

A black and white photograph of a woman in profile, holding a lit candle in a small clear container. The scene is dark, with the candle providing the primary light source. The woman's face is partially illuminated by the candle's glow. The background is out of focus, showing other people in a similar setting.

# FROM HEARTBREAK TO HEALING

The Journey of Crime Survivors

**Public Welfare**  
Foundation

Increasingly, victims of crime and their surviving family members are speaking out for reconciliation, rather than retribution, in the debate over criminal justice reform.



In April, about 500 people gathered at the Convention Center in downtown Sacramento, California for the annual **Survivors Speak Conference**. The conference, organized by [Californians for Safety and Justice](#) (CSJ), a Public Welfare Foundation grantee, has become an important measure of the increasing recognition that crime survivors should be included in discussions about criminal justice reform and that, very often, perpetrators, victims and survivors come from the same communities, and even the same families.

As Robert Rooks, the organizing director of CSJ and vice president of the Alliance for Safety and Justice (ASJ), another Foundation grantee, put it, “You have mothers who have a son in the grave and a son in prison...And, realizing that connection means that we can talk about crime victimization and also talk about reducing numbers of people in prison in the same conversation about community safety.”

When the conference started five years ago, there were “barely enough people to fill a hotel room,” according to one observer. This year, the participants filled an auditorium-sized room at the Convention Center, were addressed in person by California Governor Jerry Brown, and ended the meeting with a spirited march and rally in front of the State Capitol building. They were seeking not only more services to help them heal, but more resources for the violence-plagued communities that have been hit hardest by crime and incarceration.

Advocacy on behalf of crime victims gained prominence in the 1980s, resulting in victims’ bills of rights in a majority of states. These laws often guarantee victims the right to speak out at certain proceedings, such as sentencing and parole hearings.

The federal Victims of Crime Act of 1984 (VOCA) and similar state laws provide funding for victims services, including mental health counseling and compensation for financial losses. Still, most victims do not benefit, since fewer than half of all crimes are reported to the police.

Despite well-intentioned efforts, the views of the overwhelming majority of victims and survivors — including those who survived a crime as well as those who have lost family members and other loved ones to crime — have not been represented in state capitals or public policy debates. A recent, first-of-its-kind [survey](#) of crime survivors conducted by ASJ finds that young, low-income people of color are disproportionately represented among victims and that most crime survivors receive no help from the criminal justice system after the incident.

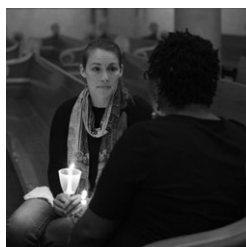
The survey results also show widespread dissatisfaction with policies and practices that result in long prison sentences for offenders. Crime survivors, such as those who attended the conference, want less spending on prisons and jails and more on education, job creation programs, and mental health treatment.

For Aswad Thomas, National Organizer for ASJ, the survey underscores a reality gap. “Across America, too many victims experience crime repeatedly, with little support from the criminal justice system,” he noted. “Crime survivors and the communities most harmed by crime and violence need investments in trauma recovery, mental health and drug treatment services, and not more incarceration.”

As Danielle Sered, director of Foundation grantee [Common Justice](#), also explained:

“When we listen to survivors, we hear a desire for accountability, but not necessarily in the form of punishment. There should be an answer for what’s been done. The crime shouldn’t go unaddressed, unanswered or





At the fifth annual Survivors Speak conference in Sacramento, California, about 500 victims of crime and surviving family members of crime victims came together to try to heal and learn to deal with trauma; to hear from Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice leaders, such as Sujatha Baliga (top left), a restorative justice expert; to help each other tell their own stories and to find common ground; to remember loved ones and offer support at a candlelight vigil; and to rally at the State Capitol building, releasing balloons for healing and seeking more resources and services for victims and survivors.

ignored...But there is a nuance among survivors. They understand the difference between [whether] someone should be held accountable and whether somebody should go to prison. Those are two different questions — and [survivors] might give two different answers...Also, survivors want things for themselves. They want the things that will help them heal, that will help them get peace.

“And they suffer in a system that is myopically focused on punishment, often at the expense of meeting their needs. They are upset that we spend so much money punishing the people who commit crimes, instead of helping the people who are hurt.”

**Elevating the voices of crime survivors, particularly those from more diverse racial and socio-economic backgrounds, has been part of anti-death penalty efforts for decades, recalled Shari Silberstein, executive director of [Equal Justice USA](#) and a former Foundation grantee. The movement has also shifted toward a more thoughtful model of restoration and rehabilitation for survivors and their communities.**

In 2011, [Partnership for Safety and Justice](#), a Foundation grantee based in Portland, Oregon, released a report called *Beyond Sides*, which called for more collaboration between “groups working on a criminal justice reform agenda and victims who share some of their critiques.”

