

Andrea Worden Scholarship for Tenacity and Timeless Grace

My path to a college degree has been anything but conventional. I have triumphed through multiple tribulations marked by shame and victimization. The painful conditions I endured as both a defendant and victim have enhanced my character. Sexual violence has been an unfortunate and devastating factor of my childhood, teenage and young adult years, yet I am using my testimony to make positive impacts.

According to data from RAINN, someone in the United States is sexually assaulted every 68 seconds, and every nine minutes the victim is a child. Studies from the CDC indicate the estimated lifetime cost of rape to a victim is \$122,461, and for childhood sexual abuse survivors, the average lifetime cost is \$282,000. Experiencing rape as a teen severely affected my mental health, causing PTSD and leaving me feeling worthless and suicidal. My primary means of support was a youth female survivor support group, which helped me feel less alone. I also found comfort and empowerment through academic and athletic achievement, advocacy, and volunteering.

While in high school, two organizations became essential to my self-preservation and development: Breaking the Silence New Mexico and the City of Albuquerque's Mayor's Youth Advisory Council. Both focused on awareness of mental health and suicide prevention. I took pride in developing a curriculum on mental health education and volunteering as a mental health advocate in dozens of schools. Additionally, I participated as a keynote speaker at numerous professional development conferences for health, social work, and education professionals. One of my proudest accomplishments was my participation as a cast member and expert in the Emmy-winning documentary film, "*Mental Health: Youth, Families and Communities*," directed by Chris Schueler. Another was placing first in the 2015 Junior USATF State Meet in the 100m, 200m, and 400m dashes, and second in the Great Southwest Championship 100m dash—just a year after surviving sexual violence and a suicide attempt. These achievements demonstrated perseverance in its purest form: using trauma not as a barrier, but as fuel for relentless drive.

Upon graduating high school in 2018, my opportunities and support seemed to fade. I completed a certificate program in Early Childhood Education and worked full-time. However, I judged myself harshly, comparing my widening gaps in achievement to my seemingly more successful peers. I once again felt vulnerable and hopeless. This low vibrational energy, paired with existing trauma, attracted disloyal friendships, abusive partners, and subjected me to further violence. Trauma cost me my job and jeopardized my financial security. Eventually, I was left homeless and impoverished.

My first day on the streets, I was offered a three-day motel voucher by a police officer. Seeing it as my safest route, I accepted. Little did I know this would be the start of my victimization in the

exploitative world of the commercial sex industry. On the day my voucher was set to expire, the hotel manager approached me with a deceptive offer. Over the prior three days, I hadn't eaten, received social support, or slept peacefully. I had no vehicle, no cell service, no money, and no loved ones to call. The manager inquired about my situation, reached into his pocket, and revealed two twenty-dollar bills, saying, "These are for you if you can do something for me."

That night was the start of a long list of violations that became a means to survival. I lost my dignity and faith, for merely a full stomach and a motel room with a working TV. For almost a year, I was looked down upon by every part of the population—police, sexual predators, and the public. I was trapped in a cycle of commercial sex abuse for nearly a year before escaping, gaining my independence, and returning to the workforce.

Life was stable for a while until I experienced another sexual assault in a nightclub. My hysterical public response led to the police being called and, ultimately, to my arrest. Never has a single rapist who targeted me been prosecuted, yet there I found myself in handcuffs, begging for a rape kit and being told no, then dumped at MDC and scanned, tagged, and discarded. I was convicted, and most of my funds went toward legal expenses. Now, every job I worked at offered a much lower wage for more intense labor. High-paying positions related to my previous background in education or non-profit work rejected me once a background check was completed. The Brennan Center for Justice highlights that there are "as many Americans with criminal records as college diplomas." This reality is a harsh barrier for formerly incarcerated individuals, where the rate of bachelor's degrees drops significantly to less than six percent.

My beautiful daughter, **Honey Mae**, inspired me to return to higher education. Born six weeks prematurely and a complete surprise, she is the sweetest example of resilience in my life. Her first strong cry at 4:56 AM on May 22, 2024, changed the trajectory of my life forever. I no longer felt completely worthless, being honored as the mother to such a stunning soul.

The first year of motherhood was filled with joy yet shadowed by poverty and the stress of providing financial stability as a sole parent. I returned to work quickly, one job at a gas station. On a rainy night, I experienced an attempted robbery where this robber did his best to intimidate me but I remained calm. The fierce and protective motherly instincts I had developed kicked in and allowed me to stand boldly. The would-be robber left; I called the police and was told an officer would respond only when available. I finished my 12+ hour shift and walked home to my child. The next day, I quit my job and enrolled in college. I realized my deepest purpose is rooted in protecting my family and community, and the only path to achieve that purpose was through education and a career of true impact.

As of August 2025, I have returned to higher education after a five-year separation to pursue a B.A. in Criminology with a minor in Public Service at the University of New Mexico. I am especially passionate about working with marginalized young women from adverse populations.

To gain necessary specialized skills I plan to enroll in the McAfee Certified Human Trafficking Investigator program. My post-graduate goal is to attend graduate school and work in corrections and crime intelligence, aiming to advocate for rehabilitation, second chances, and increased compassion for those who enter the criminal justice system in any capacity. I have dedicated all my savings and federal grants towards my academic pursuits and dreams. I embody Andrea Worden's spirit by showing kindness, compassion, and deep investment in others, translating my survival into service. Her generosity would directly secure the future of my daughter while empowering me to serve my community.