

“Hope Thrives Here”

Sacramento Regional Family Justice Center Gala  
Remarks by Casey Gwinn, President  
Alliance for HOPE International

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There is no place I would rather be tonight than a place where hope thrives.

My wife Beth and I are honored to join you tonight to celebrate the lifesaving work and the future of the Sacramento Regional Family Justice Center – as you celebrate one year of operation and providing hope and healing to more than 1,200 survivors and their children.

Ann Marie, thank you for your leadership as DA and passionate focus on human trafficking. Jan Scully, thank you for continuing to invest yourself so passionately in public safety and healthy families in Sacramento County even after retiring from the DA’s Office. Faith, thank you for your leadership of the Center. It takes a gifted leader to lead staff from many agencies when most of them don’t work for you directly. DDA Paul Durenberger, thank you for your relentless vision from the beginning of this journey in Sacramento County. You have helped bring us to the power of nearly 500 people represented in this room tonight. And thank you, Joyce Bilyeu, the Chair of the VOICES Committee here. Joyce has used her pain as power for years now. As a survivor, she did not have to tell her story so publicly but she has chosen to speak out and advocate for change and support for the Family Justice Center. She also testified in the Legislature for us for both our strangulation and suffocation bill three years ago and for our state legislation putting Family Justice Centers into state law.

The work of this Family Justice Center is the pathway to hope for survivors and accountability for those who use violence and abuse against those they claim to love. And by being here tonight, you are all hope givers. Your theme tonight “It Takes All of Us” is the truth and echoes Gael Strack, the first Director of the San Diego Family Justice Center when we brought 25 agencies together, “The Family Justice Center is the ‘power of we.’”

30 years ago, when I began my career as a prosecutor in San Diego, I never imagined this evening in Sacramento being with this amazing crowd. In my first major case, I prosecuted a sitting judge for assaulting his five-month pregnant spouse in a televised trial with a pool feed camera in the courtroom. And I lost... Well, the jury hung 11-1 for not guilty, so I did convince one person that the judge was guilty. It was understandable. Few prosecutors had ever tried to prosecute cases back then without the victim’s participation. All the local judges recused themselves because they were friends with the judge – so they brought in a judge from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to try the case. My 911 tape of the victim calling the police was excluded. The jury was not allowed to know she was five months pregnant even though the judge was claiming self-defense – that the victim dove over a dining room table to attack him. I thought my career was over. But I days after I lost an African-America leader named Ashley Walker showed up at my office demanding to see me. Her first request? “Tell me everything you know about domestic violence right now.” “About 20 seconds later, after I concluded my remarks, Ashley said, ‘You are an idiot.’” I laughed. I was an idiot and I knew nothing. Then, she said, “You need me in your life and I need you in my life.” We have been friends ever since. Soon after I met Sgt. Anne O’Dell, a DV survivor, and

passionate law enforcement leader – and the best “swearer” I had ever heard! Then I met Gael Strack who was a criminal defense attorney. Then, I met Lee Lawless a family law attorney. And we built a small group of determined people with the goal of changing how we helped victims and their children. By 1990, we had seven agencies working together and the beginnings of what would become the San Diego Family Justice Center in 2002.

As a new prosecutor, I was focused on – obsessed with – prosecuting men who beat and sexually assaulted their girlfriends and wives and children. I knew nothing about child abuse and domestic violence cases when I started. In fact, I was sick the day that everyone picked their areas of interest. I came back the next day to find only “child abuse and domestic violence” had not been picked. That was the beginning of a journey that has now lasted for 32 years.

It was not until a few years into my work as I started doing felony cases for the San Diego DA’s Office, that a truth began to emerge. I was prosecuting men for things they had done to their children that my dad did to me and later I learned that I was prosecuting men for things they did to their wives that my grandfather had done to my grandmother.

I grew up at Mount Hermon Christian Conference Center where my dad was the Director. In fact, my dad was the President of Christian Camping International. My dad did many good things in his life but he also struggled most of his life with the impacts of unmitigated childhood trauma. It took me many years to come to grips with the impacts of my family abuse issues and how it impacted me as a man and a father.