With the help of ASJ, a multi-state advocacy campaign to reduce prison populations in high incarceration states, other Foundation grantees — including [Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition](#), [Texas Criminal Justice Coalition](#) and [Citizens’ Alliance on Prisons and Public Spending](#) (CAPPS) in Michigan — will incorporate the perspective of survivors to achieve the overall goals of sentencing reform and reducing mass incarceration.

In addition, increases in VOCA funding present a historic opportunity to invest in community-based programs in underserved communities. And there is more money than ever before to provide direct services to help victims of crime recover from trauma. In the current fiscal year, VOCA funding totaled \$2.3 billion, up from \$745 million the previous year.

**Ultimately, many survivors and other criminal justice reformers want a new model of criminal justice that recognizes the trauma suffered by many communities. According to Silberstein of Equal Justice USA:**

“We believe the justice system needs to serve all the constituencies impacted by crime: survivors, those who commit crimes, and communities. That means providing healing for survivors, accountability for those who commit crimes, and safety for communities.

“Right now, the primary focus is prison as a false solution to meeting all those needs. But [we want] more of an ecosystem that takes a holistic view. Crime survivors should have robust, accessible, culturally appropriate services and care that are available on demand to anybody who’s been harmed at any point in time. Accountability should be rooted in more restorative practices that provide opportunities to repair the harm and work toward personal healing and reconnection to the community.

“And communities need more of a public health model for dealing with violence, one that includes healing, addressing trauma, and understanding violence as a disease that can spread, so you try to contain it and then eradicate it.”

“And we know how to do all of this. There are amazing programs all around the country that do some pieces of all these things. But those are not the core of our justice system, they are the exceptions and we need to make them the norm.”

**Here are the voices and the stories of a few of the crime survivors who attended the conference.**



Dionne Wilson



Lynn Westry



Adela Barajas



Aswad Thomas



**Dionne Wilson's** husband, Dan, an officer with the San Leandro, California Police Department, was killed in the line of duty on July 25, 2005. Now the Survivor Program Coordinator for Californians for Safety and Justice, Wilson readily acknowledges that her own experience as a crime survivor is atypical.

**Dan was working a night shift alone and responded to a complaint about a group of four young Latino men who were drinking and talking loudly outside an apartment complex. While Dan checked their identifications, one young man, fearful that a couple of guns and a pocketful of drugs might be discovered in a search, emptied one of the guns into the officer.**

“People are killed every day and [survivors] are left, literally, to fend for themselves and pick up the pieces of their lives and try to go on, especially if the crime doesn’t have a suspect. If it was just a shooting and somebody died — and there were no witnesses, there’s no evidence and there are no leads — that’s really common. In low-income communities of color that happens all the time. And those survivors, especially if they are of no use to the prosecution, [are told] ‘Well, come identify the child, or your husband, or your brother, or whoever. Identify your loved one and here’s how you get their belongings and we’ll call you if we have any leads and that’s it.

“Because my husband was a police officer, the treatment that I received was 180 degrees from that [because] my husband’s life was valued more than other people’s lives. It’s not right and it’s not correct by any means, but it’s just real...

“I was coddled and supported through the trial and given everything I needed. And then, when the trial was done, the conviction was secured, and the man who shot my husband was sent to death row, my role, as far as the system goes, was over, and I was just cut loose. That is just normal. It is what it is. [Prosecutors] are there to get a conviction and then everyone goes home...

“Well, I still went home with shattered children and a devastated life. There were some resources...but I kept searching [because] I was so exhausted from being angry because I was told, ‘Well, you’re supposed to be angry because this murderer took your husband, you are supposed to be full of hate, vengeful, angry...an advocate for the death penalty,’ which I did. I did everything I was supposed to do as a victim, according to the way our criminal justice paradigm has developed over the last 30 years.”

**But Wilson did not find closure.**

“I was supposed to feel better. I was supposed to wake up the next morning and go, ‘Oh, this is so great. I can move on with my life now.’ And that is so opposite of what actually happened. So that made me really mad. I didn’t get what I was promised.”

**While crime survivors have often supported the punitive policies that ballooned America’s prison population in the past 30 years, Wilson has gained more perspective during her own progression of healing. For the past two years, she has talked with and listened to prisoners through the [Insight Prison Project](#).**

“[W]hen I started working with prisoners in San Quentin, the picture started to come into focus for me about why people end up in prison. It is astonishing — the amount of unresolved trauma in the lives of people out there growing up, people sitting in prison today whose trauma was never acknowledged, identified [or], treated...And, as a result of that unresolved, ignored trauma, now, I’m sitting in these circles with men who have served 20, 30 years in prison, and we’re starting to unpack [what] happened in their childhood, and they’re telling me these stories of egregious abuse and neglect and violence that they grew up with.

