life of our dreams.

I invite you all to find that thriver energy inside you and never give up, never lose hope and always believe that, within our lifetimes, we can make a difference in our lives and in the lives of others – no matter what our experiences have been. The truest measure of our lives is not what we have experienced, but what we have made of our experiences.

Let's reconnect to positive energy in our lives and thrive! Let's permanently break the cycle of violence in our lives ... and in the lives of others.

Then living well is not only the best revenge; it is, in fact, the song of our soul and the fulfillment of all our dreams.

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There is a journey beyond abuse
beyond being a victim or even a survivor.
It is journey to becoming a thriver
... a healthy, happy person with a brilliant,
productive future in front of you.

Susan Omilian's Mission Statement

I am a woman of power whose mission in life is to be a catalyst for change for victims of violence against women. Today I celebrate my life by building a community of strong, independent, productive women who have survived abuse and are thriving in well-being, love and joy.

For more about Susan and her work in the Thriver Zone,
visit www.ThriverZone.com.

You can also find her on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

www.facebook.com/ThriverZone

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