

Living an authentic life is about as far away as possible from the secrets and sneaking around that Dominic chose. Among many things that therapy helped me to accept is that what Dominic did was wrong. No caveats. Not my fault. I don't think he was a pedophile. I don't think he was a rapist. I think he was a young man who was conditioned by popular culture to connect sex and violence. I hope that my silence, my never turning him in, my never telling anyone- didn't enable his journey along a dark path. Even so, I can finally shed the last bit of guilt—it wasn't my fault. I was 12 and 13 when everything happened. I can forgive my silence. And I can speak up now.

T.M. is an activist, artist, and educator living in the Southern United States. He has an amazing wife and a fantastic 17-year-old adopted foster son. T.M. spends his time working with queer youth, hanging out with his family and dogs, and celebrating everyday acts of kindness.

FIND YOUR VOICE AND CARRY A BIG SIGN

MAUREEN SHAW

At 15, I became a statistic.

In hindsight, the assault itself—committed by someone I trusted—was but a flyspeck on my life's timeline. It was terrifying, but it was finite. Conversely, the prolonged emotional aftermath of the attack has shaped the trajectory of my life.

I did not speak a word of my rape for seven years. Seven long years. Like many victims, I blamed myself and internalized the trauma, which manifested itself in a litany of self-destructive behaviors. It wasn't until my senior year of college that I spilled my secret to a supportive group of students in my women's studies class. It was like a dam burst; once I spoke my truth, there was no going back.

I began attending group therapy for survivors on campus, I spoke at my university's Take Back The Night, and I decided to

“come out” as a rape survivor to my immediate family and close friends. I use that term to describe my disclosure because in many ways, I had been living a secret life in which a formative experience—and large part of who I am—was compartmentalized and shelved away. I feared how my loved ones would react upon learning I had been raped. Would they blame me? Be angry that I hid this secret for so long? Think of me as “damaged goods”?

I will never forget the day I told my parents their youngest child had been a victim of rape. The anguish on their faces belied their attempt to be strong, which simultaneously broke my heart and infuriated me; it was the first time I truly grasped the ripple effect of sexual assault. I was angry that my rapist had not only stolen my joy, but had shattered the peace in my parents’ hearts. While I had suffered the physical trauma alone, the emotional trauma was now a shared experience.

My parents swallowed their pain to rally around me, as did my siblings and friends once I told them. With each retelling, I realized the shame I had been carrying for so long did not belong to me; it was my rapist’s. What’s more, I understood that the displaced shame thrived on my silence, and I refused to be complicit in my suffering any longer. For me, that meant dismantling the stigma and humiliation surrounding sexual assault by speaking about it.

Once I began sharing my story—initially among my inner circles and later, more widely as an activist and writer—I found my strength. I felt empowered each time I identified as a rape survivor because I had survived. I waded through some of the ugliest feelings I’ve experienced to date and I survived those, too.

The more I spoke and wrote about my assault, the easier it was to revisit that dark chapter in my life. And the more I opened

up, the more other survivors began to share their stories with me. Slowly, the event that had left me isolated throughout my adolescence transformed into a unifying experience that gave me a sense of community.

Really, community is what propelled me toward healing and gave me the courage to begin advocating for other survivors. I joined the local chapter of a national feminist organization and poured my energy into seeking justice for rape victims. This process came with a steep learning curve, not just about the complexities of sexual assault, but also about myself.

I was a complete rookie when I began volunteering. I was naïve about the systematic and institutional nature of victim blaming and I had no hands-on activist experience. I had zero insight into how different identities can influence a survivor’s experience. I was a middle-class, young, white woman and the obstacles I encountered during my healing journey are assuredly different from those facing women of color, men, low income, LGBT, or non-gender conforming/queer people. Consciousness would come with time.

I vividly recall my first protest. Various organizations and individuals came together in outrage over a subpar sentencing recommendation for a convicted rapist. Armed with a sign demanding our justice system take rape seriously, I marched in front of the court alongside veteran activists, and every time I tried to join in the chants (“If you do the crime, you must do the time!”), I choked up.

That lump in my throat wasn’t borne out of sadness, but from an overwhelming feeling of togetherness and pride. I was incredibly proud to be part of a movement that dedicated itself to protecting and promoting women’s rights, one that fearlessly advocated for sexual assault victims.