“And me, being a white woman in a community where things like that were not normal, I guess I had some kind of look on my face while I was hearing some of these stories. And they look at me and they go, ‘Why are you crying? What’s the matter? That’s just normal.’”







Shinika Westry, the oldest of **Lynn Westry's** two daughters, was killed in a car accident on September 7, 1998, just days before her 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. Also killed in the accident was Shinika's best girlfriend. The driver, a male friend, ran into a utility pole while under the influence of alcohol and drugs, and he not only survived the accident, but did not sustain any major injuries. Eventually, he was charged with multiple felonies and served six years in prison for the deaths of both young women.

**Lynn Westry recalled that the accident and the deaths divided her community in the Bayview-Hunters Point area of San Francisco, California. Some neighbors urged her to forgive the driver because he did not mean to kill anyone. Others suggested that her daughter's death was somehow less wrenching because the cause was a car accident rather than a shooting.**

"So, it brought division and I found it to be very difficult for me, being in a climate where most young people...during this time and after, were getting killed by gunshots. [So] I'm fighting a cause and feeling like, almost to the point where I didn't want to say my daughter was killed, or that she was killed in a car wreck. I felt kind of alone, like I was on this little island all by myself as a result of that. Even to this day, I feel the struggle because it wasn't a gunshot, but my pain is no less than someone whose child was killed by a gun.

"...And then, after that, so many homicides started taking place in San Francisco, it was like an epidemic. At that time, I was working for the Department of Public Health, so as part of my healing, I got the deputy director for the department to accept my proposal to start a crisis response unit because I was and continue to look at it as a public health issue.

"So, whenever there's a homicide, we get the call from the command staff officers, and we respond to the scene or to the hospital to provide support to those family members and to the community. And we walk the family through the whole field of making funeral arrangements, taking them through the victims' services application process, we support them during the funeral service, and try to help them with all the details, even food. And, also because we are part of mental health, we provide therapy if they so choose and we do case management with the families.

"I started the unit in 2001, but it really became part of the department in 2007. It's called Crisis Services and there are now five of us that respond to homicides.

"It was definitely part of my healing, and also, I really look at it like my community needed some healing. Because I was noticing, again, so many homicides and we kept putting a bandage on it, and nothing was really being done.

"I feel like when I help those family members with their grief and their pain with an understanding of some of their pain, I think that makes a difference. And, when I'm working with the families, to know that I've been where they are and they kind of open up to me and we can really relate and do more of the good work. And, on my team, I'm the only one who has lost a child."

**The Crisis Services team responds to gun violence anywhere in San Francisco and has handled as many as 100 cases a year. Westry, who has been honored locally for her work, has suggested a proclamation to city officials to make the month from November 20 to December 20, crime survivors' month in San Francisco,** "because that's such a difficult time for people."

She adds, "Personally, I've done hundreds of funerals. You wouldn't believe the box of obituaries I have."



On Sunday night, March 18, 2007, **Adela Barajas'** sister-in-law, Laura Sanchez, was the unintended victim in a drive-by shooting by local gang members.

"She tried to pull up in front of her house in her car, but another car was blocking the driveway. She stopped her car and when she pulled aside, her oldest son, Joey, got out and that's when the first gunshot went off. And he sort of tripped. We think that when he tripped, she must have stood up (to see what happened) and the bullet went into her lower back and right to her heart.

"Our family was in disbelief, and the kids wanted to do something, so we rallied... the next Saturday prior to burying her. It was supposed to be a small demonstration at a corner and there were about 300 people. And...the youth wanted to walk, so we went from the corner...where we were going to rally to the next corner to the next corner. It was a peaceful event, just allowing the family and the kids and their friends to demonstrate. The kids [made] posterboards and signs that said, 'Bullets Kill, Books Save,' 'We Want More Schools,' 'We Want Peace,' 'Stop the Violence,' 'We Love You , Laura.'

**Nine years earlier, Laura's mother had also been killed in a drive-by shooting Thanksgiving night. It had been difficult to get her even minimal counseling services to help deal with her grief and pain. That is why Barajas fought for services and resources for Laura's four children and her husband, Barajas' brother.**

**In the process, she founded the organization called L.A.U.R.A. (Life After Uncivil Ruthless Acts), which now operates statewide and is part of CSJ.**

"The [local] councilwoman kept asking us, 'What do you want to do?' And I was like, 'I want change. I want resources.' As a result of all that, we now have an annual resource fair, which draws up to 60 vendors who provide resources. They explain what they do and how to access them.

