Reading 2

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
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6. Madoff Victim Impact Statements - Ronnie Sue & Dominic Ambrosino
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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. 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 Dotty 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 Dotty. “When victims speak at the panels, it’s the only time our community 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 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 things (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.”

Dotty 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

\[by Michelle Parker, Editor in Chief\]
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 get to say something to every offender in the room,” Frank recalls.

Debi Salzman of QuinCY, Ill., can relate to Frank’s feelings. “I truly tried to reach them. I felt like every person in the audience had no right to be free.” Debi noted that crashing 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 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,” Dotty 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 in the panel, 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, because I didn’t even want ‘those kinds of people’ (offenders) near me. I know that sounds terrible, but that’s what I had done,” Debi acknowledges. “But each time I would go to a panel, even if it was a handful of people, I could see through them, they were seeing the real effects of drinking and driving. That’s what kept me going. I was 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 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.

For nearly two decades, Marshal Gund 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 want it changed 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 grasping 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 pointed blank, ‘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 just that day, but if it was me, no one would have cared enough to go out and speak like you do. If it was me, I would just be dead. But Joseph has done some good— I will always love and miss Joseph, and I will still want 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 some one 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 savings lives.

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

“You can’t take away the impact. When (offenders) are leaving the room, it is very quiet. Many of them are having their heads down and they’re 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 as 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,’” Dotty 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 last thing, 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.

* Time has been changed.