

**.....Keynote Address for the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual VT Victims Rights Awards Ceremony  
April 11, 2003**

Thank you for joining us on this very special day. Indeed it is a honor and a privilege to be here with you today especially considering that this is my favorite day of the year, Truly I say it is better than Christmas, birthdays and anniversaries because it is the one day out of the year that we set aside to honor and pay tribute to victims/survivors, their families, and all who work and/or support crime victims.

Indeed, we have much to celebrate, as the field of victim assistance is strong, vibrant and committed as ever to easing the suffering of those hurt by crime. There are over 10,000 community and system- based victim assistance programs in the United States today. And there are over 32,000 federal and state laws on the books today that try to define and protect victims' rights. More on victims rights in a moment but first I'd like to take this moment and highlight some of Vermont's major achievements over the past 3 decades.

**1973-30 yrs ago** The Women's Rape Crisis Center established the first 24-hour rape crisis hotline staffed by volunteers. Now the young woman who finds herself confused, powerless, fearful, and determined to seek justice, finally has someone she can reach out and confide these feelings to and know she is not alone. She will be validated and learn that these feelings are normal reactions and the intensity of these feelings will subside over time. Although they will never ever be erased completely.

**1986** The VT Victim Assistance Program is established. Crime victims now have someone to help them walk through the maze of the criminal justice system. The young woman who is kidnaped, raped and beaten nearly to death now has someone to help her assist the state in the apprehension and conviction of her rapist and attempted killer. Someone to answer questions such as What is a deposition? What can I expect in the courtroom?

**1990** the VT Victims Compensation Program is established. Financial assistance for crime victims to help pay for expenses resulting from the crime costs covered include medical expenses, counseling, funeral costs, and loss wages.

#### **CRIME DOES NOT PAY VICTIMS DO:**

According to National Institute of Justice in their 1996 Victim Costs Report “the direct tangible costs to crime victims annually are estimated to be \$105 billion in medical expenses, lost earnings and public program costs related to victim assistance. Pain, suffering and reduced quality of life increase the cost to \$450 billion annually.” Although I am not sure there can be a set amount on the total cost of pain and suffering as it usually last a lifetime and effects so many families and friends, society in general. Sept 11<sup>th</sup> being a case in point.

However, the young woman who is laying in a hospital bed in 1992 having sustained serious life threatening injuries by her captor is grateful to learn about this program. And how she learns about it is an interesting point and begins to shed a light on victims right to notification. She learned about it by chance through a letter from a concerned community member and former House Representative. It just goes to show when you live in a small state such as VT news can travel throughout a small rural and supportive community, such as mine, faster than say changing a lightbulb.

\*\* If you have not already suspected by now the young woman I am talking about in the above examples is standing right here right now speaking before you today. Although I am not that young woman anymore, but we’ll try to get away with that for a little while longer.

**In 1992** the VT Center for Crime Victim Services is created consolidating services so that it is user friendly and serves to empower the voice of the victim.

**1996** The passage of one of the most important legislation to date, The VT Victims Bill of Rights. The purpose of this legislation is to balance crime victims’ rights with defendants’ rights.

We will talk about this more in a moment.

1997 VT MADD chapter is founded

1998 the VT DNA Criminal Database Bank Legislation passes. DNA Database Banks are now established in all 50 states. The use of the DNA Database bank allows and increases the ability of authorities to solve violent crime.

1998 VT POMC Chapter is established.

**In 1999, Vermont's Deaf Victim Advocacy Services is founded. Now there are finally services for the domestic violence and/or sexual assault victim who is Deaf.**

In 1999-The VT Victim/Survivor of Crime Council is established as a place for survivors to unite, advocate and influence policy.

**One more event in 1999** the VT DOC establishes the Crime Victim Services program as a way to provide services to victims whose offenders are incarcerated and/or under supervision/parole.

