

4/28/25 Melrose, MA, City Council Meeting, Public Comments

Good Evening City Council Members. My name is Anne Marie. I grew up in Melrose and I currently reside in Stamford, CT. I graduated from Melrose High School in 1990.

I am here tonight to speak in support of the resolution put forth and affirmed by this city council on April 7th supporting the goals and ideals of Sexual Assault Awareness Month. As a survivor myself and someone who is committed to survivor advocacy and who actively seeks out further education on this subject, I am here to clearly outline the actions this council and everyone must take to support survivors and to combat the pervasive societal problem of sexual violence.

Some of you here know my story and some people watching this at home know my story. Due to time constraints I will not be getting into all of that here tonight, but I encourage anyone to reach out to me if they would like to have a conversation. Since being forced to confront and process this traumatic event that happened to me as a teenager and start my healing journey 2 years ago, I am now able to talk about it without getting extremely emotional and upset which has been a silver lining in all of this for me. I had, for the most part, been burying this for 33 years, only talking about it with very few people. I literally could not get the words to come out of my mouth. In the last 8-9 months I have become very involved in a volunteer capacity in survivor support, advocacy, education, and sexual assault prevention. I am helping others and I have learned so much from people who work in this realm and who have devoted their whole careers to supporting survivors and ending sexual violence.

I would like to share some of what I have learned and talk about how *everyone*, and especially those in leadership positions, can support survivors in their communities and their personal lives.

Supporting survivors is not passive. It requires action. It requires commitment. It requires courage. For those in leadership roles, leadership is about responsibility. It's about setting the standard and creating a culture of accountability even for your friends and colleagues. Being on city council is more than just discussing budgets & buildings and the people who represent a city must be held to a higher moral standard. Being on city council is about putting the well-being of the community in which you serve over your own personal interests and personal alliances. If you can't do that you should not be on city council. Supporting the goals and ideals of Sexual Assault Awareness Month requires more than just saying the right words. It is not enough to say we support survivors. Actions must reflect that.

The following are some ways in how people can make a real difference:

-Believe survivors when they come forward. Believing survivors helps break the cycle of sexual violence. Doubt, blame, ostracizing survivors, and verbal and written attacks retraumatize and discourage others from coming forward. Know that false accusations of sexual assault are very rare, as proven by multiple statistics. Not reporting, police not prosecuting, or even a not guilty verdict in a trial does not make an accusation a lie. People are not lying about these things. I am not lying about what happened to me nor would there be any reason for me to lie. There was no consent. There was no “misunderstanding.” There is more I could share, but I will keep that for individual conversations. This has all been very difficult and I did not want any of this. I assure you, nobody wants this. Ward Hamilton is selfishly more concerned with his own self preservation than the harm, pain, & suffering he caused another person.

-Listen with empathy and without judgment. Everyone’s experience is different and everyone deserves to be heard regardless of whether or not they reported their assault at the time that it happened. Do not preach to survivors about what you would or wouldn’t do if you were in their situation. I have had people say to me “I have trauma and I wouldn’t do what you are doing.” You can’t say what you would do in a situation until you are actually in it. I didn’t even know what to do when I found myself facing this overwhelmingly triggering situation in 2023. I ultimately decided that I couldn’t be afraid and that speaking out was the right thing to do.

Out of every 1,000 incidents of sexual violence, only 310 are reported to the police and even fewer are prosecuted. There are so many reasons why a victim may not report and every reason is personal and valid. The terrible way victims are treated by society/communities is one big reason many victims do not report. Being attacked by people and not believed simply for being the victim of a crime compounds the trauma. Nobody should be wondering why someone does not report.

