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Alice Vachss (far right) listens as Gay West (left), a volunteer at LaCASA, gives her and others a tour of the facility Friday. (Dan Luedert/Staff Photographer)

Abuse stories move hundreds at LaCASA event

"As a child, I remember loving my father very much," said Dawn Radcliffe-Snell. "I wasn't aware he was a predator." She told her powerful story and sang a song during the fifth annual "Women Helping Women" event on Friday. It was sponsored by the Lake County Council Against Sexual Assault (LaCASA)/Zacharias Center, 4275 Old Grand Ave., Gurnee.

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Abuse stories move hundreds at LaCASA event

(<http://www.pioneerlocal.com/gurnee/news/436940,gu-LaCASAevent-062107-s1.article>)

June 21, 2007

By [MARCIA SAGENDORPH](#) Staff Writer

"As a child, I remember loving my father very much," said Dawn Radcliffe-Snell. "I wasn't aware he was a predator."

After years of being sexually and emotionally abused by her father, Radcliffe-Snell uncovered that her father was a prolific predator with multiple victims. She eventually testified against him in court for sexual abuse.

She told her powerful story and sang a song during the fifth annual "Women Helping Women" event on Friday. It was sponsored by the Lake County Council Against Sexual Assault (LaCASA)/Zacharias Center, 4275 Old Grand Ave., Gurnee.

LaCASA works with women, children and men, offering support through a 24-hour crisis line, advocacy, counseling, support groups and prevention programs, among others.

Nearly 600 people attended the fund-raiser, with a theme of "The Courage of Our Convictions."

Radcliffe-Snell brought the large audience to its feet, as onlookers applauded her courage to share her story. She encouraged others to find their voice as well. Radcliffe-Snell, who lives in Wisconsin, is now a married woman with children of her own.

"Unless you have been through it, you can't understand how important LaCASA is," Radcliffe-Snell said. "They care enough to listen and hear and understand without judging."

LaCASA volunteer Alison Kolloff of Antioch said she appreciates hearing survivor stories like Radcliffe-Snell's.

"I come to this every year to hear the survivor stories," Kolloff said. "They always move me enough to keep doing this."

She works on the annual rummage sale held by LaCASA, and attended the Women Helping Women event with her mother Charmaine Roth of Des Plaines. Anita Padilla of Fox News Chicago emceed the event.

Need for prosecution

For victims of sexual assault know that finding the courage to share their story is one thing, but finding authorities who are willing to prosecute can be another.

Alice Vachss, activist and former chief of the Special Victims Bureau in New York City, was the featured speaker at the "Women Helping Women" event.

When Vachss became chief of the bureau, the sex crimes conviction rate went up to 80 percent. She prosecuted more than 100 felony cases to verdict including rape, child sexual assault, elder abuse, domestic violence, cult abuse and homicide. She is currently employed by Legal Aid Services of Oregon.

As the author of "Sex Crimes: Ten Years on the Front Lines Prosecuting Rapists and Confronting their Collaborators," Vachss now travels the world educating people on how best to investigate and prosecute sex crimes.

She believes more cases should be prosecuted in order to reduce the amount of rapes.

"I think that prosecuting those cases of rape or assault and finding someone guilty is the only way to stop the amount of rape," Vachss said before the event.

She praised victims like Radcliffe-Snell who found the strength to step up, and encouraged others to do the same.

"Every day, we see extraordinary acts of courage," Vachss told the audience. "'It's not enough. They can't change the system. We can. We need to be willing to take on the government and the prosecutors and

demand that the system do what it should."

Torrie Flink, executive director of LaCASA, has been leading the staff and volunteers at LaCASA for almost two decades.

"People touring the building today get to see the environment where healing takes place," Flink said. She said the fund-raiser is held under a tent in the parking lot of the agency so that expenses are kept low.

"We want the money raised to go directly to the people we're helping," she added.

The numbers of people needing help continues to grow, Flink said.

"My staff hears horrific stories day in, day out, but they also hear amazing stories of transformation," Flink said. "At LaCASA, you are connected with people who are truly courageous. Our truth is very simple. That children should be safe in their own homes and that men and women are entitled to moving through this world in safety."

LaCASA strives to give people that safe and comforting place with brightly colored walls, peaceful gardens and private counseling rooms.

"There's an amazing amount of healing that goes on in this building," Flink said. "It transforms everyone who has the courage to get involved."

Peggy Belmonti of Highland Park, a LaCASA contributor, said the agency's mission fits Flink perfectly.

'So empowering'

"Torrie's energy is so contagious," Belmonti said. "I think it's so empowering for all of the women who participate in this event and the agency."

The event has grown from just 90 people five years ago to 600 people this year. It was co-chaired by Sherril Ballard of Beach Park and Dawn Welker of Antioch.

They had 150 items in a silent auction this year. Last year, the silent auction raised \$70,000. A committee of 60 volunteers organized the fund-raiser. The major sponsor was Medline Industries, Inc.

Welker said she and Ballard were grateful for the strong support for the annual fund-raiser for LaCASA, as many people return year after year.

"Once you set your foot in here, your heart gets attached to it," Welker said.

Next year, LaCASA will celebrate its 25th anniversary, and Flink will celebrate her 20th year as executive director.

The center reaches out to a wide variety of people, united by one cause -- helping women and children in need. An engraved brick in the patio with words of a survivor tells it all, stating, "My voice has been heard and I made it."