

## The Darkness of Rape to The Light of The Texas Women's Hall of Fame

What do you see when you look into the dark? Do you see what lies ahead of you or do you imagine what lurks behind you? Is darkness engrossed with our vibrant imagination or is darkness overshadowed with our greatest fears? Tell me, what is the purpose of darkness.

Why do our minds imagine the most unimaginable things in the dark. Why do we have an overwhelming sense of fear when we are in darkness? Why does darkness seem like a cursed thing to us all?

I once lived in darkness literally and in a figuratively sense. There was the darkness of being a child locked up in a boarded home by my mother's abuser and then there was the darkness of being a child growing up in a world consumed by sexual trauma. My darkness would not allow me to see the forest for the trees. My darkness would not allow me to see the colors in the rainbow. My darkness did not allow me to see the safety in loved ones, caregivers or friends. My darkness almost denied me the opportunity to see that the greatness in me still reigned beyond my obscured vision.

When we look at darkness, we tend to believe that darkness is the greater of our existence. I believe we fail to see our powers because we cannot see beyond the fear of the unknown while in the dark. We allow our imaginations to take us to a place that is unhealthy not only to our mental but our psychological, emotional, and eventually our physical being.

If we cannot see before us, we imagine that something is there to destroy us or maybe there is a possibility that we may fall into a pit that's deeper and darker than the darkness that we are already experiencing at the present time.

I can imagine that we believe that there are hands literally reaching out to grab us or even shake us in an attempt to take our lives. Then I would imagine that these same hands would wrap themselves around my face in an attempt to prevent me from screaming for help or even to stop me from breathing the very breath that I used to inhale and exhale.

Then if we allow our fear to get out of control there's the possibility that these imaginary hands, we don't see in the dark are there with weapons of mass destruction to take us down as we attempt walk on a path that we cannot see or that our enemy lies in that very darkness setting up snares or traps to destroy us from reaching our destiny.

Darkness can be very scary; darkness can be very intimidating and if we listen too hard darkness can be death.

This is the space I lived in for far too long as a little girl. This is a space that tried to permanently consume me after I was left alone not having any answers after my encounter with a brutal sexual assault at the age of 13 years old. It was in this space that I was sure there was a point of no return.

I had become complacent there. I had begun to find solace in the dark. The darkness had become my new normal. This is where I dwelled and this is where I thought I would die alone, afraid, abandoned and forgotten in the darkness.

The darkness is a place where I saw no light. This darkness was a world filled with boogeymen that had access to me in every hemisphere. This darkness was a tunnel that had no connection or end. This darkness is where I heard my heart beat faster than the speed of light. In this darkness I was more than afraid I was exhausted. This darkness not only had me in captivity as a victim, but it was in the same darkness that had my mind in a prison full of anxiety. Enclosed and pitch-black spaces is not a place where I could dwell because all I saw was darkness, and in darkness, all I knew was fear.

I hate it here!

I had to come out of this place so I made up my mind that I would rather sacrifice my life fighting to get to the light than dying alone and in despair in this darkness. I decided to fight for my vision, I decided I wanted to breathe, I was determined to live beyond this darkness.

This was the beginning of my journey, a pathway to healing and to the marvelous light. I had to believe in what my grandmother and mother had instilled within me and that was the hope to believe in something greater than me which was my faith. I had to turn to the ultimate light of GOD that also revealed to me that this same light was not only my power source but that it dwelled within me.

I had to affirm within myself that I was apart of the light and that I also had the capability of living beyond the darkness as well as the power to not only overcome it but to help rescue others from this same darkness. This was the beginning of my hope, and it grew into an insatiable desire to rid the world of darkness for all survivors of sexual trauma.

I had no idea where this light would lead me but I was willing to follow its path. The more exposure to the light the more was revealed to me. I became empowered, I became fearless, I was the epitome of confidence and courage was my creed.

I made the decision that all the darkness, loneliness, neglect, fear and every other traumatic emotion that I endured after sexual trauma although painful had a purpose and I was willing to fulfill it.

I knew that I had to be that voice that could scream loud enough for others that were trapped in their own darkness to hear me so that they could navigate their way beyond the darkness. I was

determined to shine my light so bright that if they didn't know how to access their light that they could follow me until their own light was revealed and illuminated. I had to go back, I had to shine my light, I had to save others trapped in the darkness.

I love it here!

When Governor Greg Abbott signed HB 8: The Lavinia Masters Act, into law in September 2019, I knew beyond a shadow of doubt that I was doing exactly what I was purposed to do! Although I am the namesake of this law, it was never about me because I knew that going back into the darkness that I could never prosecute or seek justice against my assailant. I went in knowing that with my rape kit sitting on the shelves for over 20 years that I had already missed 2 statute of limitations and even the possibility of not identifying my rapist had he not been in CODIS as a known felon. However, none of this mattered now because I had already found my light and was determined to go back and rescue others.

Many say that I was still denied justice but when I get to speak publicly to empower victims, serve in spaces or on boards such as Congress and or legislation as I advocate for victims and their justice, train and facilitate trauma informed and survivor centered agendas to law enforcement and various organizations, while knowing whom my rapist is, I would say that is my justice reward.

Then there are the accolades, recognitions and awards that I have received over the years that bring my heart so much joy, yet I still say that none of that really matters because I do not shine my light to be seen for personal recognition but to be seen as a beacon of hope for all survivors. However, it was the unexpected recognition of being inducted into the Texas Women's Hall of Fame that literally took my breath away.

I was born in Texas and love my State no matter the racial or any other disparities and disappointments that I have my have endured, Texas is my home, Texas is my birthright yet deep down I still felt that Texas did not see me or the light that I had within me as that 13-year-old girl that was brutally raped here. I had started to believe that Texas was part of the reason that my light could not fully shine because of how they treated and denied rape victims justice and the opportunity to shine their lights.

I was determined to continue to fight for others so that Texas could see them but didn't realize that I had become complacent with not knowing if they would ever really see my true light. Sure, there is the Lavinia Masters Act of 2019 but in my eyes that is for all survivors that come after me in the State of Texas so that they will never be denied justice again as they illuminate their lights to the world. I was pleased and still am excited about this law but still...

When I was inducted into the 2023 Texas Women's Hall of Fame, it was evident that Texas saw my light and was determined to help place it on that hill where it could never be hidden again! It was in this moment that Texas told me that they saw me alone on that shelf, they heard my cries, they even saw me going back and forth to rescue other Texas girls and that although they could never take back the trauma and pain that all this caused, they will forever make sure that my light is illuminated.

If you were to ask me what being inducted into the 2023 Texas Women's Hall of Fame means to me, I would honestly say that there are no words that I could possibly articulate for anyone to understand this moment in time. However, The Lavinia Masters Act of 2019 was for all of Texas, and I am honored to share that with my State but the induction into the 2023 Texas Women's Hall of Fame is for me and I will forever hold this honor in my heart.

My faith in Texas is gradually being restored in not because of what I do but because they see the lights of survivors and are willing to allow us to shine collectively. Texas allows survivors to fight on the battlefield alongside them to eradicate sexual violence, rape kits etc. and is working to illuminate or lights and voices. They understand that they must do better, as my fellow sister warrior, Tracey Matheson says and they are realizing that we, Texas, and survivors, are stronger together in this war of sexual violence.

Texas is my home; I was born here and when it is time for me leave my earthly body I wish to be laid to rest here as I know my light will continue to shine for all victims of sexual violence to see as they find the pathway from their own darkness.

#Laviniaspeaks

Lavinia Masters

Survivor/Advocate/Activist