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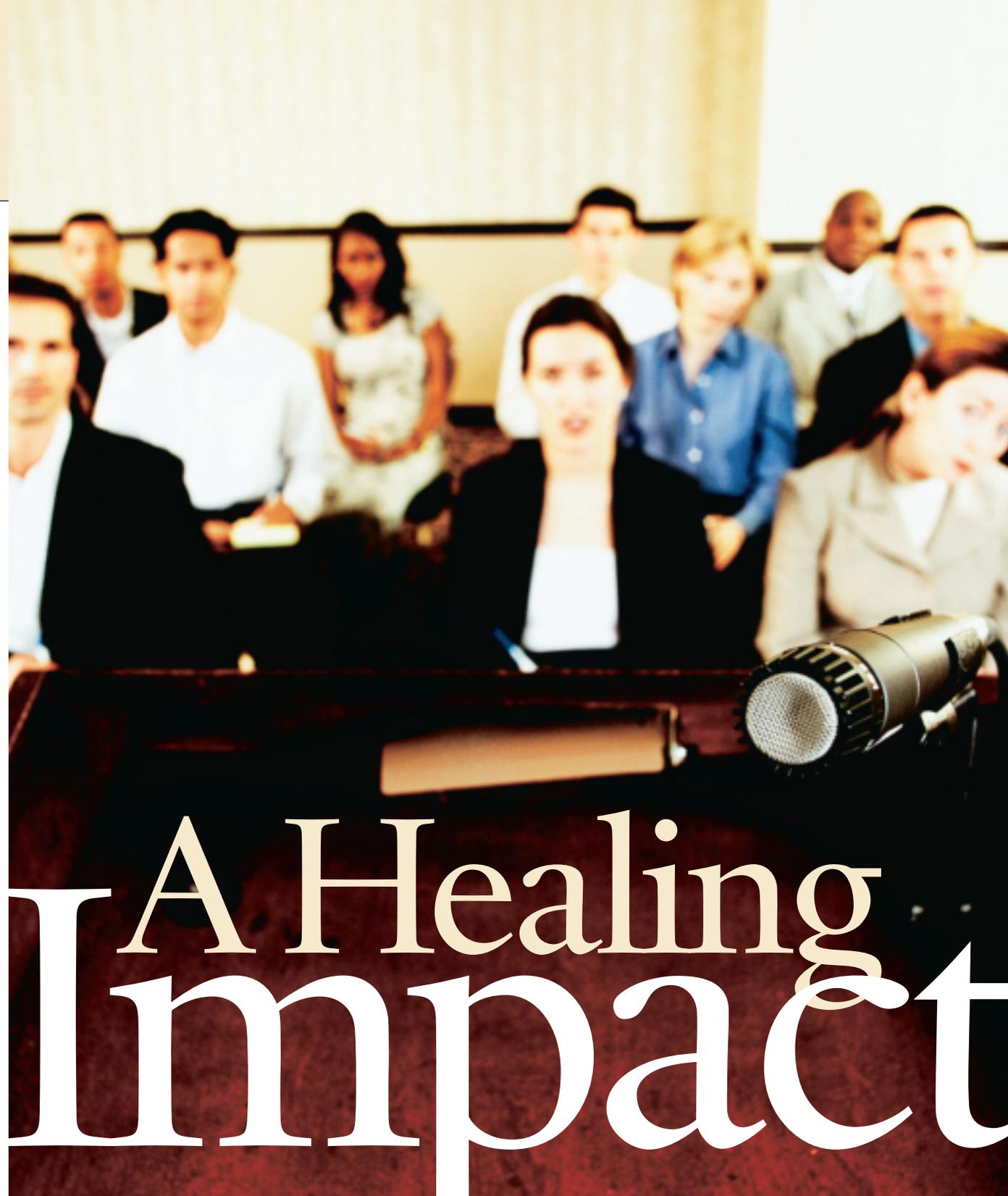
**Victim Awareness: Reading, Analyzing, and Writing
Victim Impact Statements**

1. Jane Mosher Victim Impact Statement
2. MADDvocate – A Healing Impact
3. MADDvocate – I Knew Before I Was Told
4. MADDvocate – Shattering of the Soul
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6. Madoff Victim Impact Statements - Ronnie Sue & Dominic Ambrosino
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As the men and women file into the room, V Mathews listens to their angry stomps reverberate off the hardwood floor. She observes them communicating silent but blatant irritation. And as they wait, she feels their resentment soak the room's atmosphere.

Given the mood of the crowd, it's hard to believe that V is going to speak about the deeply personal pain, grief and loss she experienced after her sons, Roger and Blake, were killed in two separate alcohol-related crashes. What's even more unbelievable is that she is going to tell her story to a room full of convicted drunk drivers who clearly do not want to hear what she has to say.

But V has been speaking on MADD Victim Impact Panels (VIPs) for more than 15 years, and she knows that most of these offenders will leave the room in a very different manner, some perhaps a different person than they were when they arrived. She also knows that, as a victim and survivor, she will leave with having taken another step in her healing journey.



