

Wednesday, February 18, 2009

She's not a victim anymore

MORNING READ: Bound and gagged, she started helping others.

By **GREG HARDESTY**

The Orange County Register

IRVINE She awoke in her home naked and wrapped in a blanket, like a cocoon, her mind zapped by a drug slipped into her drink and Saran wrap covering her mouth.

The personal trainer she thought was her friend — a man who had drugged her and stripped her and then neatly folded her clothes and placed them on her bed — was telling her what would happen if she screamed.

"When I'm done killing you," he said, "I'm going to kill your son."

Until this moment, in April 2002, Patricia Wenskunas had spent much of her life playing victim.

She had kept quiet about an uncle who had abused her when she was a child. She had battled eating disorders and become a single mother in her early 20s, after her boyfriend

bolted when he found out she was pregnant.

Now, the attacker's words slashing at her soul, Wenskunas did something she had never done before:

She fought back.

She tore free from the blanket and ripped the wrapping out of her mouth. She unleashed a torrent of punches and kicks as her attacker slammed his head into her face.

Then, Wenskunas jumped a dozen feet from a balcony to the kitchen below, where she bolted out the door to get help. Her preteen son was not at home at the time.

Police arrested the suspect at his home, that night, in San Diego.

Wenskunas didn't know then, but her dramatic escape marked the beginning of a slow, often painful transformation from victim to survivor — a meaningless distinction for most people, but for her, as fundamentally different as night and day.


SIX MONTHS IN BED

It's late January, almost seven years later, and Wenskunas is sitting in a coffee shop, her longish blonde hair cascading past the shoulders of her black-and-blue business suit.

She turns 40 soon, and says she can't wait.

It's difficult to imagine that this confident, forward-thinking woman is the same person who, following the attack, spent six months in bed staring at the walls, too traumatized to do much for her 12-year-old son.

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Wenskunas decided to crawl out of bed only after overhearing her son say to a friend, "I wonder if she's ever going to get up and stop crying and take care of me."

She immediately decided to see a counselor — a decision she credits with saving her life.

As she was taking steps to repair her spirit, Wenskunas had to cope with another ordeal: the criminal justice system.

Many victims complain that they feel victimized a second time by a system designed, she says, to protect the rights of the accused.

In Wenskunas' case, the jury found her attacker guilty of assault with a deadly weapon (the Saran wrap) and of making criminal threats. He was sentenced to 120 days in jail and is scheduled to get off formal probation this summer.

Wenskunas remains outraged at the brief jail time.

"I wish people would quit judging victims or questioning them — you know, like, 'What did she have on when she was raped? Why was he in a bad neighborhood when he was killed? Why did she have him in her house? Why, why, why?'"

"Such questions are stupid and ignorant.

"The questions should be, 'Is the victim OK? What the heck was the criminal thinking — is he a sociopath? What can we do for the victim? Let's get justice, so criminals will not do this to anyone else.'"

Wenskunas has channeled such passion into an organization, Crime Survivors Inc.

Over the years, the nonprofit has made her

well-known in law enforcement and victims' advocate circles.

Now, she's about to launch her biggest project yet.

DREAM PROJECT

Crime Survivors Inc., founded in 2003, puts on several events a year to raise awareness of the needs of crime victims. It distributes, through police agencies, "victim emergency bags" to adults and children. And, through partnerships with several agencies, the nonprofit provides resource guides throughout the county.

But Wenskunas' new goal is to create a countywide Victim Resources Center. The center would provide, under one south county roof, services from several organizations and agencies to help victims of any crime.

Counseling, self-defense and safety workshops, legal assistance — all would be available in a single place, making the process of recovery at least somewhat easier for crime victims.

Money is a hurdle. Wenskunas hopes to raise \$3 million for the project. Last year, Crime Survivors took a bit more than \$142,000.

Still, Wenskunas is gauging the interest of potential funders for the facility, which is modeled after the national Family Justice Center initiative created during the George W. Bush administration.

She knows she faces an uphill battle raising money during a bum economy, but Wenskunas is driven by her desire to not have other crime victims go through what she did.

She didn't know where to turn.

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For the first five nights, she and her son holed up in a hotel.

"We had no idea what resources were available to us."

BLACK AND BLUE

The official colors of Crime Survivors Inc. are black and blue — the color of bruises.

For Wenskunas, black represents the crime and blue survival. She says she forever will remain bruised on the inside. On the outside, she appears anything but a victim.

Rumbling around town in her large SUV, she spends her time not used for her main money-making venture – event planning and catering – meeting with city and police officials to rally support for her organization and planned Victim Resources Center.

She met recently with the sheriffs of Orange and Los Angeles counties to provide more programs for victims of crime. She lists several high-profile people and organizations as donors to her nonprofit, including Henry T. Nicholas III and the Nicole Brown Charitable Foundation

Recalling that horrific night on April 4, 2002, Wenskunas doesn't flinch.

"People always tell me how sorry they are for what I had to go through. But the experience has allowed me to help others.

"I was there. I understand.


"But this has never been, and never will be, about me personally," she says.

"This is about victims."

For more information, visit www.crimesurvivors.com, www.surviveandthriverunwalk.org, or call (949) 872-7895 or email crimesurvivors@aol.com

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