

Testimony Julie Weil  
Rape Survivor

United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary  
Subcommittee on Crime and Drugs

“Rape in the United States: The Chronic Failure to Report and Investigate Rape Cases”

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Good afternoon Chairman Specter, Ranking Member Graham, and distinguished members. Thank you for the invitation to participate in today's hearing. I am humbled to share my experience with you and hope that it empowers you to help all rape victims get the support they need to heal and fight the injustice of rape.

Improving the reporting and investigation of rape will happen only when we are committed to providing victims with comprehensive support services -- from that first 911 call all the way through to sentencing. My story demonstrates this: the support services I received sustained me through the longest, most grueling years of my life, a time when giving up sometimes seemed like the best thing to do.

My name is Julie Weil. I was raised in Miami, Florida. I graduated from the University of Virginia and then spent a brief time here in Washington, DC working for the Department of Justice. I returned to Miami in the mid-1990s for graduate school. I got married, and my husband and I chose to settle down in the same small community where I had grown up in South Miami. We started a family, and I decided to take time off to raise my infant son Peter and my three-year-old daughter Emily.

My story begins on a beautiful, hot October morning in 2002. My son and I went to pick up my daughter at noon from the church preschool around the corner from our house. When we got back to our minivan, my daughter jumped inside while I buckled my son into his car seat. I then walked around to other side of the van to make sure Emily's car seat was secure. As I was doing this, I was ambushed from behind and hit over the head.

As daughter screamed for her life and fought to escape the van my assailant stripped the car keys from my hand and held a knife to my neck. He closed the door behind me, locked us in and turned the radio all the way up to drown out the sounds of my children's cries. As he pulled out of the church parking lot he asked me, “do you believe in God?” When I answered “yes”, he said “good, then you will forgive me for what I am about to do to you and your children”.

He then drove my children and me far away to an area that bordered the Everglades, parking our van on a canal bank surrounded by tall sawgrass. The hours that followed were the most terrifying of my life. The assailant beat me, held a knife on my children

and me, and raped me four times. Each time I was violently raped, he forced both of my children to watch every moment of his crime. My daughter was forced to sit just inches from me as I screamed in pain during the brutal sexual assault. When he was done with me, he drove me to two ATMs and asked me to withdraw money. He then returned our van to the church and parked it behind some shrubbery. He told me to wipe down the surfaces of the car with my underwear to erase any fingerprints. Then he laid me naked on the floor of the van and stuck the knife at the base of my neck one last time. He made my daughter beg for my life. The fear in Emily's tiny voice as she pleaded for him not to kill me still haunts me today. Then, he suddenly opened the van door and walked away.

I immediately drove to my parents' house and limped inside. Half naked and bleeding, I sobbed while my parents begged me to call 911. While I was afraid of what the rapist might do to my family if I reported the crime, I soon called the police. The compassionate and professional responding officer and SVU detective who arrived at the house that night set the tone for how I would feel about my experience with law enforcement. Without that encouraging beginning, my story might have ended quite differently.

Eventually, they took me to the Roxcy Bolton Rape Treatment Center at Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami. Thankfully, the police and the nurses at the rape treatment center were all veterans in dealing with the unique needs of rape victims. The rape exam was horrible and very painful. Being poked, prodded and photographed was almost too much to take, but the forensic nurse stuck by my side and helped me through the pain.

The next few months were torture on my family. The police found no fingerprints, and the rape treatment center uncovered no DNA on my body. This was extremely disheartening news. However, a few days after the rape I received a call from the police who informed me that tests revealed a tiny speck of DNA on my clothing. The DNA matched with a sample left at another rape. But unfortunately, the rapist's information was not in the system. In a city of millions of people, my attacker could be anyone. I was terrified.

The Miami-Dade police force put everything they had into looking for this man. My relationship with the detectives in my case served as a source of strength for me in the agonizing months after my rape. Because they communicated with me and checked in on me regularly, I felt like they were personally invested in securing justice for my family. This gave me the strength I needed to continue forward with the process.

By a stroke of luck and good police work, my rapist was finally identified months later. Police were called to investigate a domestic dispute at a hotel where a man was beating up his pregnant girlfriend. Although she dropped the charges, police fingerprinted him and swabbed the man for DNA. Three weeks later, the DNA tests came back as a match to my rape and another prior assault. At last, I had a name and face to put with my attacker--Michael Thomas Seibert. It was finally over, I thought to myself. I did not know that the real endurance test was just beginning.

After his arrest, the State Attorney's Office in Miami-Dade took over the case. I was thrown headfirst into the complex criminal justice system, something completely foreign to me. The first eighteen months after my rapist's capture were filled with a great deal of confusion, delay and disappointment. I began to feel hopeless.

Then my case ended up on the desk of Assistant State Attorney Laura Adams. Laura and her team were amazing. They promptly returned my phone calls, communicated with me about every motion and eased my anxiety during what seemed like endless continuances. They empathized with my concerns and helped me to see the bigger picture, which translated into justice for my precious family.

In October 2006 my trial began. It had taken more than four years of work to get to this point. I trusted the officers, nurses and attorneys who had worked tirelessly on my case over the years, and I was confident in their ability to secure justice for my family. Facing my rapist in court was extraordinarily difficult, not just for me but for my family. The compassionate care of wonderful counselors from the State Attorney's office was invaluable to my mother as she prepared to testify. It is something I will always be grateful for. Finally, after many days, I took the stand. For nearly two hours, just feet away from my rapist, I relived the horrendous crime in graphic detail. I endured degrading questioning from his defense attorney and recited all of the despicable details to a room full of strangers. The jury deliberated for two and a half hours. I held my breath as they read their decision: guilty on three counts of armed kidnapping, guilty on 4 counts of rape in the first degree with a deadly weapon and guilty on one count of robbery.

Sentencing came five weeks later. I told the judge how Michael Seibert broke my dreams and destroyed the life I wanted for my family. I told of how his actions forced us to leave the city, home, friends and family we loved because we no longer felt safe. The judge sentenced Michael Seibert to an astounding seven consecutive life sentences plus fifteen years for the events that occurred against my family.

There is immense power in seeing a case through to the end. The justice system can work when victims are provided with the support we need. Without that support, my rapist may still be free and victimizing other women and their families.

That is why we must continue to improve the system for rape victims. Organizations like RAINN, the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, provide victims and their families valuable information on their website and much needed emotional support through their National Sexual Assault Hotlines.

Seven years ago I was lying on the floor of my van, in the presence of my children naked and bleeding. I never would have imagined having the strength to come here and speak to you as a survivor activist -- but it is too important for me not to. That is also why I frequently share my story at law enforcement trainings, at State Attorneys meetings, and to medical personnel. The power that a positive experience with law enforcement and the legal system can have on a life -- and on public safety -- is enormous.

The safest and healthiest communities acknowledge the severity of rape as a crime and begin by respecting all victims, providing specialized training to law enforcement and healthcare professionals, and not downplaying the prevalence or the seriousness of rape.

Thank you for your time and for inviting me to speak on this important issue.