

Crime Victim Survivors: The Power of the Personal Story

Episode 2: Elizabeth Huebsch

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Janelle Melohn:

Welcome to the OVC VOCA Center podcast series, Crime Survivors: The Power Of the Personal Story. This podcast provides a platform to those who've been impacted due to crime to tell their story. The stories spotlight the perspective of those who've experienced harm due to crime and connects their experience to issues affecting Victims Of Crime Act, or VOCA, victim assistance and state compensation administrators, resulting in the sharing of promising practices and highlighting areas for improvement.

I'm Janelle Melohn, director of the OVC VOCA Center at the National Criminal Justice Association. Today, we invite you to join our podcast host, Aurelia Sands Belle, research instructor at the National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center at the Medical University of South Carolina, as she guides us through the personal story of Elizabeth Huebsch.

In 2014, Liz became the victim of ongoing sexual violence at the hands of her spiritual advisor. When Liz sought assistance and support from both law enforcement and her local sexual assault victim services organization, she unfortunately experienced significant violations of her personal privacy and confidentiality. While her experience with her state's crime victim compensation program was very positive, the rest of her journey to justice was not. Liz tells us that when damage is done to a victim, it's everyone's job to repair that damage. Let's listen to, and learn from, Liz's experience that she is so generous to share with us.

This podcast is made possible through a grant from the Federal Office For Victims of Crime. Opinions and points of view expressed in this podcast are those of the presenters and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the Department of Justice. Throughout today's conversation, we may discuss difficult issues, such as trauma, violence and victimization, and their impact on all of us. Please don't hesitate to take a break from listening. Taking care of yourself is what's most important to us.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

Elizabeth Huebsch is going to share with us today. Elizabeth, may I call you Liz?

Elizabeth Huebsch:

Yes, you may.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

Okay, very good. Thank you so much for being with us this afternoon, for your willingness to have this conversation, we really appreciate it. Could you share with us some background information about the sexual abuse that you experienced in 2014?

Elizabeth Huebsch:

Yes. I was sexually assaulted multiple times by a spiritual community leader over a two-year span. In 2013, I joined a spiritual group in the community because I was feeling stuck with work, relationships,

family and stuff like that. I was seeking guidance and direction. Then after I had been in this group for several months, all these issues that I had initially just dissolved. I attributed that to this spiritual leader and his guidance. He was significantly older than me, married with four adult daughters. He was a retired elementary school teacher and he regularly worked with vulnerable people. All of these facts about him really made me feel comfortable and safe to be around.

Our relationship started where he like put me on a pedestal and idolized me and pointed out my strengths. He believed in me in a way that no one else has and he built a deep level of trust with me. I shared my personal wounds and struggles and flaws. He knew that I was pretty isolated at the time, so that I wasn't going to tell anyone about him or I didn't have anyone to turn to.

Then it got to the point where I told him to leave me alone. This was after he had sexually assaulted me multiple times. He started showing up at events that he knew that I was working at. He was this calm, collected, loving person, and I was this person that appeared to be crazy because I would have these panic attacks when he would show up. He showed up at my workplace and put a card in my mailbox at work. Then I ended up leaving my job because he decided to rent office space at the place I was working at. Then that is when I started speaking up about this and he sent me a cease and desist letter. Then at the time I was unemployed and didn't have health insurance.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

Wow. Liz, this led you to seek support from another group, your local victim advocacy agency. Could you explain to us your experience at that crisis center when you met with the advocate who was assigned to work with you?

Elizabeth Huebsch:

Yeah. In September of 2016, I went to that advocate agency. I had met with an advocate only two times. I was just trying to figure out what the cease and desist letter was. I was really embarrassed and ashamed, so I was just sharing bits and pieces of what had gone on. I didn't show any emotion at all. I was just scared and not saying much about it, I guess.

Then I did express my fears to this advocate. I told her that I was scared or concerned that I didn't file a report right away, fearing that others wouldn't believe me. Then I told her how the abuser was trying to convince people that I had a mental health problem, which I did not, and so he was trying to make me look like I'm the crazy one. Then he also threatened my social work license, that if I were to reveal his identity then he would get my social work license revoked.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

You were seeking services from this particular organization. What type of services were you looking for from that agency?

