

Sample Speech

When her child was brutally murdered, she asked for time alone with the corpse, time to say goodbye. Somebody decided this wasn't in her best interest. Her final farewell went unsaid.

The person who burglarized his home was 13 years old, a mere child. That didn't matter much to him in relation to the sentimental loss of his grandmother's jewelry and other family heirlooms. But it mattered to someone who followed the letter of the law -- someone who decided it wasn't "in the best interest of the child" to give the victim information about the status of the case.

She was only six years old when her father began sexually assaulting her -- a painful pattern of incest that continued for ten years. She couldn't tell her mother -- she wouldn't be believed -- and he said he would kill her if she told anyone. She couldn't turn to anyone because of her sheer terror. She was a mere child -- she couldn't even vote. Yet another muffled voice . . .

She was a victim of chronic domestic violence, battered throughout her marriage. She almost pressed charges once, then reneged when she thought of her kids, whom he had threatened as well. She thought about turning to her family, his family, her minister -- anyone! But he was an upstanding member of the community -- he pretty much convinced her that nobody would believe her allegations anyhow. What was the use?

That was *then*. In 1999, the victims' rights discipline in America commemorates its 27th year of providing service and support to victims. And in 1999, we celebrate the progress we have made in giving a voice to victims of crime -- voices that have historically been silent. Voices that are *silent no more*.

This is *now*. Today in America, our systems of *criminal justice* and *juvenile justice* are beginning to welcome the concept of *victim justice*. Justice for victims simply means that they are given a voice in a process that will affect them for the rest of their lives. Victim justice means that victims have input into decisions that affect how their offenders will be treated and held accountable for their offenses. Justice for victims means that victims have a voice in creating a *vision for justice for all* -- which equates to justice for victims, for offenders, for communities and for our nation as a whole.

We can learn much from listening to the voices of victims. We learn that victims *can* and *must* define the harm caused by crime. Traditionally, offenses have been considered to be against the

state -- the offender versus the (state/commonwealth of _____). Yet victims will tell us that it was not the (state/commonwealth) who was murdered, raped, assaulted or burglarized. It was a real human being, an individual who suffers.

We learn that victims are the only people who can truly personalize a crime. When a name, a face and a voice of humanity is attached to a crime, it becomes more difficult to depersonalize the harm that has occurred. It becomes impossible to accept excuses for criminal or delinquent behavior. When the victim's voice is heard, that victim can feel validated. Validation of victim harm, victims' rights and victims' needs is critical to the process of victim healing.

We learn that offenders need to hear victims' voices. Today in communities across America, victims, if they so choose, are talking to offenders -- sometimes to those who directly hurt them through victim/offender mediation or family group conferencing, sometimes by talking to other offenders through victim impact panels in the hope that they can influence the decisions and actions those offenders will make in the future. We want offenders to *understand the harm* they have caused to their victims, their communities, their own families and themselves. And we cannot begin to make that crucial connection without the voice of the victim.

The voice of the victim has also given rise to the voice of communities that are deeply impacted by crime. Citizens schedule and plan their days to avoid potential crime in their neighborhoods -- "I need to be home before dark." "I can only park my car in certain places." *Crime affects our quality of life.* And no matter what anyone says, I ask you to consider that there is no such thing as a "victimless crime." Because the *threat* of crime, or the *fear* of crime or the *reality* of crime affects us all.

During 1999 National Crime Victims' Rights Week, thousands of individuals and organizations are gathering to celebrate the progress that has occurred in victims' rights and services in America. Over 30,000 laws have been passed to define and protect victims' rights. In 32 states (*including yours, if applicable*), victims' rights have been elevated to protection in state constitutions. And a federal constitutional amendment is currently pending that will solidify victims' rights in our nation's most cherished document.

Perhaps the greatest accomplishment is that *victims are, indeed, silent no more.* Their voices offer us a vision for a nation where justice applies to young and old, every culture in the rainbow of the quilt that is the United States, in communities large and small, rural and urban. They offer us understanding of victims' needs, and appreciation for what victims endure. They offer us hope. As Winston Churchill once said: "The right to speak must be earned by having something to say." Victims' voices tell us much about them and their needs, and even more about ourselves -- about a nation that cares for our family members, friends and neighbors who are hurt, and a nation that stands ready to support rights and services for victims of crime.