-Challenge and correct victim-blaming. When you hear it, call it out. No survivor is ever at fault for what happened to them. The only ones at fault for sexual assault are the perpetrators. Perpetrators know how terribly survivors are treated which is why sexual violence continues and with little accountability or justice for survivors and is why some people, ultimately and sadly, don’t survive this. Do not be someone who perpetuates this culture of victim blaming, shaming, and ostracizing survivors who speak out. *If you participate in attacks like this, this makes you as bad as the person who caused the initial harm.*

-Educate yourself about sexual violence. Having trauma yourself does not make you trauma informed. Do not preach to survivors about what you would or wouldn't do if you were in their situation. I have had people say to me "I have trauma and I wouldn't do what you are doing." You can't say what you would do in a situation until you are actually in it. My situation, unfortunately, was all too common but became unique in 2023. I didn't even know what to do when I found myself facing this overwhelming triggering situation. I ultimately decided that speaking out was the right thing to do and that I couldn't be afraid.

-Hold people accountable for their harmful behavior. Just because you have only seen someone's nice side does not mean that someone else hasn't been subjected to their cruel side. If your friend is accused of sexual assault, even if it is 30 years later, advise them to seek the help of a professional who works in the realm of survivor support so they can come to terms with the pain & suffering they caused, take responsibility for their actions, and be honest. If you hear your friend calling the victim crazy (which, by the way, is a page straight out of the sexual assault perpetrator playbook) or saying things like "she has a long, sad, history of mental health issues" to try and discredit her, tell your friend that that is the morally wrong thing to do and certainly do not participate in attacks like this. *Again, if you participate in attacks like this, this makes you as bad as the person who caused the initial harm.*

-Do not try to silence or shame survivors for reporting and/or speaking out. No one should be punished, blamed, or shamed for sharing their truth. Survivors do not owe perpetrators their silence or anything at all. Survivors are NOT ruining the accused's life by reporting and/or speaking out about the harm done to them. The ones who ruin lives, both the lives of their victims and their own, are the perpetrators. I have had some really terrible things written to me and about me by people who lack empathy and understanding. I was very naive in thinking that it was safer to speak out in a post #metoo world and in liberal leaning Melrose, but it was not. There is still so much work to be done.

-Do not throw around words like defamation. People love to throw this word around even when they have no knowledge or understanding of what exactly defamation entails and no evidence in which to call something defamation. Threats of defamation are just a tool that perpetrators and their enablers use to try to intimidate and silence survivors.

A couple months ago, a person in a high profile leadership position in Melrose [Cal Finocchiaro] wrote in a 10,000+ member Melrose Facebook group about what happened to me: "It is defamation if nothing has been done about it by law enforcement or legally." This is completely false. Reporting to the police is not the sole determinant of truth. It was unprofessional, irresponsible, and very damaging for a person in a

high profile leadership role to write this in a public forum. Other survivors, people currently being abused, and future victims may have (probably did) read that and thought she knew what she was talking about and may now fear coming forward. I asked Cal to apologize publicly for writing this inaccurate information about defamation, but she has refused to do so.

Historical and current cases involving public figures like Bill Cosby, Marilyn Manson, Jeffrey Epstein, Nick Carter, Harvey Weinstein, Matt Lauer, and so many more illustrate that many survivors never report to law enforcement yet still deserve to be heard, supported, and believed.

People who choose to support survivors – to listen with compassion and stand against injustice – are helping to build a better, stronger, and safer society to send our kids out into. You set an example of the kind of community members Melrose, and all communities, should want. People who strive to make society be a place where victims/survivors are respected, supported, and believed.

Quotes in Support of the Resolution to Support the Goals & Ideals of Sexual Assault Awareness Month:

Padma Lakshmi in a New York Times op ed: “Some say a man shouldn’t pay a price for an act he committed as a teenager. But the woman pays the price for the rest of her life, and so do the people who love her. We all have a lot to lose if we put a time limit on telling the truth about sexual assault and if we hold onto the codes of silence that for generation have allowed men to hurt women with impunity.”

Me Too Many Voices Community Support Network: “Rape culture is getting angry at victims for coming forward rather than the perpetrators for the abuse. Rape culture is thinking it’s toxic and dramatic for survivors to talk about their experiences, but justified for people who look the other way and silence those who have been harmed. Behind every perpetrator of sexual assault or abuse are dozens of enablers, nay-sayers, and look-the-other-ways. As they say, ‘it takes a village.’ It is not a coincidence that too many abusers skirt responsibility and accountability while their victims are often ostracized and ridiculed. Enabling abuse is abuse.”

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