In my early years as a prosecutor, I thought that I was solving everything for victims and their children after I prosecuted them. I missed three things. First, I missed the complex long-term needs of survivors and their children. Second, I missed the most dangerous men in the world –men who were choking women but leaving no marks and therefore virtually no prosecutable cases against them. And third, I failed to understand where the rapists and batterers and most criminals of all kinds were coming from and how we can prevent the next generation of perpetrators.

### **Family Justice Centers Can Meet a Survivor’s Complex Long-Term Needs**

It took years to learn this fundamental truth. In America, we raise our criminals at home. In fact, the vast majority of everyone we lock up in this country for all crimes came out of homes with some mix of child abuse, domestic violence, and/or drug and alcohol abuse. And if you add historic oppression, racism, poverty, pornography, or community violence...you are magnifying the effect of childhood trauma that is victimizing men and women of color in even larger numbers than white men and women. I grew up in the feminist movement as a prosecutor and was always told that if I just focused on helping battered women that they could take care of their children because “Children are resilient.” Some children are very resilient, but many are not. Many need more help than mom can offer in the midst of her own trauma, violence, and abuse. And after the prosecution was over, victims and their children had many challenges still to navigate. I also realized that many victims were going back to their abusers because we were not offering them a “community”. We were only offering them a “program” or a “service.” If we want victims to leave their abusers, to leave the violent community they are trapped in, we need to offer them another community to join. And we need be there with that community support long after the crisis intervention services, restraining order process, or short-term shelter stay period.

Today, we call that kind of community a Family Justice Center. Sacramento is starting small but around the country we are building campuses of 75,000 – 100,000 feet, bringing together Child Advocacy Centers, Rape Crisis Centers, and Family Justice Centers to do both prevention and early intervention work. We are breaking down the silos between agencies and trying to create the “power of we.” And we are measuring our success like never before! This year, we published, with Dr. Chan Hellman at the University of Oklahoma, the first peer-reviewed, academic research about Family Justice Centers including the stunning results from the Sacramento Regional Family Justice Center. Hope is measurable and we measured hope, resilience, emotional wellbeing, flourishing, and survivor-defined goal attainment – and we demonstrated statistically significant increases in every measurement after 90 days of the “power of we” in seven California-based Family Justice Centers! Your investment in this Center is worth every penny. We know what works now for many victims and we can prove it.

Comprehensive, wraparound services – not individual siloed agencies each working separately is the future. And the survivors are telling us they want this kind of Center. They don’t want to go from agency to agency and place to place to get help and have to tell their stories over and over again. They want us all to work together in a trauma-informed, survivor-centered way.

### **The Most Dangerous Men in the World**

Second, we have learned that the most dangerous men on the planet batter women and eventually “choke” them – what we now call strangulation. We run the Training Institute on Strangulation Prevention and the truth of our work around this has never been more evident than it is right now. America is awash in mass murders and domestic violence is at the heart of most of them. America’s mass murder problem is a domestic violence problem that we have failed to solve. But even more than domestic violence in the history of mass murderers is the history of strangulation. A church in Sutherland Springs, Texas never imagined that the Air Force’s failure to treat a child abuser and domestic violence strangler seriously would change their lives forever. In fact, based on our research, it is hard to find a mass murderer that is not a domestic violence strangler – Omar Mateen, the Orlando Night Club mass murderer, Esteban Santiago, the Fort Lauderdale Airport mass murderer; Cedric Ford, the Newton and Hesston, Kansas Mass murderer; Mohamed Bouhlel, the Nice, France mass murderer of 89 people – domestic violence strangler. We don’t have the time to recount them all – many committed in domestic violence situations, others committed by domestic violence offenders on strangers.

But as I speak here tonight, we must also recognize another truth. Men who strangle and beat women are also the cop killers of this country. I want to honor and remember Deputy Robert French (Sacramento County), Deputy Danny Oliver (Sacramento County), and Detective Michael Davis (Placer County). All of whom lost their lives protecting all of us from rage-filled men with a history of childhood trauma and adult domestic violence and abuse, including strangulation histories. There are only one group of people in this room that run toward gunfire every day as part of their jobs – the sworn law enforcement officers of this community. I would like to ask you all to stand so we can thank you for risking your lives every day to keep us safe. You risk your lives to keep our communities safe everyday – living in a constant state of readiness and stress not knowing when you will find a rage-filled predator or killer. We just finished a review of the histories of the 38 killers of police officers this year in the United States and we have found a domestic violence history in 32 out of 38 of the killers in just Internet searches. As we are digging deeper, we are finding strangulation histories in more and more of them.