A Healing Impact

Speaking on a Victim Impact Panel can be an important step in your healing journey

Healing Words

A VIP is a group of three or four victims who briefly tell convicted offenders stories of how their loved ones were killed or injured in drunk driving crashes, and they describe how their lives were affected by the crash.

Held in communities nationwide, VIPs are designed to individualize and humanize the consequences of drunk driving in an effort to change attitudes and deter impaired driving recidivism. But VIPs do something else—they give victims/survivors the opportunity to heal.

"I've found over the years that talking about it is healing," says Doty Smith of her experience speaking on a VIP about her 21-year-old daughter, Tammy, who was killed by a drunk driver in 1985. "It is helping to make a difference for somebody else. It gives me the chance to talk about Tammy, and it gives Tammy the opportunity to make a difference. As hard as it is to do this, I think it is healthy."

Anne Gleason, whose son Joseph was killed at the age of 23, agrees with Doty. "When victims speak at the panels, it's the only time our society allows us to truly express our feelings," she says in reference to the grief and loss she and other victims/survivors feel. "Our culture allocates a certain amount of time to 'get over it.' If we extend past that time, people think there is something wrong with us. But when we are doing a panel and go back to the day that hurt us so horribly, it's OK for us to show our feelings. It's the one

time that no one is saying to us, 'You have to get over this.'"

As difficult as it may be for victims/survivors to open their hearts to a group of court-ordered drunk driving offenders, VIP speakers are compassionate, honest and have a true desire to save lives.

"I feel like this is something I just need to do," V explains. "My goal is to get the drunk drivers off the road by getting them to realize how awful it is when someone is killed by a drunk driver."

"We are trying to get a message across," says Frank Patrylo, whose 19-year-old son Todd was killed in a 2000 crash. "We don't want any other family to go through this—including the drunk driver's family."

But to get their message across, speakers are careful not to assign blame or pass judgment. They simply tell their stories.

"I don't dwell on the wrong thing [offenders] have done," V explains. "Through my story, I want them to see how dangerous it is to drink and drive and how it impacts people."

Doty says, "By being kind and compassionate and helping them understand what drunk driving really does, they are better able to relate to the message."

Overcoming Anger

As meaningful and important as VIPs are for victims/survivors, they can take an emotional toll. Oddly enough, this is one of the healing aspects VIPs offer.

The reality of the panels is that victims/survivors are in front of a

group of people who drove drunk—the very thing that caused the person to kill or injure their loved one. Because of this, many speakers struggle with anger.

“The first time I spoke on a panel, I wanted to spit on every offender in the room,” Frank recalls.

Debi Salzman of Quincy, Ill., can relate to Frank’s feelings. “I truly hated them. I felt like every person in the audience had no right to be free,” Debi says of her crushing anger toward drunk drivers after losing her niece, Sarah, and brother-in-law, Dale, in a 1994 crash and her other brother-in-law, Don, in a 2001 crash.

Despite their consuming rage, both Frank and Debi acted appropriately by not expressing their anger toward offenders.

“If you get up there and say, ‘You are no good, you are a bad person,’ they are going to shut you off, they won’t listen,” Doty says. “And that defeats the whole purpose.”

Hiding that anger, however, can be difficult and draining, and worst of all, it can impede the healing process. By speaking on the panels, both Debi and Frank were able to gain a different perspective. This new viewpoint allowed them to gradually let go of their anger. And as the anger diminished, they were able to take the next step in their own healing journeys.

“Until I started with the panels, I didn’t realize I had become a person who was so full of hate. It was so bad that I had a wall, a barrier, up because I didn’t want ‘those kind of people’ [offenders] near me. I know that sounds terrible, but that’s what I had done,” Debi

acknowledges. “But each time I would do a panel, even if it was a handful of people, I could see they were getting it, they were seeing the real effects of drinking and driving. That’s what kept me going.

“I am healing. If I have anger now, I use it in a positive way. And when [offenders] come up to hug me after speaking, I can truly hug them back. I do not have that hate inside of me. I really just want them to be better,” Debi says.

“I came to realize that they aren’t bad people. They are just people who made a bad decision,” Frank says. “I began to see that I am speaking to help them to not make the same bad decision.”

Reliving the Tragedy

V Mathews says she never experienced the anger Debi and Frank experienced, but she has struggled with reliving the pain and anguish of her tragedy each time she speaks.

“Every time I talk, I relive it all over again,” V says about the two separate crashes that killed two of her sons. “I see my son dying in my arms. I see my other son when I identified his body. It’s like I am there.”

While it is emotionally taxing to relive the details of the tragedy, speakers find they are strengthened each time they tell their stories.



“The first time I spoke on a panel, it brought back so many memories, things I hadn’t thought about in a long time. I went home and cried all night,” V remembers. “It dug up a lot of hurt, but it’s something I needed to do. Talking on the panels has lessened the hurt.”

