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ON WORK | JOY SOLOMON

Coming Full Circle to Help Her Elders



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A career of tough cases turns a lawyer into a champion for the elderly, just like her mother.

IN THE MIDST of my raging adolescence in 1979, my mother was devoting most of her time to a Jewish nursing home in Baltimore where she was the board president.

I would come home after school, make instant mashed potatoes, settle into the comfort of our gray velour sofa and watch "General Hospital," enraptured. Family

dinner often included stories about Mom's afternoon with the old people. In her mind, the elderly were to be revered as the bearers of history, lives lived and lessons learned; in my self-centered, adolescent thinking, old people were fragile, needy and dying. I felt more connected to soap stars like Luke and Laura than to aged Jewish grandmothers. I told myself that I'd never end up working in a nursing home like her. No way.

Fast-forward: college, law school, 1989, the big city.

New prosecutors in the Manhattan district attorney's office think on their feet.

Three weeks of training, and I was in court, facing judges and defense lawyers, asking for bail, holding hearings, trying cases. In those days, each case had its own paper file. Barely five feet tall, I would walk across Centre Street to court, my arms laden with overstuffed files, often carrying many of my 200 misdemeanor cases.

I volunteered for family violence cases. Most of the victims of family violence are

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female. Many are powerless and voiceless in their relationships. Deeply shamed, I wanted to appear steady and bold as I guided them through one of the most challenging experiences of their lives. I wondered if they could tell that I was sometimes scared — and uncertain whether I would be able to secure the protection that they sought.

It was imperative that I keep a safe emotional distance from the victims, but it was far from easy. Sometimes I imagined quitting my job and working at the makeup counter at Bloomingdale's, where I could help women feel happy and beautiful.

Later, I spent two years in the child abuse unit. That work was heart-wrenching on a daily basis, as I dealt with traumatized children who often had limited resources for healing. I just wasn't cut out for that job.

I also worked in the Special Prosecutions Unit, and it was there I was assigned to my first elder abuse case. Few assistants wanted to work with older victims, but as it turns out, I was drawn to them.

Older adults, primarily victimized by their adult children or grandchildren and often frail with some kind of cognitive impairment, can make terrible witnesses. It's those same factors that make them such vulnerable prey.

Like L., an 83-year-old retired teacher struggling with diabetes. Her adult son, Johnny, had untreated depression and a cocaine habit. Over decades, he had physically, financially and psychologically abused her. With the encouragement of her pastor, L. called the police from the hospital where she was being treated for a broken hip caused by his most recent assault.

With the support of the pastor, a caring detective and me, L. courageously testified before a grand jury, and Johnny was indicted. A temporary order of protection was issued against him, requiring him to stay away from his mother.

When Johnny was released shortly after his arraignment, he returned home and begged his mother to let him inside. From the hallway, in the slender opening held secure by the door chain, he told her he was sorry. He'd get help. Feeling fear, resignation and love, she let him in. Months later, because of her steadfast refusal to cooperate and testify against him, *People v. L.* was dismissed and sealed.

I was disillusioned that such a gaping hole in the system had allowed this to happen. Here was a son who had no easy access to treatment and a mother who had few options. I was helpless to act without a witness or other corroborating evidence. Would L.'s story have ended differently if she'd had a safe place to go after the hospital?

Not so green anymore, I struggled with my role as a prosecutor to push cases forward, and with my growing awareness of a legal system inadequately designed to address the aftermath of family violence, particularly against frail, cognitively impaired older adults.

I have found a different way to respond to elder abuse. I am in solution mode, not wading in exasperation.

IT'S EASY to look away from older people in a society that prizes youth, but I was becoming more compelled to pay attention. As I continued my work with older victims, I noticed both of my grandmothers' difficult experiences in navigating their once independent lives. One had dementia, the other heart disease. I listened more closely to their stories, and to their complaints about becoming invisible in a world obsessed with youth. Their medical and emotional vulnerabilities, despite the loving families that supported them, challenged me to be more empathetic to the challenges of aging, disease and victimization.

Both of my grandmothers died about the same time that I lost touch with L., and I wondered how I could be a voice for this marginalized population.

In 1999, with two babies at home and an interest in part-time work, I took a job at the nonprofit Pace Women's Justice Center in White Plains, which provides legal service to victims and survivors of domestic violence. I managed its Elder Abuse Unit, including answering calls on the help line.

It was not one shocking story, but many lives of quiet desperation that continued to influence me. Like a call I took on the help line in which a confused older adult,

unwilling to tell me her name, explained that she was terrified of her grandson, who had moved in three months earlier. He was taking money from her wallet, pawning jewelry he had stolen from her and coming home "crazy and high on something." What could she do? She did not feel safe at home. Because she was too old and ill for a domestic violence shelter, there were no good solutions. Again, I experienced frustration — there I was, the seemingly experienced lawyer, with no options to offer her.

Fifteen years on the front lines of family violence can lead you either to see a solid brick wall or to discover one of its tiny cracks where light sneaks through. Fortunately, in 2004, my world came full circle, and I was able to help start a dedicated shelter for elder abuse victims located in a nursing home.

Elder abuse victims often enter the shelter in crisis, with just the clothes on their back, no money and no access to their financial information. Some become long-term residents, finding friendship, romance, love; some are reunited with family members lost after years of isolation and abuse. They are safe here, and seen.

Since those early days of navigating broken systems and trying to fix giant problems with tiny Band-Aids, I have found a different way to respond to elder abuse. I am in solution mode, not wading in exasperation; that could have shattered me.

Yes, I still see signs of abuse and deep suffering. But now, in a nursing home that I used to think was reserved for people to die, it's a place to begin again.

I recently spent time alone with my mother, now a widow of 20 years, and we talked about some of her thoughts and wishes as she grows older. Despite my years of talking to older adults about very difficult things, this conversation was particularly tough. My mom loves being part of a community and is certain that if she needs help, she doesn't want to be home alone with an aide. She would rather be in assisted living or a nursing home.

And now, at dinner with my husband and my own teenage daughters, I tell stories about the fierce grace I see in the older people at the shelter, the same way my mother talked about that nursing home years ago. In a profound way, I have come home.