This is why supporting the Sacramento Regional Family Justice Center is so important. Family Justice Centers are now becoming experts in addressing offender accountability and focusing on multi-disciplinary approaches to hold the most dangerous men on the planet accountable. If we never prosecuted another push, punch, or slap by a man and only went after men who strangle women, and then banned them (actually prohibited them from possessing) firearms, we would reduce domestic violence homicides in this country by 75% within five years.

### **Preventing the Next Generation of Perpetrators**

Finally, I want to thank you all for supporting Camp HOPE Sacramento. Before the Family Justice Center even opened, Paul Durenberger and many others started sending children to Camp HOPE America, our camping and mentoring program that is the first evidence-based program of its kind in the country focused on helping children impacted by domestic violence find a pathway to hope and healing. Two years, I wrote a book called *Cheering for the Children* about Camp HOPE America and the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. If you are not familiar with the ACE Study, it is the best argument to support the Sacramento Family Justice Center that exists. The ACE Study began in an obesity clinic in San Diego – looking at the impact of childhood sexual abuse on morbid obesity – and now has become a ten question index measuring different kinds of trauma that people may experience before the age of 18. 30% of the American public is a ZERO on the ACE Scale. My wife, Beth, is a ZERO. I know it sounds like a terrible thing to say about her but she grew up in a healthy, functional home. I said in *Cheering for the Children* that I am a 4 on the ACE Scale. My sister read the book and wondered out loud if I was still minimizing the level of trauma in our home growing up as she has battled to overcome her own struggles from the impacts of our home. But here is the key piece of the ACE study. The higher your ACE Score the greater the likelihood of bad things in your life as an adult. If you are a four on the ACE scale, you are 1,200 percent more likely to attempt suicide as an adult. If you are six on the ACE scale, the likelihood of you shooting heroin as an adult goes up 4,600 percent. This should be part of the conversation in our country about the opioid crisis. The average ACE Score in studies of our homeless populations in this country – ACE Score of 4. Average ACE Score of all men prosecuted for child abuse, domestic violence, and sexual assault? 5.5. The long-term implications? If you are a six on the ACE Scale, on average, you die 20 years younger than someone who is a ZERO on the ACE Scale.

Do you want to know the average ACE Score of children coming to Camp HOPE America –California? In our first published study two years ago, our kids coming to camp had an average ACE Score of 5.5! We have the children now coming into our Family Justice Centers and going to camp that will be our inmates and victims in the next generation. The real question is: Will we invest the resources and the effort to change their destinies while we still can?

This is the sacred work of the Sacramento Regional Family Justice Center and more than 130 Centers we now have across the country. This is why Camp HOPE Sacramento is so central to the success of the Family Justice Center that we are asking you to support tonight.

Let me close with a personal story. In the later years of my dad's life, he struggled majorly with depression and bi-polar disorder related to the trauma he experienced as a child including being punched in the head every day to be awakened by my grandfather. In 2005, after a psychotic break, I walked my dad into a psychiatric lock-up unit in Riverside to get help and then hugged him and told him I would see him tomorrow. My dad triggered when he realized I was leaving and he was not. He started screaming at me, "You are worthless. You are nothing to me. You've never respected me. You will never

amount to anything.” I was paralyzed as he screamed and then said, as I burst into tears, the only thing I could think of saying. “That is not my dad talking. My dad loves me. My dad believes in me.” My dad paused, cocked his head to the side and then said, “Maybe you would talk to your son that like that if you had been kicked down the hall by your father over and over lifting you off the ground with his boot as you tried to get away from him. Maybe you’d talk to your son like that too.”

The next day, when I got to the hospital, my dad had no recollection of that conversation and I realized that locked deep in his damaged brain was the trauma of childhood abuse that he was never able to fully process, talk about, or heal. But we can help others find that healing. We can commit ourselves to increasing hope in the lives of everyone impacted by child abuse, domestic violence, sexual assault, elder abuse, and human trafficking. We change the ending for so many hurting adult and child survivors.

But for my faith, and my family, this work is the most important thing in my life. It is such an honor to stand side by side with all of you here tonight. May God bless each of you and may God bless the work of the Sacramento Regional Family Justice Center.