For speakers new to VIPs, it is important to expect and be prepared for memories and feelings to resurface. For those who have been speaking for a while, it is critical to find a balance between the past and present as to not hinder or even reverse the healing process.

“Now, what I do after speaking to get rid of the ‘living in the moment’ of it all, is close it off like closing a big garage door,” V says. “I shut the door and leave it behind.”

Seeing the Other Side

Many victims/survivors have experienced significant healing, ironically enough, from speaking on panels with offenders. But at first blush, a victim/survivor may not think that the experience could be a positive one.

“When I found out an offender was speaking on the panel, I didn’t want to go. I didn’t want to be on the panel with someone I perceived as a very bad person,” Debi recalls of her first experience of speaking on a panel with an offender.

“I was surprised by my reaction, because I had come so far in working past the anger. But I was very offended, and I didn’t want to be on the ‘same side’ that he was on. I was also fearful that I wasn’t going to be able to show him respect.”

Despite her reservations, Debi took the stage with Richard Cox*, an offender who killed his friend while driving drunk.

“When I got up on the stage with Richard, I was full of hate and anger for him. I did not want to be around him,” Debi says. “I got off that stage a completely different person.

“When Richard was telling his story, you could see that he couldn’t stand himself for what he had done. He could barely get his story out. Tears were rolling down his face. His words were so heartfelt. He was just so full of pain

*Name has been changed.



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and remorse. I knew his heart was hurting as much as mine had ever hurt. I just wanted to get up and hug him.”

Afterward, the panel speakers got together to debrief. Debi immediately went to Richard.

“I told him, ‘You’ve healed me in a way that I’ve not been able to. I truly get the whole picture now. I have not felt this good in my heart in so long.’

“I realized that he will always have what he did with him, it is not going away,” Debi says. “He truly thought he was OK to drive, and that is what we need to get across to people—three or four beers and you are not OK. He is angry at the choice he made, and he has to live with it.”

For nearly two decades, Marshal Gurd has been living with the fact that he killed his friend Anne Gleason’s son, Joseph. Though it was three years ago that they first spoke together on a VIP, Anne remembers it vividly.

“Beforehand, I told Marshal that it may hurt him to hear what I have to say, but I won’t change it because that is what happened,” Anne recalls. “I had no idea what he would say and, honestly, I was worried that he might say something that was offensive to me. I was also bracing myself to hear one of the many excuses offenders use.

“When it was his turn to speak, he held up a picture of Joseph and pointblank said, ‘I am the man who murdered Joseph.’ It was heartfelt and there was absolutely no denial.”

In that moment, Anne says she truly saw Marshal’s pain and knew he was not a bad person. Moments later, the shock of hearing him admit to killing her son sunk in; Anne broke down and cried.

“It was so important for me to hear that,” Anne says. “It meant so much to me because I knew that Joseph really mattered; that I wasn’t the only one who cared. I needed to hear that Joseph mattered to Marshal.”

The more Anne and Marshal spoke together, the more Anne healed.

“For a long time, I asked, ‘Why did Joseph have to die? He was such a good person,’” Anne says of her son. “Marshal said to me one day, ‘I would give anything for it to have been me who died that day, but if it was me, no one would have cared enough to go out and speak like you do. If I was killed, I would just be dead. But Joseph has done some good.’

“I will always love and miss Joseph, and I still would give anything to have him with me today. But knowing something good came of it, I am finally OK with the fact that Marshal lived and Joseph died,” Anne says.

Witnessing the Impact

Speaking on a VIP will not help someone magically heal from the death or injury of a loved one—nothing can do that. But VIPs can offer victims/survivors the opportunity to take important steps in their healing journeys, and at the core of those steps is saving lives.

That’s why V Mathews endures those angry stomps, the glares of irritation and the air of resentment.

“You can literally see the impact. When [offenders] are leaving the room, it is very quiet. Many of them are hanging their heads. Some are crying. Several come up to hug me, thank me and tell me that they never realized they could hurt someone else,” V says.

Then there are those offenders who are beside themselves with remorse. They are the ones who leave the room a different person than when they came in. They are also the ones who will not drink and drive again.

“My satisfaction and healing comes from those who look me in the eyes and say, ‘I promise, I will never do this again—you can count on it,’” Doty says.

“By doing the Victim Impact Panels, I am at least making sure I am doing as much as I can so someone else doesn’t have to go through what I did,” Anne says. “That is one of the most healing things to me. In the very beginning, I was doing the panels for Joseph. Then it was for me. Now it is for them.”

To learn more about becoming a VIP speaker, contact your local MADD chapter. ■

THE DO'S AND DON'TS

Telling an Effective VIP Story

Do

- Tell the facts of what happened.
- Express how the death or injury affected your life.
- Keep your story to 10 to 15 minutes.
- Use appropriate visual aids.
- Speak from the heart.

Don't

- Quote statistics.
- Express opinions about the criminal or civil justice system.
- Blame or accuse the audience.
- Use graphic or gruesome photos.
- Over-rehearse your story.