

# “Justice is Truth in Action”

Kelsey McKay, member of FAUSA and founder of the non-profit organization RESPOND Against Violence, tells us about her work in the field.



**Kelsey McKay**

I was born in Florida, where both of my parents grew up. We quickly moved to Texas, then Australia (where we lived in Sydney and Perth), then England and Boston. In 1990 our family moved to Jakarta, Indonesia where we lived for eight years until I graduated from high school. I attended the Jakarta International School starting in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade and was lucky to have a hold on moving through the end of high school. We would generally come home for three months during the summer, where I would get a taste of American life—going to the beach and making up dance

routines with my cousins, shopping at a mall, and going to the same summer camp year after year. It was at that camp many years later that I met my husband. I always loved feeling like a typical American kid for a few months every year, but I always knew that I was different than everyone else because of the other nine months.

## Leaving home

I left Indonesia after graduating from high school and moved to Austin, Texas, where I attended the University of Texas. It was an odd transition because while I looked like many of the girls around me, I couldn't have been more different. I had never worn makeup, I didn't know what a sorority or khaki shorts were, and I wore flip-flops year-round.

During college, I really became engaged in learning and consuming information and processing my perspective and thoughts. I never took extracurriculars like sports or art—I always used extra hours to take classes or seminars that would make me think: epidemiology, presidential elections, the rhetoric of utopia, political philosophy, and so on.

## Finding my passion

I struggled early on, not quite knowing what to study, trying economics, special education, journalism, government, statistics, and psychology. There was no major for changing the world, but I did manage to graduate with honors with a psychology degree where I focused on research, statistics, and how they were used to impact social issues. At the time, I didn't realize that I had fallen into what would be my career.



Me aged about four

## Today

I live in Austin, Texas, with my husband, Jared and an (almost) 11-year daughter and (almost) nine-year-old son. After college, I was grateful to stay in Austin for law school, and then I just never left. In 2005 I started working as a prosecutor and spent the next 12 years navigating the world of criminal justice and learning everything I could about violent crime, trauma and became a subject-matter expert in asphyxiation-related crimes. Somewhere during that time (2010 and 2012), we had two children and started a real estate and renovation business! In the seven years before COVID-19 I was traveling a few times a month across the country, training and consulting with different agencies.

## What is justice?

This is a question I ask a lot when I'm training police officers, attorneys or advocates—all who work to achieve justice. For me, personally, it means the validation of truth. The tagline for the non-profit **RESPOND Against Violence** I recently started is: "Justice is truth in action." It's difficult because it seems like such a simple concept, and an achievable goal—but with an uneven playing field that punishes survivors, it's hard to do.

## Getting involved

At first, I thought becoming a prosecutor was essentially a way to do volunteer work that I was passionate about but have benefits, a paycheck, and be an adult. I was doing "justice" every day, on every case to the best of my ability. Some days seemed more significant than others, like trials or verdicts that sent murderers, rapists, or child abusers to prison. But I started to see that my involvement or a verdict was not nearly as impactful on a victim or the broken system that I was working in. Over the years, I started to see routine injustice and failures that were ignored over and over again at the cost of people and



With my family



Me with RESPOND colleagues

lives. At first, I always believed that victims were only hurt by criminals who abused them. In time, I learned that punishment often came from the trauma of the system that failed to protect them in a meaningful way.

I spent years working on the local level, trying to fix the failures one by one, only to discover that most parts of the criminal legal system are very resistant to change on the systemic level. When I left prosecution, I was worried about the survivors that might not get justice but knew that meaningful change just could not occur one case at a time.

## Different perspectives

I love learning about a different perspective. I've been lucky to be able to focus a lot of my energy on the very specific topic of strangulation and asphyxiation-related crimes, which has also forced me to understand the issues and challenges that surround this often-misunderstood type of violence. It has forced me to learn about aspects of crime that I would never have navigated. My expertise in the area has also given me the opportunity to think about the topic from every perspective. When you walk into an auditorium full of doctors, or police officers, or army generals, or defense attorneys, you have to understand their perspective to be able to teach them.

Fifteen years ago, I discovered an issue: our community was not responding to strangulation crimes in a uniform or informed way. Since then, I've talked to anyone who would listen. First our cadet academy, then our paramedics and eventually the ERs, probation and parole boards, people on the plane next to me, and anyone who dares to sit next to me at a dinner party. As I



on topics like crime, gender, and race, we have first to be informed by truth and accept that the reality for one person is not necessarily the experience of another. If we listen more, understand others, we can work together on issues. There is so much division in the world, and conversations are the bridge to working together.