"[In] the last nine years, the city has been more inclusive of the 90058 zip code because of the work we're doing. I call our area the forgotten part of greater LA, and the council people say, 'When are you going to stop saying that?' And I say, 'When more resources start coming our way.' So, I've been like the little thorn in their side saying, 'Hey don't forget us.'"

**After getting high, four African-American young men who lived not far from the Sanchez family decided to go after someone with a local Latino gang and mistakenly thought Joey was a gang member. Two fired shots, with only one actually hitting Laura, but all four were convicted in three different trials.**

**During the trials, Barajas became acquainted with some of the family members of the young men and realized that everyone was hurt.**

"The other part of the work I've tried to do is bring blacks and browns together to try to be one voice — unifying us instead of dividing us. Every homicide is different...In Laura's case, we have five families who are affected. And, to me, the family of the perpetrator and the family of the victim should receive services. Kids out there need to see the trial and the sentencing, to see how the offender, "the cool guy," is all alone in an empty courtroom without his so-called friends. He's there with the family that's suffering the loss of a murdered loved one and his own family, who is seeing their son being sent to prison for 40–60 years. And maybe this way the kids can see that what they think is cool to do, is not cool at all, but painful.

"So, when someone asks me what do you think needs to change so the community can change? I say, flood it with resources. That's what's going to change our communities...We are all human and we should invest in childhood so that when we become young adults, we have a healthy mind and a healthy body to pursue happiness and a normal life and not a dysfunctional life that we're sort of forced into for lack of healing resources."





**Aswad Thomas**, the National Organizer for the [Alliance for Safety and Justice](#), is the youngest of five boys. Though Thomas was born in Hartford, Connecticut, his mother moved the family to Detroit, Michigan when he was five. At the age of 10, he lost his best friend, who was the innocent victim of a drive-by shooting.

**Five out of ten men in Thomas' own family are victims of gun violence. His oldest brother went to prison on a homicide charge (though he was not the shooter) during Thomas' senior year in high school. But his brother always encouraged Thomas to stick to academics and sports.**

**After two years at Wayne County Community College in Detroit, Thomas' good grades and athletic skills earned him a scholarship to Elms College in Chicopee, Massachusetts, where he played Division III basketball and received a degree in business management.**

"I can remember being in my dorm room and I didn't have to hear gunshots. I didn't have to see any illegal activities. I didn't hear people fighting. I didn't hear ambulances. It was the first time that I ever experienced normalcy and peace and quiet. I didn't have to fear for my life."

**After graduating from Elms, Thomas, then 26, moved back to Hartford where his family had relocated again, three weeks before fulfilling a contract to play professional basketball in Europe.**

**Around 10 pm on August 24, 2009, he went to a convenience store and was the victim in an attempted robbery.**

"I suffered two near-fatal gunshot wounds to my back. The bullets were inches from my spinal cord and my aorta...I suffered two collapsed lungs, a lot of internal bleeding. I was just in bad shape...The doctors didn't think I was going to make it that night."

**Thomas recovered, but he recalled being lost when he was finally released from Saint Francis Hospital.**

"I was thrown back into the community with no help, no counseling, no therapy, no victim services, no opportunities to help me cope with what happened to me, and no services for my family. It was very hard because I had so much going for myself prior to this incident. So, I became very depressed...They [the robbers] took away my livelihood. They took away my identity."

**That changed when Thomas was interviewed for a documentary called "The Sweetest Land," about community violence in Hartford, an idea that originated with the trauma ward at Saint Francis Hospital.**

"Working on the film is where I first started sharing my story — and finding my voice. The director asked me some tough questions that made me think that what happened to me was happening all across our communities, all across the country."

**Thomas began speaking about the film at local high schools, community events, and eventually at Harvard Law School and the U.S. Capitol in Washington, DC. He also pursued a Master's degree at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work, and started focusing on the importance of helping victims in the community and advocating for more services.**

"Those communities that have the highest crime rates and have high rates of crime victimization, are least likely to be supported and served by existing victim services or by existing criminal justice policies. I think, across America, my experience is not rare, especially among other young men of color. We endure these traumas almost every single day, with little support to recover, little support to avoid being victimized again, and little support to our families who are in dire need of services..."

"We want our voices to be heard about how we want to see things change within the criminal justice system. Previously, we spent so much money on prisons and that hasn't worked. So now, we want to reverse the coin and take money from the criminal justice system and reinvest it back into the community — help people heal, help people recover, and help people move forward with their lives."



## Public Welfare Foundation

1200 U Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20009  
202.965.1800 ext. 242  
[www.publicwelfare.org](http://www.publicwelfare.org)

Photos: [David Y. Lee](#)  
Design: [Fuszion](#)