

# 'I suffered in silence for 12 years': Rape survivor helps black women talk about sexual violence

[philly.com/health/black-women-sexual-assault-laquisha-anthony-20190311.html](https://philly.com/health/black-women-sexual-assault-laquisha-anthony-20190311.html)

by [Aneri Pattani](#), Updated: March 11, 2019



*This story is part of [Made in Philly](#), a series about young residents shaping local communities.*

After LaQuisha Anthony was raped in college, she didn't tell anyone.

Black girls don't talk about this, she thought. Sure, she'd heard Oprah Winfrey's and Maya Angelou's stories of childhood abuse, but their experiences were in a different time.

In 2001, Anthony had no role model to show her a path forward. She was convinced she was alone.

"When you see someone like you who has moved through it and their life has gotten better, it gives you hope," said Anthony, now 36 and living in South Philadelphia. "Not having that, I had no hope."

Nearly two decades later, Anthony has become that hope for others.

Through her nonprofit called V.O.I.C.E. (Victory Over Inconceivable Cowardly Experiences), Anthony works to elevate the stories of black women and girls, who are more likely to face sexual violence, research shows, yet less likely to speak out or be believed when they do.

"I suffered in silence for 12 years," Anthony said. "I don't want nobody to experience that long stretch of suffering."

National statistics show that black women are more likely than other women to be raped, killed by a partner, or sexually abused as a child. Yet adults view black girls as less in need of protection than white girls, according to a 2017 study published by Georgetown Law. And a University of Michigan study found college students perceive black victims of sexual assault to be less believable and more responsible for their assault than white victims.

That comes from generations of racist stereotypes that black women are sexually immoral, said Carolyn West, professor of psychology at the University of Washington Tacoma and author of the book *Violence in the Lives of Black Women*.

"For most of our country's history, sexual assault and sexual violence against black women was not even a crime," she said. "We live with the remnants in a number of ways."

For every black woman who reports her rape, at least 15 black women don't, according to the nonprofit End Rape on Campus.

And though the recent Lifetime docuseries about singer R. Kelly raised the stories of some black women to a national platform, West said, the MeToo movement has largely focused on the voices of powerful white women.

Anthony is trying to change the narrative by sharing her story, mentoring black teens, and working with her pastor to bring sexual-assault awareness to church, one of the most trusted institutions in her community.

It's hardly a future she saw for herself at age 19.

In the months after her assault, Anthony didn't want anyone to know. "I would have taken the story to my grave," she said.

The trauma would follow her for an additional 10 years.

"Sexual assault, particularly when it goes unaddressed, can have profound mental and physical health effects across the lifespan," said West, from high rates of sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancies to high blood pressure and increased risk of suicide.

## Therapy plus God

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For years after the assault, Anthony drove home on I-95. Every day she'd imagine swerving off the bridge.

Yet something always stopped her from turning the wheel.



Kristen Balderas / Staff Photographer

LaQuisha Anthony attends a Sunday service at Catalyst Church.

Eventually, in 2011, she was ready to seek therapy.

She worked with a psychologist at Women Organized Against Rape (WOAR) for nearly a year. In 2012, the therapist suggested Anthony tell her story at an event the organization was hosting.

Reluctantly, Anthony agreed.

She was shaking as she stepped up to the mic. Her mom was in the crowd. So was former Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter.

But once the words came out, things started to shift, Anthony said. "People came up to me and said they were really inspired and encouraged because I shared. And I was like, 'Really?' "

For the first time, her story was empowering, not shameful.

For the next two years, life continued as usual. Then one day in 2014 Anthony visited Catalyst Church in West Philadelphia.

As she walked in, the pastor happened to be preaching about support for survivors of rape and molestation -- a topic she'd never heard clergy broach in more than 30 years attending church. "It was groundbreaking to me," she recalled.

Anthony joined the church immediately and enrolled in a yearlong mentorship program the pastor was running for people looking to start a business. That's when the idea for her nonprofit took shape.