**2000 - Expanded coverage of the Abuse Protection Act.** The Abuse Protection Act created in 1980, applied to spouse and former spouse. This Act included "persons who live together, share a dwelling, minors or adults who are dating or who have dated, and those who have been in and/or are in a sexual relationship."

Let us take a moment and reflect on how the Washington DC area was gripped in fear for weeks while law enforcement officials were tracking down the elusive sniper and how thankful we all were when these criminals were caught and we could breathe a little easier. However, for many domestic violence victims they live in fear every single day, every moment of their lives.

They know what constant fear feels like. And nowadays my mind can not help but wonder if it even remotely possible for a someone living in the MiddleEast to obtain a such an order or for any type of victim services.

\_\_I have only briefly touched upon but a few major accomplishments that have occurred in VT  
Many of these accomplishments could not have been reached without the dedicated and tireless  
work of crime victims/survivors, and victim service providers whose experiences and stories  
propel this movement and it is why we are here today to pay tribute and honor those for their  
advocacy.

Many of these same accomplishments have occurred in other states throughout the nation.  
However, we face many challenges, today and will continue to do so in the future. These  
challenges will require even greater doses of courage, of compassion, and of commitment to  
justice for *all* people who are hurt by crime.

**This year's theme Victims Rights: Fulfill the Promise**, encourages us to consider the following  
questions: What can Vermont do to fulfill its promise to crime victims? And what would we like  
to promise to crime victims yet are unable to do so due to lack of policies, programs and/or  
resources?

We can promise and commit to

- \* Treat every crime victim with compassion and dignity.
- \* To help them identify and meet their most important needs related to their physical,  
emotional, financial and spiritual needs.
- \* To provide them with information about their statutory rights as well as advocacy to  
help them implement their rights.

**But what would we like to promise victims to truly comply with the theme Fulfill the  
Promise:**

We would like to promise victims that the scales of justice are truly balanced that their needs and rights will receive equal consideration to the needs and rights of their accused or convicted offenders. What I am talking about here are equal rights, equal protection under the law, for me, for you: If any one of us is accused of a crime, then our country's constitution protects us against the unwieldy power of government; **If we are the victim of a crime, then shouldn't our country's Constitution be there to protect our rights as crime victims with the same level of force and commitment.**

While criminal defendants have almost two dozen separate constitutional rights - 15 of them provided by amendments to the U.S. Constitution - there is not a single word in the US Constitution about crime victims, just place the word victim in a search engine you will not find it.

A good friend of mine and a long time victim activist, Ed Stout, asks us to consider the following questions:

What is the price of justice? What is the price of injustice! A definition of justice that excludes the victim is a definition of injustice....

which costs more -- injustice or justice (Ed Stout)?

**What else would we like to promise crime victims?**

We would like to promise that their statutory rights will always be enforced, but sadly this is not the case. 33 States have amended their State constitution to include victims rights and although unfortunately VT is not one of these state VT has enacted legislation such as the Victims Bill of Rights. The truth of the matter is that there are over 32,000 federal and state laws which are

on the books today, and The reality of the matter is that **these laws are insufficient to fully vindicate victims' rights in the criminal justice system.** If we look into our history books we will find that it was only by amending our Constitution that slavery was abolished and women were giving the right to vote. The ultimate way to fulfill our promise to victims; to fully vindicate victims rights in the criminal justice system is through **supporting an Constitutional Victims Rights Amendment.** This is a tall promise and a commitment that we can not fulfill alone. If I have learned anything from the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, it is thus:

When Americans are faced with unspeakable acts of trauma and tragedy, they rise up in unison to confront them. Today there is a universal bond among everyone who lives in this nation, who cherishes and values the freedoms and liberties that make us Americans. That bond —— comprised of courage, and compassion and commitment —— is what it will take to fulfill the promise to crime victims. . . . that their needs and interests represent our needs and interests, as individuals, communities and a nation as a whole. And that bond and commitment is what gives me hope that our promise to crime victims will ultimately be fulfilled. Thank you  
Susan S. Russell, M.A.