I worry that we don't have enough voices on our side, and I'm discouraged that gender-based violence is seen as just a women's issue—because women can't make men stop abusing them. Only men can do that. But I find good men are often defensive on the topic. What I have discovered, through years of training in a male-dominated culture (policing) is simply that men don't live in the same world as I do. Men don't fear women the way women fear men. So when the first responder to a gender-based crime is a male with a gun—there is an automatic barrier, and it is the role of an officer (not a traumatized victim) to try to bridge that gap.

found solutions, I have traveled the country to help the criminal system better respond to these crimes. Seeing that the same problem exists everywhere allows the solutions I've developed to be utilized universally.

### Rewarding aspects

One of the most rewarding aspects has been conversations with survivors, especially those who exist in a world of sexual exploitation. Those conversations and relationships provide me an understanding of a world that originally motivated me to do this work. Growing up in Southeast Asia, I often saw children and women in vulnerable positions but lacked insight into how complex the situation was for them. It is the predators behind the shadows that force them to the front. Until we see in those shadows, we will continue to punish survivors. Talking to survivors and learning from them has taught me how to create policies that support safety rather than punish survival.

### What's next?

I hope the future holds a generation that prioritizes humanity and equality despite appearance and circumstances. I hope we see change that provides the vulnerable with a more consistent and reliable system to live in a safe world for themselves and their children. I'm encouraged by my colleagues around me, who I have found over the years who speak the same language as me and fight for justice in new ways.

I often encounter defensiveness on issues where conversations and perspectives are the solutions. The way we speak to each other in this world becomes too adversarial (similar to the court system) and builds walls rather than bridges. Headlines are rarely informative or an effort to change the hearts and minds of society and encourage division and judgment. To shift culture

### Injustices that I see

After seeing thousands of people victimized by violence and working with both survivors and those charged with crimes, I learned that the criminal legal system does not fulfill this definition. People are often defined by a defendant or a victim—without any context of their experience. As a result, victims who struggle to live through their situation are often criminalized for surviving. I see predators manipulate law enforcement, communities and judges and worry that our current system often empowers them by punishing victims. We need to humanize populations who face adversity and struggle, due to trauma, and penalize actual offenders who are



Giving a presentation



With my daughter

Before COVID-19, I was traveling about 50% of the time. Since then, my days are a variation of helping a prosecutor, colleague, or police officer with a case; supporting a survivor or a family member understand the reality of the system they entered; meeting with colleagues from around the country to develop forward-thinking approaches, training, or policies; building power points; presenting virtually to conferences or communities; working on a variety of publications to make sure that practitioners have evidence-based research to support their work; making a smoothie; making sure the kids are alive; zoom meetings; taskforce meetings; reading journal articles; working on curriculums; scheduling conferences; creating resources without funding; trying to keep up with emails, requests; getting a phone call to deal with an emergency; making sure the kids did school; figuring out what to do for dinner. And then watching America's Got Talent with the kids, and we all crash. Once in a while, I have time to wash my hair. Other days I use dry shampoo.

dangerous and pose a risk to our safety. Right now, we see anyone who commits any type of crime as a criminal rather than making a distinction between people and dangerous criminals. As a result, survivors get caught up in the penal system as they navigate survival.

The issues are layered and we have a system that silos every topic rather than dealing with the complexity. The root cause of addiction, homelessness and so many other issues is domestic violence and yet the conversation about prevention and accountability for that crime still remains silent.

Policy needs to be evidence-based so that we can solve real problems with authentic solutions. Otherwise, we are just making the same mistakes over and over again and calling it a solution. When justice is attached to politics, power, or money – I see this all the time – avoiding transparency and accountability cover-up truth and progress. At RESPOND Against Violence, we hope to create sustainable change through proven practice.

### A typical day for me

My days are absolute chaos. My eyes open and my immediate hope is that my body rested and slept well enough to take on the day. Regardless of the reality, the morning starts with coffee and a few deep breaths. I've almost stopped watching the news but usually wake up around 2:00 a.m. for an hour and read Heather Cox Richardson's historical review of the day. I get a sweet kiss and smile from my son, an early bird, and I get to work. I always dream of taking things off my to-do list but rarely end the day with anything checked off. There hasn't been a day in the last five years that I've been able to read every email, text, or voicemail.

