

## **EXPERIENCE — SARAH GROSSO, NEW YORK I SURVIVED A VIOLENT CRIME**

On Sept. 13, 1997, my life was changed forever. I had transferred to a new school, where the students were unfriendly and consumed with appearances. My old school had more of a feeling of community; students and professors were friendly, and the environment was healthy.

At my new school, I felt really isolated and under tremendous academic pressure to perform. This is why, when a seemingly nice young man asked me out, I agreed. I thought it would be nice to have a friendly person to talk to. Because my studies were always my first priority, I gave little time and attention to dating.

The plan was to go to the movies. We never arrived at the theater. Early on, it became clear that all he wanted was sex. I repeatedly said no to his advances. I didn't want to be rude, so I just kept saying, "No, no, no." He wouldn't listen to me at all; my words meant nothing to him.

Part of me never returned from that date. That night, I was sexually assaulted. I reported the rape and underwent a rape kit and other tests.

In my case, the police made me feel as if I were the criminal. They said that if I prosecuted this man, my entire sexual history would be discussed, and my actions that night would be scrutinized and judged. I felt that I didn't have anyone to turn to.

To me, legal prosecution was unfathomable. I was broke and isolated, and I felt as though no one in the world would understand. I could not risk having a court find me at fault. The police had me sign a release form to close the case. They said that they would speak to the rapist, who never approached me again. But his image still haunts me.

This was my first experience. That night and the following months were almost unbearable. I could remember being covered in my own blood and feeling physical pain. To survive this, I knew I had to take complete responsibility for my life. No one had ever told me to watch out for this. I never thought that it would happen to me. I was terrified that my family would find out and disown me or call me names.

Soon after the rape, I read a magazine article that motivated me to get tested for HIV. The article showed that large numbers of young women in my age group were becoming infected with the HIV virus at an alarming rate. I didn't know my attacker's history, so he could have given me any number of sexually transmitted diseases. Fortunately, the HIV test was negative.

Unfortunately, I was living upstairs from where the rapist worked. He was there every day from 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., as well as on the weekends. I couldn't even go to the store or the Laundromat for fear of seeing him or his friends. I couldn't sleep or eat; I was literally shaking when walking down the street or going into stores. I changed my whole schedule around. My daily life became unbearable. It was imperative that I move out as soon as possible.

I determined to move and used my practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism to help me take the actions I needed to get out of the apartment. I chanted a great deal and held overnight chanting sessions with the goal of getting out of that apartment. By Friday of the same week, I had moved into my new apartment. I was now living only seven blocks from an SGI-USA culture center. I went for evening prayer and other religious activities every night. I was so close to the edge that I needed to be there and hear people chant

Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to bring myself back to life.

This experience has filled me with compassion for what rape survivors have lived through — those lucky enough to have survived an attack. It has also given me a fighting spirit to stand up and fight for rape to be perceived as a serious violent crime and for rapists to be perceived as violent criminals. I want all rape survivors to know that they are not alone and help them get the justice I was discouraged from seeking.

Coming so close to death, I have reevaluated my life and learned to mourn the loss I experienced. In individual and group therapy, I have begun to understand myself better as a woman and my feelings about the rape. The rage and pain are coming out. They are only something that can be healed in time.

I am so fortunate to have my life, when others have lost theirs. In the process of overcoming this experience, I learned to take responsibility for my life. By creating value out of the rape, I learned to deal with the fear that had grown inside me. It was a fear of life. I now have supreme respect for the dignity of all life.

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