Kristen Balderas / Staff Photographer

LaQuisha Anthony speaks about her work with V.O.I.C.E. at Catalyst Church, as her pastor Keon Gerow applauds.

Since then, Anthony and her pastor have worked together to hold several events around sexual assault. They invited WOAR, where Anthony now works as an education and training specialist, to give a presentation during Sunday service, and held a community event to discuss the R. Kelly docuseries.

"A lot of us in the African American community, we don't necessarily speak about our issues," Anthony said. "But we will pray about them."

So church can be the avenue to start a conversation on an often taboo subject.

“As a pastor, I stand in a position where people believe and trust me,” said Keon Gerow, Anthony’s pastor. “And I want victims to know they’re not alone.”

That doesn’t mean prayer solves everything, he said. God works through mental health professionals too.

That’s why Anthony’s motto has always included both. It’s what she credits with keeping her from driving off the bridge: “Therapy plus God.”

## ‘Helping my girlfriend out’

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For the last five years, Anthony has mentored teenage girls through Mothers in Charge, a nonprofit focused on violence prevention. At a recent mentoring session, she led a group activity for six girls, asking them to stand whenever a statement applied to them.

“You’ve ever gone on a diet,” Anthony said. Three girls stood up.

“You’ve ever not felt pretty.” Four girls stood up, nudging one another and giggling.

This was a break for them, a chance to get off the grounds of Carson Valley School in Flouertown, where most were in mandated residential placement after fighting in school or skipping class.

Kristen Balderas / Staff Photographer

LaQuisha Anthony sits at the head of a table at Mothers in Charge where for the last five years she has mentored teenage girls.

“You’ve ever been harassed or whistled at in public.” Every girl stood up. “Every day,” one commented.

“You’ve ever been hit by a man,” Anthony said. In silence, every girl rose to her feet.

A 2012 report found up to 60 percent of black women are subjected to coercive sexual contact by the age of 18.

It’s widespread yet hardly discussed, Anthony said. Which means sometimes it gets normalized.

When she leads trainings on consent and healthy relationships at high schools, Anthony often finds girls don’t realize what they’ve experienced is assault.

“By me educating, I can see lightbulbs going off: ‘Oh my gosh, I had this experience,’” she said.

Anthony hopes her work with youth can help combat that. In mentoring sessions, she talks about self-esteem and encourages girls to make vision boards for their future.

“It’s about showing them their life can be more than what they’ve seen or what they’ve endured,” Anthony said.



MARGO REED / Staff Photographer

LaQuisha Anthony shows her vision board to a teenage girl at a V.O.I.C.E. event.

For 14-year-old Tajhuana Harris, self-esteem is a skill she’s constantly working to improve.

“Every time I leave [mentoring], I practice and I write it down,” she said.

After two months of writing positive thoughts about herself, Harris said she’s starting to believe she’s smart and beautiful.

It’s a skill adults need to practice too, Anthony said.

At a recent V.O.I.C.E. event, Anthony had women write on a CD all the negative things they’d been told, things that stuck in their minds like a song on repeat.

Anthony’s CD read: *skinny, damaged, not enough.*

Others wrote: *stupid, ugly, worthless, too dark, too many baby daddies.*

Then they snapped the CDs into pieces, sending the satisfyingly loud cracking noise reverberating through the room and startling people down the hall.



MARGO REED / Staff Photographer

LaQuisha Anthony comforts Nandi Slocumb during a V.O.I.C.E. event focused on healing and creating vision boards.

With small acts like this, “LaQuisha’s raising up other black women and other leaders,” said Tiffany Gillespie, Anthony’s friend who attended the event.

Sometimes Anthony will send a girl an Uber to get to her counseling appointment or buy a woman a flight to escape sexual abuse at home.

“It’s just me helping my girlfriend out,” Anthony said. “And saying, ‘Girl, you can make it because I made it too.’”

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