Elizabeth Huebsch:

I saw on their website that they had counseling services and support groups available. I was looking for that, but then also any other resources available or services available because I didn't know what was out there, this is my first time going through this process. When I asked about counseling and support groups, the advocate told me that they don't provide those services.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

What types of services or resources did you receive?

Elizabeth Huebsch:

I never received any services or resources. After she told me that they don't provide those services, I asked about a mental health counselor in the community that specializes in sexual assault so that I can see them, because I just know, as a social worker, that you don't get that training in school unless you specifically go through it. I wanted someone who is in this field.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

Now, you mentioned that you were unemployed and you didn't have health insurance and you were seeking mental health counseling. Your advocate, were they able to connect you with victim compensation so that you could talk about receiving assistance that way?

Elizabeth Huebsch:

No. I didn't even know that victim compensation services existed at this time. I was shocked, because I didn't have insurance and I was seeking counseling services. I would've thought that she would've offered that to me and all her clients.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

At any point, were you ever informed about the issue of confidentiality that victim advocates have? Did anyone ever talk to you about that?

Elizabeth Huebsch:

The second time that I had met with her was in October and that's when I brought up how we had a mutual friend in common. That's when she promised me confidentiality and told me that victim advocates have higher confidentiality standards than counselors because victim advocates can't be subpoenaed in court.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

Oh, okay. From there, after you've had that kind of conversation, let's talk just a little bit about your experience when you did finally talk to law enforcement. Could you tell us about that?

Elizabeth Huebsch:

That was in January of 2017, so several months after I'd last met with the advocate. I filed a sexual assault police report because the abuser kept showing up at these events and wouldn't leave me alone. It consisted of 50 minutes of questioning by the detective. That victim advocate that was assigned to me was present, I agreed to allow her to be present during that interview. During that interview, I was asked a lot of victim-blaming questions, why questions, why didn't I fight back, why didn't I report right away, and why did I allow it to happen more than once. Under the stress of the abuse and the triggers of having to recall and revisit a series of abusive events in chronological order, I had a really difficult time doing that, which now I know is common for victims, but at the time, the detective was very impatient with me.

At one time, the detective stepped out of the room and I looked at my advocate and I told her that, "I don't know what's wrong with me, I'm blanking out, I can't remember anything." At the time, I wasn't educated on the neurobiology of trauma and I wasn't aware of why I was blanking out. The detective doubted my account of abuse and told me several times that there's no way I was sexually assaulted.

Then after the 50 minutes, the detective told me that I needed to leave because there was another person waiting, there was another appointment after me. Then she asked the advocate to stay behind, so then I was left to walk out by myself. I just remember being very embarrassed after exposing very painful details about my assault to people that I thought would help me.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

We've learned a lot about law enforcement's interaction with victims and how having the right questions and taking the right posture with victims can allow them the ability to feel comfortable and to feel safe to share what is going on and what has happened to them. Trauma-informed investigative skills are very important for law enforcement. What you've said to us lets us know that that was missing for you in your experience, because it can absolutely shut victims down.

Elizabeth Huebsch:

Yes. Definitely.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

Okay. Again, that's just sad, I'm very sorry that you had to go through that. We know that the effects of trauma can indeed cause confusion and you don't remember things chronologically. You remember things in the importance of the moment that it's asked of you what happened. A lot of work still to be done in that particular area. It sounds like that was a harrowing experience.

Just a few months later you received a call from someone claiming to be a state investigator from your social work licensing board. What happened when you received that call? Can you tell us about that?

Elizabeth Huebsch:

Yeah. I received a call from a man stating that he's an investigator and that he was given information about me because he heard that I had some legal issues, and all I'm thinking about at that point is that the abuser had been threatening to get my license revoked. This investigator said that he was checking in on me and that if I needed anything I could give him a call. He mentioned that if I don't want to talk to him, it's optional. I was on my way to therapy and so I just had to end the call with him right away.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

That was odd. Do you know who filed a complaint against you?

