

DAY 1 – OCTOBER 13, 2022

KEYNOTE LUNCHTIME SPEAKER: STEPHANIE MCGRAW, CEO, W.A.R.M. – WE ALL REALLY MATTER¹

INTRODUCTION – BY DORCHEN LEIDHOLDT

Welcome back everyone. I'm thrilled to be here. I'm Dorchen Leidholdt, and I'm the Director of the Legal Center at Sanctuary for Families, CBWLS [Center for Battered Women Legal Services]. It is my tremendous honor now to introduce Stephanie McGraw—the founder and CEO of W.A.R.M., an extraordinary, survivor-centered nonprofit provider of holistic domestic violence services, based in Harlem.

I'm now going to read the powerful biography that W.A.R.M. forwarded me for Stephanie's introduction today: Stephanie McGraw grew up in New York City Housing Authority projects and lived with abuse as a child and intimate partner violence as an adult. She survived thirty years of abusive relationships and a resulting stay in a domestic violence shelter. Leaving the shelter and growing out of her pain, Stephanie returned to her Harlem roots, where no one was talking about real life issues related to domestic violence. In this environment, Stephanie grew a burning desire to live a mission of helping poor victims of color journey from devastation to safety and independence. So, she gave birth to W.A.R.M. (We All Really Matter, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization) in 2010 to increase community awareness about domestic violence, empower victims to help themselves, and develop community responses that make our wonderful city a safer place.

For eleven years Stephanie regularly has helped victims escape from homes located on blocks police acknowledge as among the most dangerous in New York City, and with perpetrators present.

During the pandemic, domestic violence services have been closed or greatly limited while the need has spiked. During these times, often partnering with the NYPD, she continues to inspire W.A.R.M. to rescue dozens of victims annually and bring them to safety 24/7.

W.A.R.M. is unique and successful because Stephanie has blended her life lessons with the work. Integrating a grassroots, client-centered mindset that

¹ See Sanctuary for Families, *Lunchtime Speaker – Stephanie McGraw*, YOUTUBE (Oct. 24, 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQ90OZYbGt4> [<https://perma.cc/LAS3-E4Q4>].

brings crisis services to wherever victims are. Volunteer survivors who walk side-by-side with victims, sharing their stories of pain to triumph, while victims' minds and hearts change from "I never mattered and I never will," to "I do matter," and "We All Really Matter." Staff are a bridge of trust between victims and the criminal justice system. There are no time limits for support—a free, lifetime, 24/7 service partnership, reducing recidivism.

What Stephanie does radiates from an internal fire rather than external recognition. At the same time, she feels renewed and further strengthened by ongoing formal validation of her work from local politicians, community organizations, newspapers, a TV station, hospitals, the New York State Senate, and the United Nations.

I can personally testify to Stephanie McGraw's visionary leadership, courage, resourcefulness, and impact. I have visited Stephanie at W.A.R.M.'s offices and seen her and her staff in action addressing the wide range of needs of survivors—principally in Harlem and the Bronx—from the urgent need for food and clothing, to shelter, to legal services. I've witnessed how Stephanie and her staff cut through the red tape to provide survivors with life-saving assistance and services. I saw that she had the commanding officer of every precinct she works in on speed dial, and I saw her deep connections to leaders in communities and city and state government, and the tremendous respect they have for her and for her powerful community-based activism.

Let me give you just one example: On April 30th, I followed Stephanie, bullhorn in hand, as she led an awareness raising march and rally in Harlem in honor of twenty-seven-year-old Brittani Nicole Duffy, one of W.A.R.M.'s fallen angels who was murdered by her boyfriend in front of her eight-year-old son at the height of the pandemic. She was three months pregnant at the time of her murder.

Stephanie also honored, in that march and rally, Brittani's women neighbors, who immediately after the murder of their friend, at great personal risk, intervened to protect her son. The march took place in and around Manhattanville Houses, where Brittani Nicole grew up.

Among the marchers were Brittani Nicole's mother, grandmother, father, grandfather, neighbors, friends, and, most heartbreaking, Lee, her sister, who marched with her arm around Brittani Nicole's now nine-year-old son, wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with the words "Mommy, I love you." Hard work.

I'll end with Stephanie's powerful words: "One of the reasons we're doing this is because silence hides violence." Brittani never told anyone about the abuse until it was too late. Stephanie, we are so grateful for the many powerful

ways in which you are breaking the silence with truth about the devastating impact of domestic violence, especially in our city's most underserved communities.

Stephanie McGraw—

[*Applause*]

Stephanie McGraw Keynote:

Thank you so much, that's just so incredible. I'm just so honored to be here. My name is Stephanie McGraw. I am the founder and CEO of W.A.R.M. W.A.R.M stands for "We All Really Matter." And if you don't matter, what does it mean? I'd like to take a moment to thank Sanctuary for Families, especially Dorchen, my sister in the struggle. Of course, the color of our skins are very much different; you can tell because you can see, you have eyes. However, that is my sister, because she is about action. Like W.A.R.M., myself, and everything we do is about action. So, I charge you even before we start this, before we leave here today: let's take some action! Okay?

