



Department of Justice



Office of Justice Programs

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JUSTICE DEPARTMENT HONORS **VICTIM ADVOCATE AND SURVIVOR WITH** **CRIME VICTIMS SPECIAL COURAGE AWARD**

WASHINGTON – The Justice Department’s Office for Victims of Crime, a division of the Office of Justice Programs, presented the Special Courage Award to Lavinia B. Masters, a victim advocate and sexual assault survivor. This National Crime Victims’ Service Awards category honors a victim or survivor who has shown exceptional perseverance or determination in dealing with his or her own victimization. It may also acknowledge one who has acted bravely to aid a victim or to prevent victimization.

“Ms. Masters is a powerful example of how someone can survive a horrific crime and use her experience to bring about justice for others,” said OJP Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General Katharine T. Sullivan. “By honoring her vital contributions, we focus national attention on the challenges facing sexual assault victims, many of whom have waited far too long for their cases to be resolved.”

As a 13-year-old, Ms. Masters was brutally raped at gunpoint by a stranger who broke into her home in Dallas, Texas. DNA testing was unavailable at that time, so physical evidence collected from her at the hospital sat idle for 20 years. Then, in 2004, Congress passed the Debbie Smith Act, which provided funds to improve DNA testing and reduce the backlog of sexual assault kits. The Dallas Police Department started a cold case program the following year, and Ms. Masters asked them to reopen her case. Police discovered a DNA match to a man already serving time in prison for other sexual assault convictions. However, her case could not be prosecuted because the statute of limitations had expired.

Instead of breaking her, that reality led Ms. Masters to tirelessly pursue for others the justice she had been denied. Her fight culminated with passage of the Lavinia Masters Act of 2019, a Texas law that aims to prevent backlogs of sexual assault kits, prohibit their premature destruction and extend statutes of limitations for certain crimes. She continues to encourage law enforcement to understand that, in her words, “these are lives that are sitting on [DNA backlog] shelves” and inspires hope through her involvement with HOPE S.A.V.E.S. Ministries.

“Ms. Masters illustrates that through courage and persistence, an act of evil can be drained of its power and redirected as a force for good,” said OVC Director Jessica E. Hart. “Her determination to serve victims and work for the justice they deserve inspires us all.”

The Department’s Office for Victims of Crime, a component of OJP, leads communities across the country in observing National Crime Victims’ Rights. President Reagan proclaimed the

first Victims' Rights Week in 1981, calling for greater sensitivity to the rights and needs of victims. This year's observance took place April 19-25 and featured the theme, "Seek Justice | Ensure Victims' Rights | Inspire Hope." The award recipients were honored privately and virtually with friends, family and Office of Justice Programs leadership.

The Office of Justice Programs, directed by Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General Katharine T. Sullivan, provides federal leadership, grants, training, technical assistance and other resources to improve the nation's capacity to prevent and reduce crime, assist victims and enhance the rule of law by strengthening the criminal and juvenile justice systems. More information about OJP and its components can be found at www.ojp.gov.

The year 2020 marks the 150th anniversary of the Department of Justice. Learn more about the history of our agency at www.Justice.gov/Celebrating150Years.

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