Feeling of awe aside, I remained unconvinced of what end result, if any, our action would have that day. As it turns out, our protest and an online petition made a difference; the judge handed down the maximum sentence.

That triumph—my first real taste of feminist activism—taught me a powerful lesson I'll never forget: that speaking up can make a tangible difference. And not just in one's own healing journey, but in the lives of others. I loved playing a part, no matter how small, in that process. Over the course of the next several years, each time I attended a protest, led a group of volunteers in letter-writing campaigns or sat in a courtroom in solidarity with a victim plaintiff, I shattered the silence that had trapped me for so long. I grew confident, I developed a purpose, and I became fierce.

An unexpected and very welcome sidebar to my immersion in feminism was the reclaiming of my sexuality—on my terms. For years, sex had been transactional, as something I engaged in though never valued, mostly because it felt tainted by my rape. My feminist awakening sparked a sensual awakening. The confidence and strength I drew from activism—in addition to internalizing the feminist movement's emphasis on bodily autonomy—translated to a healthier sense of self: mind and body. Once I learned to believe in myself as a capable, spirited human being with valid feelings and passions, it spilled over to the physical. I respected my body and knew I deserved sexual intimacy.

I have no doubts that feminism helped create the best version of myself. And this is the person my (now) husband fell in love with.

By the time we met, I'd had years of being publicly identified as a survivor and I no longer felt ashamed. Even so, coming out to him

in the beginning stages our dating was decidedly daunting. For the first time in my adult life I was ready and willing to trust another human being on a deeply intimate level, and I was terrified my disclosure would jeopardize our budding relationship. It wasn't rational, it was visceral: It felt eerily similar to the moments immediately before telling my parents.

My fears were (once again) unfounded. He listened empathetically and I was reminded of the cathartic power of sharing my story. As we navigated an emotional and physical relationship over the coming weeks and months, he was patient and followed my lead. It was refreshing to be involved with a person who respected me so much, and his compassion was (is) bottomless. He understands that my rape is a part of my history; it doesn't count against me and it doesn't define me, but it does impact the way I approach life.

As it turns out, it also affects the way I parent. My husband and I have two young children—a preschool-aged daughter and an infant son—and although they're too young to understand the concept of sexual assault, let alone talk about it, we've already begun teaching consent in age-appropriate ways.

Consent is a two-way street, however. As vital as it is for our kids to know they shouldn't be touched without consent, they also need to understand and respect others' physical boundaries. We talk about this regularly with our daughter and plan to do the same with our son as he grows up. I firmly believe that the earlier we help our children establish bodily autonomy, the better.

Now in my mid-30s, in a loving relationship and a mother of two, I've come a long way from the teenager who lived in fear and was well versed in self-loathing, thanks to my empowering trifecta of self-disclosure, feminism and a supportive partner. I'm proud of

who I am today and love myself deeply not in spite of my rape, but because I triumphed over it. It has been a learning process about my own strengths and power, and an inspirational jumping-off point on many occasions. The value of speaking up can't be overstated especially in the face of adversity. I encourage anyone suffering in silence to develop their voice with confidence. It helps to carry a big sign.

Maureen Shaw is a feminist, writer and proud mama of two. Her writing has appeared widely online, including sherights.com (which she founded in 2011), Quartz, The Atlantic, Huffington Post, Mic, Women Under Siege, Feministing, Fem2.0, Jezebel and more. Maureen holds a Master of Arts degree in Human Rights from Columbia University and can't imagine life without feminism or chocolate.

LIKE A VIRGIN

JUSTINE LARK

There was no religion in my family, no ability to reach out for it, no way through to an understanding of how to deal with life's complexities, and no opportunity to follow a faith in order to find forgiveness. I didn't care. I liked my body and my body knew that the feelings I had were real and exciting. I was sure that touch led to something ecstatic, if not exactly speaking in tongues, then tongue-related. And it did.

I was 14 and I was turned on, full of expectations and desires. I really was. We were in the same class at school; he paid attention to me and smiled a lot. He was kinda tough and kinda shy with brown hair and freckles. We started going out together, meeting on the corner and finding places to make out. It was exciting and we both loved it. I felt no shame. There was nothing that would change my mind about it. I was having sex with my boyfriend; it was 1963.