Elizabeth Huebsch:

No, not at all. At this point, I didn't even know that a complaint was filed against me, he never mentioned that on the phone at all and I never received something on letterhead or in the mail. I didn't know if this guy was legit, you know?

Aurelia Sands Belle:

Right.

Elizabeth Huebsch:

The investigator didn't mention anything about it. I, honestly, like I said, thought that it was the abuser that was behind all this and that he just got someone to contact me and try to talk to me and stuff like that.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

At what point did you realize that an actual complaint was made against you to your licensing board, and what happened, what did they find out during that investigation?

Elizabeth Huebsch:

Yeah. Due to false statements that were reported to my licensing board, to the state investigator, the state investigator contacted me three times within 30 minutes and then he left two voice messages on my phone, threatening my license if I didn't call him back within 24 hours. Then the next day, there was a state investigator, three police officers and a locksmith that broke into my home for a welfare check that was called on me by the state investigator, having to do with information that he received from this complainant. At the time, I had no idea, I was at home and I had no idea who was at the door breaking in, I just knew it was a matter of time that they would get there, so I ended up calling 911. I was really scared and I didn't know that they were police officers because they'd never identified themselves. I went into my bathroom and shut the door and called 911 and was just terrified, crying.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

That's terrible, I'm so sorry to hear that, and calling for help. There are just so many pieces and I just want to say to our audience, we're asking Liz to bring a tremendously long story down to some short nuggets. It's so much that she's experienced with not only the onset of the initial trauma, but what she's experienced in the aftermath. Listening at that and understanding that you had someone breaking into your home, not knowing who it was, at what point did you have to take your next step? I'm assuming that's when you had to get some outside legal help to help you with the complaint that was made against your license and to help you navigate all of the things that were happening with the licensure board and that state investigator, is that correct. Is that where you found yourself?

Elizabeth Huebsch:

Yes. I had to hire an attorney to help with communication between the state investigator and the licensing board and stuff, because at this point I was scared of this investigator too, his behavior was getting more aggressive and calling me three times within 30 minutes was pretty scary. That's when I realized that this complaint had been made and that this state investigator was who he said he was, through the communications with my attorney had with him.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

Now, Liz, I realize that what I'm about to ask you is sensitive, but at some point you were required to get a mental health evaluation. Can you tell us a little bit about that experience?

Elizabeth Huebsch:

Yes. I was ordered by my licensing board to undergo a mental evaluation by a licensed professional, at my own expense, to prove that I was not in danger to myself or others, due to these false allegations and stuff that this complainant had made about me. Luckily, as a result of my evaluation, the board determined that these allegations were not true so the case was closed, but that was after eight months. It was a long time.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

It wasn't until you had that evaluation, that mental health evaluation, that you found out what was in the complaint and what it was about, is that correct?

Elizabeth Huebsch:

Yes. During that evaluation, the evaluator was reading statements to me. As his way of evaluating me and my mental health, they had to ask me questions about these certain allegations. The complainant may have made false statements regarding whether I had been sexually assaulted. The complainant had diagnosed me with a mental health disorder, that she determined without any education or training or qualifications to do so. I was also accused of being unfit to practice or see clients, and she misstated confidential information that I shared, which tainted professional's perceptions of me.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

Wow. Liz, how did you find out that your victim advocate took confidential information that she'd received from you and used it to file a complaint against you to your licensing board?

Elizabeth Huebsch:

Yeah. It wasn't one particular thing, it was putting a lot of pieces together. In a letter I received from my licensing board ordering me to get them at mental evaluation, it stated, "In September of 2016, the respondent reported being a victim of abuse." This victim advocate was the first person I had sought help from and the only person I sought help from in September of 2016, so that was a clue. Then the investigator used the pronoun she when referring to the complainant when he talked to my attorney.

Then during the mental health evaluation, the evaluator read statements and there were things that the abuser had said that were reported in the police report. The advocate used those words. At that time, nobody knew about this police report or this sexual assault report that I had filed, so it had to have been one of two people, I guess. Then the welfare check in August of that year, I got a copy of the police report from the welfare check and it specifically said her name and the agency and that I had a sexual assault issue and that I wasn't in the right state of mind. That's public report, and so that was really what confirmed it.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

Okay. Liz, we're going to take a break here, because hearing that a victim advocate behavior like this, I need a break too. We're going to give you a break, let's regroup a second and then we'll come back.

