

National Bulletin on Domestic Violence Prevention

Legacy Snapshot

Leading advocates reflect or recalled

Joan Zorza

Joan Zorza has advocated for battered women and their children for more than 40 years. She is perhaps the most prodigious legal writer on domestic violence and sexual assault in the United States. Joan is the founding editor of both *Sexual Assault Report* and *Domestic Violence Report*, shepherding these bi-monthly newsletters for 11 and 17 years, respectively. Joan engaged experts from a rich diversity of scholarship and practice in writing about legal developments, innovative programs, survivor support initiatives, forensic strategies, health treatment advances, and research on domestic violence and sexual assault law, practice, and prevention. She edited *Violence Against Women* in three volumes (2002, 2004, and 2006), and authored the *Guide to Interstate Custody: A Manual for Domestic Violence Advocates* (1992, 1995). Beyond these, Joan wrote articles for legal journals and “practice” publications on defending battered mothers charged with parental kidnapping, gender bias in the legal system, marital rape, vicarious trauma of advocates, female genital mutilation, consumer rights for survivors, prostitution and the invisibility of harm. animal abuse as a tactic of con-

trol, drug facilitated rape, problems with mediation, suing the police after *Castle Rock*, sexual harassment in the military, workplace domestic violence, the costs of sexual and domestic violence, and the right of children to testify, among scores of other diverse topics.

Joan began her legal practice in 1981 at the Legal Services Center of Harvard Law School where she served as teacher, librarian, clinical supervisor, and litigator in the family law unit. Moving to Greater Boston Legal Services in 1986, she supervised the divorce unit, engaged in legislative advocacy and litigated contested custody and education cases. She represented more than 2,000 battered women, almost none of who returned their abusers. GBLS permitted her to litigate virtually any case arising for battered women. In 1990, she moved to the National Center on Women and Family Law in NYC where, as senior attorney, she provided national technical assistance and training for advocates, attorneys and policymakers on domestic violence law. She wrote amicus briefs in critical law reform cases for battered women and developed many resource materials for the field.

Joan is most passionate about mothers and children surviving domestic violence. Her priority legal and organizing work focused on protecting children from the denigration, moral corruption, coercive control, intimidation, manipulation, and abuse, and on safeguarding battered mothers from the ter-

roristic threats of child abduction and retaliatory violence against children for the protective efforts of mothers seeking freedom and safety.

While a board member of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Joan worked assiduously on behalf of the children of battered women. She was an advocate for federal legislation addressing DV custody. She crafted portions of the original iterations of the *Violence Against Women Act*. She worked to reform the *Uniform Child Custody Jurisdiction and Enforcement Act* to provide emergency jurisdiction for battered mothers and to expand the law’s protections to nonabused children accompanying battered mothers in flight for safety across state lines. She was one of the early organizers of the annual Battered Mothers’ Custody Conference, which celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2013. She participated in the *Battered Mothers’ Testimony Project* at its inception in 1999; the project undertook research to assess whether the Massachusetts family court system was acting in accordance with human rights standards and norms in select custody cases and to identify and promote the changes necessary to ensure that the family courts meet their human rights obligations. She addressed the U.S. Senate in 1996 on batterers and custody, as well as speaking at a White House briefing on *Protecting Children in Custody Disputes When One Parent Abuses the Other* that same year. She was an organizer of discourse on the

jeopardy to women and children in mediation of custody cases.

A member of the bars of Massachusetts, New York, and the District of Columbia, Joan has received awards for her work on custody by the Department of Justice in 1998, by the City of New York Human Resources Administration for her work on behalf of victims of domestic violence in 2000, by the Sunshine Lady Foundation for her work on violence against women in 2002, by the American Society of Criminology (2011), and a Lifetime Achievement Award by the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, National Organization for Men Against Sexism, and the Battered Mother's Custody Conference (2013). The *Joan Zorza Tribute Wall*, a virtual, Internet-based wall, was erected by EVAW, International in 2012 to symbolize the

support that Joan built for victims through her life's work.

Joan has been a liaison to the American Bar Association's Commission on Domestic Violence; an advisor to the International Association of Chiefs of Police; served on the boards of EVAW, International, the Legal Resource Center on Violence Against Women, and on the National and New York State Coalitions Against Domestic Violence.

One national leader notes: "Joan's words and writings always remind us that the experts are not in the courts and law enforcement agencies or victim service programs—the experts are the women who have the courage to hope for so much more for themselves and their children. We owe her great thanks for that clear vision."

Few of us experience the joy and struggle of life-partnership with a per-

son of equal passion about creating access to justice. Joan and Richard Zorza embody this unique personal and professional journey for justice for poor, violated, and disenfranchised people. Our debt is great to this incredible duo.

Joan is a consummate knitter. Needles and yarn accompanied her to the highest reaches of government, as well as to meetings with survivors. Multi-tasking, perhaps. Seemingly working the detail and complexity of her legal analysis into each line. Surely knitting her passion into each stitch. We honor and thank you, Joan, for your extraordinary productivity and unequalled passion for survivors, and wish you well in your retirement.