

Out of darkness

Emerging as more than a victim, Misty Cockerill speaks at tonight's important forum; Offering a new perspective on victims of violence

BY CHRISTINA TOTH, THE TIMES APRIL 23, 2010



Photograph by: Jean Konda-Witte, Times

Misty Cockerill will be one of three speakers, all affected by violent crime, at a victims' forum, free to the public tonight at the University of the Fraser Valley.

For many in the Fraser Valley, Misty Cockerill's name will forever be linked to a brutal attack in 1995 in Abbotsford, when the teenager was beaten and her best friend, Tanya Smith, was killed.

The killer was eventually caught and sentenced to life in prison, but only after he taunted the victims and the community for several months. But Cockerill is much more than a victim.

Since that time, she grew up, fell in love and had children. She's a daughter, a friend, a mom, a student. She's ready to graduate from university and start a career in social work.

The upbeat young woman is a survivor, and from early on after her tragic experience, she became an eloquent voice for survivors of crime.

Cockerill is a panel member tonight at the free Long-term Inmates Now in the Community (L.I.N.C.)-sponsored Every

Victim Matters forum in Abbotsford, held in part to mark National Victims of Crime Awareness Week. Joining her are John Allore and Marjean Fichtenberg, both who have lost loved ones to violent crime. They'll discuss the on-going trauma endured by those left behind, and what society can do to help them heal.

"Murder victims have multiple deaths," said Allore, whose sister Theresa was murdered in 1978. "There is the physical death, but then there is a second death when they are driven into silence by the voices of law enforcement, or the media who co-opt tragedy to tell a story (and in so distort the truth), and in some cases there is the death by the legal community who fashion facts for their own purposes," he said. "After a criminal death, there is only humiliation." Cockerill's message is to take care of victims of crime, to give them a voice and to help them regain their lives.

"Strength is not just a word, it's the force that keeps you moving, breathing and laughing," she said. "There will always be violence and despair. It has followed us since the beginning of time.

"Instead of just trying to prevent violent acts, as a society we need to also learn how to support and nurture the victims of those acts. "They should not feel as they are the ones being prosecuted." For Cockerill, being pushed into the spotlight and giving voice to her experience helped her move on with her life.

"I felt like I had a new role, an

advocate role, and it helped me so much,” she said, adding that society tends to focus on the crime, and can sometimes unwittingly hold people in the victim frame of mind.

“People dwell on the event, but for me, it was one hour out of my life. The seven months that followed [until her attacker was caught] were traumatizing, and the months that followed after that,” said Cockerill.

Also speaking is Marjean Fichtenberg, whose son was murdered. She will outline some preliminary findings of a feasibility study to create a healing centre for survivors of homicide, an initiative of the L.I.N.C. Society.

There will also be an opportunity for the audience to ask questions.

The event is supported by the University of the Fraser Valley criminal department, and is funded by the Department of Justice. The moderator is Fraser Simmons.

The forum starts tonight at 7 p.m. in Room B101, at the University of the Fraser Valley Abbotsford campus, 33844 King Rd., Abbotsford. Pay parking is in effect.

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