Janelle Melohn:

Nationwide, crime survivors' rights to privacy and confidentiality are rights and not merely recommendations and are provided for in organizational policies and standards. If you are a victim or survivor of sexual violence, you can contact the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network, or RAINN, toll free for free confidential support at 1-800-656-HOPE, that's 1-800-656-4673. You can also visit RAINN's website for information about support that is available in Spanish and via online chat at rainn.org, that's R-A-I-N-N dot org.

In the episode description of today's podcast, you'll find resources that describe crime survivors' rights to privacy and confidentiality. We're grateful to the US Department of Justice Office For Victims of Crime for its support of the VOCA Center and this podcast series.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

Liz, I can only imagine how your life has changed and the things that you would routinely do changed as a result of what you experienced and the impact of a victim advocate breaching your confidentiality. Can you talk to us a little bit more about that and share some ways that really impacted you?

Elizabeth Huebsch:

Well, yeah. First off, I was investigated by a state investigator, I had my home broken into by three male cops and a male locksmith who were conducting the welfare check. I ended up staying in a hotel the night that my house was broken into because I felt unsafe at home following the police intrusion. I had increased nightmares and flashbacks due to the police intrusion. I went through trauma treatment, EMDR treatment. I was attending therapy twice a week because of the police breaking into my home and stuff like that. I had a lot of feelings of alienation, isolation, emotional paralysis, hypervigilance, and disconnectedness, because I didn't know what events led to this state investigator and police intrusion.

I hired an attorney to represent me through this licensure investigation. I was re-victimized just by my victim advocate not believing me. I was ordered to get a mental health evaluation by a licensed professional. I was now having to deal with two problems to heal from, instead of the one that I originally was seeking help for. Diminished confidence and trust in support professionals, including my mental health counselor and other victim advocates. I was in constant fear, not knowing who filed the complaint. If it was that easy to just file a complaint, I was concerned that I would have the state investigator after me again. I had a lot of PTSD from all this, which affected me getting a job right away and stuff.

I also was an active member that met on a local college campus. I had quit that because that is where this advocate is now working. Then I'm constantly researching still, and back then, any time I go to an event. I'm an adjunct professor at a local university and there was an event that this agency was going to be at. I had planned on being there, but I didn't know that this agency was going to be there. I'm constantly researching to make sure that the advocate or people in this agency are not going to be attending. If they do, then I create a safety plan.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

I think that points out how on guard survivors have to be for their physical, as well as emotional, safety. You've pointed out so many different ways that you've had to maneuver your life and adjust in the aftermath of what you've experienced because someone did something to you. Now, prior to the reporting to the licensing board, did the advocate express any concerns to you about your behaviors or any concerns about how that advocate thought your mental state was, your mental health was? Was any anything said to you?

Elizabeth Huebsch:

No. She never expressed any concern about me or my mental health. It was really odd. She talked to the investigator months after that she had last seen me. It was just really odd that she never gave me any resources if she was concerned about me and she never expressed any concern at all. Really, when I was going through therapy, she was not part of my story because she just wasn't existent and she didn't help me at all, so I didn't ever discuss her or anything when I was going through my stuff and healing and stuff like that. She was not there.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

I see. Well, there's a lot that we could talk about with that, but I'm going to move on. Let's shift just a little, and I want to talk a little here about confidentiality. Tell us about how one breach can result in multiple people obtaining vulnerable information about a victim survivor. Can you give us just a few examples about that, how you were made vulnerable as a result of this breach? Just a few.

Elizabeth Huebsch:

Yeah. Basically, just because you're held at a level of confidentiality, when you breach to law enforcement, law enforcement is not held to confidentiality standards so then they can discuss information and that can be passed on through them and stuff like that. This investigator showed up to places I used to work at to try to gather information about me from other employees. He'd mentioned that he received allegations that I had mental problems, that I may in danger to potential clients, and that he needed to make sure that my mental health was in a state to practice. He also told people that my license was going to be suspended if I did not call him back or return his call and that it would be really hard to reinstate it.

