A career of tough cases turns a lawyer into a champion for the elderly, just like her mother.

In the midst of my raging adolescence in 1978, my mother was devoting most of her time to a Jewish nursing home in Baltimore where she was the board president.

I would come home after school, make instant mashed potatoes, settle into the comfort of our gray velour sofa and watch "General Hospital," enraptured. Family dinner often included stories about Mom's afternoon with the old people. In her mind, the elderly were to be revered as the bearers of history, lives lived and lessons learned; in my self-centered, adolescent thinking, old people were fragile, needy and dying. I felt more connected to soap stars like Luke and Laura than to aged Jewish grandmothers. I told myself that I'd never end up working in a nursing home like her. No way.

Fast-forward: college, law school, 1989, the big city.

New prosecutors in the Manhattan district attorney's office think on their feet. Three weeks of training, and I was in court, facing judges and defense lawyers, asking for bail, holding hearings, trying cases. In those days, each case had its own paper file. Barely five feet tall, I would walk across Centre Street to court, my arms laden with overstuffed files, often carrying many of my 200 misdemeanor cases.

I volunteered for family violence cases. Most of the victims of family violence are

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female. Many are powerless and voiceless in their relationships. Deeply shamed, I
wanted to appear steady and bold as I guided them through one of the most challenging
experiences of their lives. I wondered if they could tell that I was sometimes scared —
and uncertain whether I would be able to secure the protection that they sought.

It was imperative that I keep a safe emotional distance from the victims, but it
was far from easy. Sometimes I imagined quitting my job and working at the makeup
counter at Bloomingdale’s, where I could help women feel happy and beautiful.

Later, I spent two years in the child abuse unit. That work was heart-wrenching
on a daily basis, as I dealt with traumatized children who often had limited resources
for healing. I just wasn’t cut out for that job. I also worked in the Special Prosecutions
Unit, and it was there I was assigned to my first elder abuse case. Few assistants
wanted to work with older victims, but as it turns out, I was drawn to them.

Older adults, primarily victimized by their adult children or grandchildren and
often frail with some kind of cognitive impairment, can make terrible witnesses. It’s
those same factors that make them such vulnerable prey.

Like L., an 83-year-old retired teacher
struggling with diabetes. Her adult son,
Johnny, had untreated depression and a
cocaine habit. Over decades, he had physically,
financially, and psychologically abused her. With the encouragement of her pastor,
L. called the police from the hospital where she was being treated for a broken hip
caused by his most recent assault.

With the support of the pastor, a caring
detective and me, L. courageously testified
before a grand jury, and Johnny was
indicted. A temporary order of protection
was issued against him, requiring him to
stay away from his mother.

When Johnny was released shortly
after his arraignment, he returned home and
begged his mother to let him inside. From the
hallway, in the slender opening held secure
by the door chain, he told her he was sorry.
He’d get help. Feeling fear, resignation
and love, she let him in. Months later,
because of her steadfast refusal to coopera
te and testify against him, People v. L.
was dismissed and sealed.

I was disillusioned that such a gaping
hole in the system had allowed this to happen.
Here was a son who had no easy access
to treatment and a mother who had few
options. I was helpless to act without a witness
or other corroborating evidence. Would L.’s
story have ended differently if she’d had a
safe place to go after the hospital?

Not so green anymore, I struggled with
my role as a prosecutor to push cases for-
ward, and with my growing awareness of
a legal system inadequately designed to
address the aftermath of family violence,
particularly against frail, cognitively im-
paired older adults.

I have found a different
way to respond to elder abuse.
I am in solution mode, not
wading in exasperation.

IT’S EASY to look away from older people
in a society that prizes youth, but I was be-
coming more compelled to pay attention.
As I continued my work with older victims,
I noticed both of my grandmothers’ diffi-
cult experiences in navigating their once
independent lives. One had dementia, the
other heart disease. I listened more closely
to their stories, and to their complaints
about becoming invisible in a world ob-
sessed with youth. Their medical and emo-
tional vulnerabilities, despite the loving
families that supported them, challenged
me to be more empathetic to the challenges
of aging, disease and victimization.

Both of my grandmothers died about
the same time that I lost touch with L., and I
wondered how I could be a voice for this
marginalized population.

In 1989, with two babies at home and an
interest in part-time work, I took a job
at the nonprofit Pace Women’s Justice
Center in White Plains, which provides legal
service to victims and survivors of domestic
violence. I managed its Elder Abuse Unit,
including answering calls on the help line.

It was not one shocking story, but many
lives of quiet desperation that continued
to influence me. Like a call I took on the
help line in which a confused older adult,
unwilling to tell me her name, explained
that she was terrified of her grandson, who
had moved in three months earlier. He was
taking money from her wallet, pawnimg
jewelry he had stolen from her and coming
home “crazy and high on something.” What
could she do? She did not feel safe at home.
Because she was too old and ill for a dom-
estic violence shelter, there were no good
solutions. Again, I experienced frustration
— there I was, the seemingly experienced
lawyer, with no options to offer her.

Fifteen years on the front lines of fam-
ily violence can lead you either to see a
solid brick wall or to discover one of its tiny
cracks where light sneaks through. Fortu-
nately, in 2004, my world came full circle,
and I was able to help start a dedicated
shelter for elder abuse victims located in a
nursing home.

Elder abuse victims often enter the shel-
ter in crisis, with just the clothes on their
back, no money and no access to their finan-
cial information. Some become long-term
residents, finding friendship, romance,
love; some are reunited with family mem-
bers lost after years of isolation and abuse.
They are safe here, and seen.

Since those early days of navigating bro-
ken systems and trying to fix giant prob-
lems with tiny Band-Aids, I have found a
different way to respond to elder abuse.
I am in solution mode, not wading in exas-
peration; that could have shattered me.

Yes, I still see signs of abuse and deep
suffering. But now, in a nursing home that I
used to think was reserved for people to die,
it’s a place to begin again.

I recently spent time alone with my
mother, now a widow of 20 years, and we
talked about some of her thoughts and wish-
es as she grows older. Despite my years of
talking to older adults about very difficult
things, this conversation was particularly
tough. My mom loves being part of a com-
community and is certain that if she needs help,
she doesn’t want to be home alone with an
aide. She would rather be in assisted living
or a nursing home.

And now, at dinner with my husband
and my own teenage daughters, I tell stories
about the fierce grace I see in the older peo-
ple at the shelter, the same way my mother
talked about that nursing home years ago.
In a profound way, I have come home.