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## Silent no more

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**BY ERICA MASINI ELmasini@scn1.com**

GURNEE -- "I had a voice," Dawn Radcliffe-Snell said after LaCASA's annual "Women Helping Women" luncheon. "People heard me."

Silent no more, Radcliffe-Snell sang for her first audience under the tent at the Zacharias Center and told her story on Friday to sponsors, staff and friends of LaCASA, the not-for-profit organization serving survivors of sexual assault and abuse.

The fund-raiser's theme, "The Courage of Our Convictions," was embodied by Radcliffe-Snell's speech when she spoke of the years she fell prey to sexual abuse and the courage she gained to overcome her pain. She said her knees were shaking onstage.

"I never had a voice as a kid, and now I feel like I have a family again," Radcliffe-Snell said after her speech. "If I don't speak the truth about my past, then there will be kids out there who won't know how to speak out."

She began her speech with a song she had wanted to sing for the past 12 years entitled "What Do You Do When You're Twelve Years Old?" Her words recounting her childhood when she was taught to keep her mouth shut reverberated throughout the crowd, bringing tears to the eyes of some.

"Daddy whispers in your ear at night, 'Don't tell a soul,' well, that's how it goes when you do as you're told and you're six years old," she sang.

Originally from Virginia, Radcliffe-Snell said she heard stories about her father sexually abusing other girls and women, but was too young to know exactly what was going on. After countless instances of being sexually abused and hearing her father's threats to "protect the family," Radcliffe-Snell prayed, wrote to Dear Abby, spoke with counselors and finally went to authorities for help.

She testified against her father for sexual abuse in 1984 and now lives in Wisconsin with her husband, Steve, and their four children.

One of the hundreds listening to her speech was Alicia Conover, 18, of Waukegan who knows a thing or two about not being heard. As a survivor of sexual abuse herself, she said she found the speech motivational.

"I wanted to make a difference for everyone else out there who isn't helped," Conover said about her decision to join LaCASA's "REAL Kids CARE" program last summer. She, along with other teen volunteers in the program, raise awareness about sexual assault in the teen community and conduct fund-raisers.

The luncheon consisted of tours of the Zacharias Center, a silent auction, drawing, and lunch. It also included speeches from Fox News Chicago's Anita Padilla, LaCASA's Executive Director Torrie Flink and Alice Vachss, former chief of the Special Victims Bureau of the Queens, N.Y. district attorney's office and author of "Sex Crimes," a New York Times Notable Book of the Year.

Flink said she is proud to be part of a "lunatic team of idealists," at LaCasa. She also said she is proud to be LaCASA's director for 20 years and looks forward to celebrating LaCASA's 25th anniversary next year.

Alluding to many surprises in store for the next years, Flink encouraged the audience to be brave enough to "step up" against sexual assault and abuse.

"Be the change you want to see in the world," Flink said. "Don't wait for it. Don't talk about it. Be it."