Basically, between the locksmith, the state investigator, law enforcement licensing board members, the neighbors that he talked to, my landlord, the therapist who I rented space from, and then former employees, and then the mental health evaluator, there was over 20 people that became aware of my vulnerable information.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

Wow. Your story is incredible and when I think I've heard it and absorbed it, I'm hearing something else, but again, just so that people understand that kind of breach has a long reach out into the community. Thank you for sharing that and giving us something else to think about as we provide services.

Liz, with this phenomenal story, what recommendations do you have for professionals who help victims and survivors of crime, because we don't want to see this happen to anyone else. It happened to you, we don't want it to happen to anyone else. What kinds of recommendations would you make?

Elizabeth Huebsch:

I'd say when damage is done to a victim, it's everyone's responsibility to help repair that damage, whether it's other programs reaching out or other people that are helping to repair and heal that and bring them back into the community, because a lot of times they feel isolated and stuff. My concerns about attending trainings, and there was one where victim advocates were attending and so I had talked to the director and they let me know which ones were going to be there, but then also there was a plan if I needed to walk out or I had someone from the agency or the coalition that would be at that training so that I could go to if I needed to have someone with me.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

Very good.

Elizabeth Huebsch:

Another thing was what you were mentioning earlier, is training that victim confidentiality is the law and also why it is so critically important to survivors who are seeking services. My advocate harmed me very badly with her professional misconduct. I was a victim, I was supposed to get help and she was supposed to help me as a victim advocate, but instead she harmed me. The defamatory statements that she made when breaching my confidentiality are now in permanent documents. Her actions have been a

barrier to my career advancement and a drain on time and money spent to try to clear up these derogatory statements. It's been very damaging to my reputation.

The advocate and the agency did not exercise confidentiality, so it makes me wonder if anyone in the helping field has been sexually assaulted, should they fear seeking help? Without confidentiality, it only creates an environment for victims that tells them not to speak up about their sexual assault.

Another thing is law enforcement and other professionals' training on how trauma impacts the victim's capacity to talk about what happened and also the power dynamics of sexual abusers. When I reported it to law enforcement, one of the instances that I spoke about, I said that he had put his hand down my pants without consent. The detective responded, "Well, he stopped didn't he?" If a man at a train station is sitting beside a woman and puts his hand down her pants, that's illegal. Knowing the person should not make this action any less illegal, just it's been less believable. That's something to think about, is a lot of times the person that has violated you.

My relationship with the abuser initiated during my participation in a spiritual group where he was this leader or teacher, authority figure. People in authority are not supposed to pursue relationships with those in subordinate positions, according to Title IX. The detective told me that there was no way that I was sexually abused because I have a higher degree than him. That's looking at my educational background instead. Then he used verbal threats often to control my behavior. When a person is threatened in a relationship, they cannot consent to intimate contact.

Another thing I think is important is the information that victims provide to staff, I think it's important to shift your perspective on things and looking at it as a gift to the agency. When a victim brings up any concerns to leaders or board members about other programs or professionals, just holding the information that is being offered as a gift, because victims, really, they don't have to do that. This information can be helpful to help improve services if the people receiving it are wanting it to.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

Is there anything else that you could think of, is there any other way that you think that you could help bring something to this field to help us think about?

Elizabeth Huebsch:

Focusing on being centered around survivors or victims, it can help keep programs accountable when they've caused harm. I think it's important that when there's harm caused that that program comes up with a plan, because victims need three things when harm was caused to them. The first thing is acknowledgement, they need to know that you acknowledged what had happened, and the second thing is responsibility, victims need the ones who cause the harm to take responsibility for the harm, and the last thing is accountability, how did you create a relationship with this victim who was harmed to restore them as whole, that repairing the damage thing. That's really important because we need to bring them back into the community so that they're not walking around being skeptical of life, like is typical.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

Liz, let me ask, do you feel that the victim advocacy agency that you worked to has repaired the harm that they caused you?

Elizabeth Huebsch:

Have they repaired the damage?

