

SPECIAL REPORT

RAPE IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY

LAST IN A SERIES

By Jazelle Hunt

Washington Correspondent

WASHINGTON (NPA) – “On May 15, 1995, two men ran up behind me as I approached my apartment building, and one of them pointed a gun at my head. In the hour that followed, I was blindfolded, gagged, tied facedown to my bed, and raped by both.”

Eight years after that horror, Lori Robinson published those words as an introduction to her guidebook for Black survivors and their loved ones, titled *I Will Survive: The African American Guide to Healing from Sexual Assault and Abuse*.

Since then, Lori, who moved from Washington, D.C. to Detroit, has enjoyed a fulfilling, happy life. But on that night 20 years ago, she didn't know how, or if, she would recover.

“I remember asking if, after such assault, women went on to have normal lives, get married, have children, be happy,” she writes in *I Will Survive*. “It sounds silly to me now, but

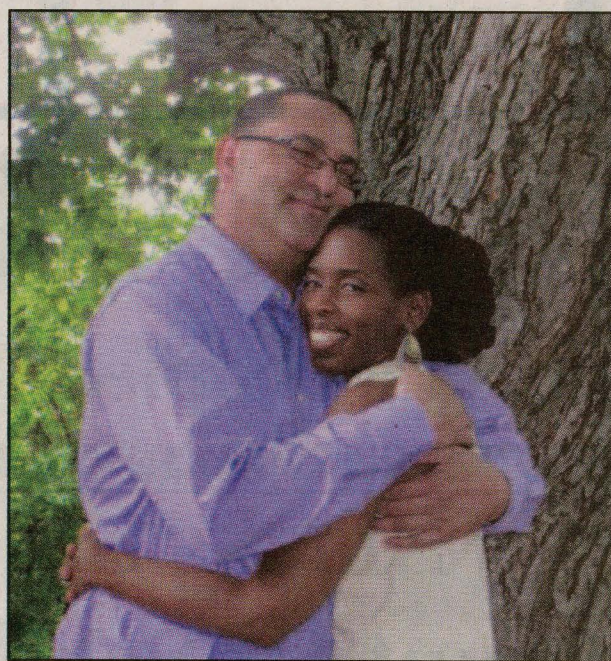
on May 15, 1995, I found it inconceivable that someone could be normal, much less happy after experiencing what I had.”

Silence and other hurdles to healing

The circumstances around Lori's assault were atypical – there was more than one assailant, they were strangers, and there was a weapon involved. In more common circumstances – when the people know each other or are related; when alcohol is involved or there has been previous sexual/romantic involvement; when the perpetrator is a prominent figure; or when the survivor was became pregnant – the decision to report a rape can be even more agonizing.

“I respect whatever anyone's choice is about whether or not to disclose, because everyone's doing the best that they can, at the time, with the information they have. And not everyone is in an environment where they get good information and support,” Robinson stated.

“There's still too much silence, but it's not the fault



Lori Robinson and her husband, Ollie Johnson.

Photo courtesy of Lori Robinson.

of the survivors. It's because we as a community, as individuals, as a society, haven't done what we need to do to make disclosure a safe and preferable choice for anyone who experiences sexual assault.”

“...A gradual process”

The men who raped Lori had stolen her car, electronics, and her landline cord. After carefully freeing herself from her bed, she mustered the courage to knock on a neighbor's door so she could call the police.

After the police she called her sister, who picked her up and took her back to her home. The following day, she called the DC Rape Crisis Center hotline. Later, her mother and sister accompanied her to her first counseling session. That evening, Lori told her boyfriend and the next day he accompanied her to counseling, the first of several occasions.

Her memory is a blur after that first week.

“For like a good year

after I was raped – I don't have many specific memories from that year. It's very fuzzy,” she says. “[Healing] was a gradual process – it wasn't like I finished therapy and it was over.”

A journalist, Lori slowly channeled her pain into her work. About a year-and-a-half after the assault, she agreed to write an article on a freshman Spelman College student who maintained that four Morehouse College students – three of whom were on the basketball team – had gang raped her. Spelman was Lori's alma mater; her own rape occurred the same week as her 5-year class reunion.

The article, “Rape of a Spelman Coed” was published in *Emerge* magazine almost exactly two years after Lori's assault. It became an award-winning story, and the springboard for *I Will Survive*.

“After that article, [the

magazine] got a really powerful response,” she recalled. “So the idea [for the book] came from having written an article about sexual assault; realizing that this was a huge problem in the African American community; that we didn't have culturally specific resources available to us; and that we just didn't know how to deal with sexual assault.”

From surviving to thriving

To her knowledge, Robinson's assailants were never caught and are thought to be responsible for at least three other rapes. Still, in 1996 she marked the one-year anniversary of her survival with a celebration.

“I'd experienced the most horrific thing I could possibly imagine, and I am still standing. I am still going to work; I still have my right mind, for the most part. It absolutely was a celebration of my survival,” she remembers.

Today, she has become a noted activist and speaker on the issue of sexual assault, speaking at more than 100 events in more than 20 states and in three countries. She has lived and taught in Ecuador, Brazil, and other parts of Latin America, and is still enjoying a career as an award-winning bilingual journalist and educator.

She also married Ollie Johnson, the boyfriend who had been there with her through it all.

“We weren't married then, but I definitely thought of us as a couple. You come together, you support, you love, you struggle, you handle it, you get through it. That was my mental-emotional framework,” he said.

“I've had various crises and challenges with my own family, but nothing like what happened to Lori. So I didn't have any direct experience with supporting or helping or loving survivors. But I just kind of knew that was the right thing to do.”

When Robinson first began writing *I Will*

Survive, Ollie thought it was a great idea and logical next step from the *Emerge* article – until it became clear that the research, interviewing, and writing caused Robinson to relive her trauma.

“I recommended that she consider dropping it or suspending it on several occasions, because it was so painful.... She would always say that she had to do it. And she worked through it,” he said. “I was very impressed with her strength and resilience through the whole process and still am just amazed that she could handle everything the way she's handled it.”

Robinson encourages survivors to seek healing, whatever that may mean for them.

“Not every survivor necessarily needs therapy, but based on my personal experience, I highly recommend that survivors reach out to someone. It's so important to be able to tell your story, let it out, [to] be able to talk to someone who can empathize with you, support you, and encourage you,” she said.

“Take care of yourself. Think of mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual self-care. What feels nourishing to you? What feels safe to you? What makes your body feel good? Do that.”

Every survivor's experience is profoundly personal. At the same time, millions of survivors are all fighting through the same devastation of this rampant trauma, often in shame and silence.

Robinson wants them all to remember one thing “What happened to you is not your fault. No matter what the circumstances were – no matter what you wore, or what you drank, or what time it was, or where you were – the only person who was responsible, the person who deserves all of the blame, is the person who forced unwanted sexual activity on you,” she said. “You are no less perfect, or sacred, or beautiful because of what happened to you.”

Suspensions

Continued From Front Page

education for all children – so much so that the Justice Department issued civil rights-based discipline guidelines to schools last year – strides are being made.

The report states, “Although we anticipate that newer data will reveal substantial improvements in some states and districts, there is no question that much more reform is needed if we are to be successful in closing the school discipline gap.”

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