

• W O R T H Y •

2017 Worthy Women's Professional Studies Scholarship – Finalist Essay

By Rachel Carter

In 2004, I joined the U.S. Army as a Broadcast Journalist to honor my grandfather's memory. He was a gunner for the British Army during World War II. I was very close to him as a child, and sadly, he died when I was 8. Less than six months into my service, I was sexually assaulted by another service member. When I reported it, I faced victim blaming, accusations, and shame which carried into my active duty assignment. Unable to cope with being ostracized and humiliated by the chain of command, I left the Army with an honorable discharge but was labeled as having a personality disorder. I was told repeatedly that I was a failure and an embarrassment to the Army and all women who served before me. For over half a decade, I believed these words. They rang true in my mind, body, and soul. I really believed I was a failure. One day in October, 2012, I came across *The Invisible War*, a powerful documentary about military sexual trauma. While watching it, I realized that I was NOT alone. I was NOT the only person this has happened to. I felt anger, sadness, relief, and hope all in those moments. It was then that I found my voice. Since 2012, I have worked with politicians to draft legislation to help protect and find justice for military sexual assault (MST) survivors. I have spoken in multiple states to various non-profits, churches, hospitals, and other organizations on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), MST, and the long-term effects of sexual trauma. I gathered stories from other MST survivors and their loved ones from all across the country and across generations and formed a theater project called *Speaking Out: Why I Stand*. The first performances were at a local theater back in 2014 and has recently been picked up by The American History Theater and the Women's History Museum in San Diego, California. I self-published the first edition of the script last year and a second will be released this year. Now I realize what happened was the failure of others. The failure of my comrade to respect who I was and my dignity. To respect my right to say no. The investigators' failure to provide me with an advocate and legal counsel. The Army's failure to provide me with adequate mental health treatment. Both of my units' failure to provide me with compassion and support. However, my reflection and thoughts on all of these experiences is that in the end, it is bittersweet. I cannot change what happened to me or how I was treated but I can change what I do with

it and that is the “sweet” part. I have used my trauma and the experiences that followed to help others. Every time I speak, I speak to help victims become survivors. They need to know they are NOT alone. They are strong, beautiful, and they are not broken. They are enough. I speak to raise awareness in the communities that sexual assault, including military sexual assault, is a community issue. It affects all of us. The UU Fellowship of La Crosse gave me a job when I still felt broken. When I struggled to feel loved and when I refused to let the world in. Unitarian Universalism is a liberal faith grounded in the teachings of various world religions. It offers a welcoming and inclusive home where people are accepted for who they are in that moment. No matter what your gender, sexual identity, race, faith, social class, or economic status is. You are welcome. Our ministers are Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, Agnostic, Humanist, Pagan, and of many other faiths. I am attending theological school because I want to be a chaplain and work one on one with individuals and families in a hospital or trauma setting. As a person of many faiths, I want to be in their boat with them, offer support as they take us wherever they need to go. As a trauma survivor, I understand the challenges life can unfairly throw at us. I want to continue to help people realize they are not alone. I am not alone. We are not alone.