Aurelia Sands Belle:

The harm.

Elizabeth Huebsch:

No. In fact, I've seen them use the harm that they've caused me more as a platform for talking about their policy changes and improvements that they've made as a program, which isn't victim-centered.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

Wow. Well, that's another podcast, I think worthy of looking at, but for the time I'm going to pause a little bit and make another little shift. You talked earlier about some financial concerns. What was your experience like when you worked with crime victim compensation?

Elizabeth Huebsch:

I actually had a really good experience. I had a really good case manager with victim compensation. After being harmed and not believed by all these professionals and not trusting the system, it may have taken a little while and I may have questioned him a lot, but he was very patient with me. With victim compensation, these stories are so complex that they don't fit in this cookie cutter way. I felt like he was very creative with how to make my situation fit, because it wasn't like I got lost wages and stuff and so it wasn't that I could just provide pay stubs. We had to figure out how can I prove that I was working and that kind of stuff.

Then I got denied initially. When you get denied, it's like you just don't have hope, why would I write an appeal and stuff like that, but he was very encouraging and was explaining the process along, that it's not necessarily a bad thing that you got denied, it's just we need to give more information or stuff like that. He did a lot of the work, which took a lot of stress from me. I ended up getting lost wages. I also got financial support for security cameras at my place, which has helped keep me safe so that I can look on my phone app to see who's at my place before I pull in, because I live by myself.

Yeah, it was a good experience. I think that there's some challenges with the whole rules that you have to follow and guidelines that you have to follow for the compensation, but I was able to get therapy and transportation. It was really helpful because he let me know of all the services that victims comp could cover and stuff helpful.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

Oh, that sounds like a good victim advocate to me.

Elizabeth Huebsch:

No kidding.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

That sounds wonderful, I love that. Is there anything that you would like to also say about the compensation professionals and, again, how they can best help, or did you feel like you summed that up for us?

Elizabeth Huebsch:

I just think it's important to continue to review and revise different policies and procedures to make sure that they are victim-centered, because sometimes we can get caught up in these rules or laws and I think it's important making sure that it's accomplished or done through a victim-centered lens.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

I know you talked about changing policies and looking at policies and procedures, is that something that you would hope that VOCA administrators should know as they continue to work and provide services on behalf of survivors, that sometimes policies need to be looked at and procedures need to be looked at?

Elizabeth Huebsch:

Yes. I've learned through my experience that there are ways to accomplish things and it can be done in a victim-centered lens. When you report to the police for sexual assault, you can gather information through a trauma-informed lens with how you are asking questions and stuff like that. There's a way to get there from a victim-centered lens as well.

Aurelia Sands Belle:

Absolutely. Well, Liz, you shared so much information with us in our time with you today. You spoke some very powerful words, and what you've ended on is also very powerful for us to think about, that we can always improve our care and the way that we do things and the way that we work with victims. Thank you very much for your taking the time today to share with our listeners the truth of your experience. Thank you again for sharing the power of your personal story. I know that your commitment to improve victims' and survivors' rights to privacy and confidentiality really resonates with so many of our listeners. I know that your willingness to share your powerful experiences so that others can learn from them will be a benefit not only to crime survivors, but also to the many professionals who serve them because we all want to do better. I will remember your advice, the information that victim survivors provides to us is a gift. Listen, don't get defensive, but make changes. Again, Liz, our heartfelt thank you.

Janelle Melohn:

Thank you so much, Liz, for reminding us about the critical importance of privacy and confidentiality for crime survivors. Without the guarantee of privacy, it's clear many victims and survivors may refrain from seeking the services and support they need and deserve. Today we've learned about the importance of VOCA administrators holding victim service agencies to the highest standards of confidentiality. We've also learned about the value of trauma-informed supportive compensation program case managers.

Throughout this podcast series we'll continue to listen and learn from survivors about how to make the theme of 2022 National Crime Victims' Rights Week, Rights, Access, Equity For All Victims, a reality in their lives. We'll also learn about the many challenges they face on their journey toward justice. Please join us again in August for a new edition of Crime Survivors: The Power Of the Personal Story podcast.