So, I would also like to thank the "Justice for Survivors: Intimate Partner Violence" conference. You know, I'm looking at justice and I wonder, is it "just-us"—women of color—or, is it "justice," for all? Just marinate with that, you know. Maybe you'll get that when you get home. But we have to start making a difference.

So, I'm the founder CEO of W.A.R.M. We operate in the Bronx area. We are now in the Bronx, and we're in Harlem, and now we have trickled into Brooklyn. Just the other day, we responded to a young twenty-two-year-old-girl—murdered, chopped up, and put into suitcases. She was murdered. So, we were there on the scene, responding to the community, responding to the pain, responding to another fallen woman of color. So, that's what we do.

So, look at the birth of W.A.R.M. [*shows image of woman kneeling in fetal position*]. And I chose that picture, to reflect where I was at the time when I gave birth to W.A.R.M. I gave birth to W.A.R.M. in fetal position, just like you see on the screen. I was in fetal position in 2010. Now, I've been in a fetal position in and out of my life for over thirty years. However, this one was devastating. And it kind of defined who I was going to be coming out of this fetal position—so battered, shattered, broken, for over thirty years of my life. The vicious cycle continued to continue. And at the age of forty-something, I found myself in front of an apartment in the Bronx, a tenement walk-up, drugs in the building, roaches and rats in the building, but I had to go there because it was time for me to give birth, and I went and gave birth. And at this time, I

didn't know why I was in the fetal position, but I knew it was something that I had to do after all of my pain and struggling from years of abuse. There was something that I had to do. And I heard this very strong voice—I believe it probably was the creator (yeah, it was the creator)—saying something warm. Like, okay, it's cold here, but maybe I can go somewhere warm. But I didn't know I was giving birth. So, I gave birth to W.A.R.M., “We All Really Matter,” in 2010.

And at the time I came out of the [domestic violence] shelter in upstate New York, and I came back to New York City, I didn't see anyone that looked like me, sounds like me, talked like me, anyone that had the lived experience. Anyone in my community that grew up in poverty—well, we all grew up in poverty, so we were able to identify there—we grew up in the projects, we grew up in poverty with dysfunction. However, there was no one in my community that was talking about domestic violence. It was still considered, in 2010, to be a shame—“don't talk, be quiet, don't talk about it, hush.” So, we are here to say and to discuss and to expose domestic violence. It is a crime. It's not a shame. I created this organization because there was a need.

So, I have been doing this work now for twelve years. I did it for eight years, absolutely no money. And Hannah Pennington is over there, she could testify to that. Coming out to her office, bringing women on the train, trying to get some kind of help, trying to get some kind of services. And we had these amazing conferences, bringing people together, bringing lawyers together, bringing police together, bringing the United Nations together. As a matter of fact, I went downtown, and I was able to get some judges to come up to Harlem. Because the only way you're going to make any kind of effective change is that you have to be in it! You can't be over there, and you make a change over here. Because at the end of the day, there's going to always be a gap.

We recently brought a commission from ACS [The Administration of Children's Services] up to Harlem, and we took them into the belly of the beast. If any one of y'all want to take that ride with me, sign up here—the sheet is right here, put your name and your number, come take that, come and see what it's like. I suspect some of you might be judges sitting in family court, come and see what these women that have to come in front of you have to experience.

This woman, Shanice Young—murdered in front of her three children, nine months pregnant, coming from her baby shower. And because she didn't get the vital information about domestic violence that it's the most dangerous time was when you're trying to leave, she was murdered. And because there's no kind of healing, and any kind of services that's in place for women. Even right now as I speak to you, this woman's daughter is still looking for therapy. There are no services in place, and that has to change.

So, she was murdered. We responded. We called the police. We called the mayor's office. We got the community together and we did a candlelight vigil. We were able to walk Shanice's family out of that. We were able to get the funeral paid for. We were able to get the community, get the church, and get the family services—on a Friday evening because that's when they came to my office. So, in order for you to start healing, you have to understand where people come from—their struggles, their pain, where they come from.

I grew up in a household with nine children. I didn't have an opportunity to choose great education. I didn't have the opportunity to choose Whole Foods, back then they didn't have Whole Foods anyway, okay? We had bodegas, and we had Little Debbie's, and we had them quarter juices. I could not tell you what was in those quarter juices, what kind of chemicals and stuff or whatever. But we didn't have an opportunity to have choices, to even get an education, to get the decency of our basic needs met, like food and clothing, and just to come home and know that there will be a hot meal on your plate. We didn't get that. My mother had nine children and she did the best she could have. My father left at ten because he was trained from the slave master. – Yeah, I'm going to go there. Four hundred years of vicious cycles, and the sad thing about what I'm talking about is that we're still seeing that in our communities. We're still seeing the trauma of 400 years of our ancestors. We were brought here. We didn't have a choice. So, this is why we do this work.

Shanice Young—murdered in Harlem. This is what Dorchen briefly spoke about. Brittani Duffy—three months pregnant, in her home, and her boyfriend came in there and shot her in the neck, in front of their eight-year-old child. We are still working on getting him therapy because it's after the death, after the sensations, after the news, after the police, after the crowd, after the candlelight vigil, then they're left with little or no services. I'm telling you because I'm out there, I'm boots-on-the-ground, grassroots, embedded and invested in the community, and we're walking with these families.

So, these are the stories that I bring to you. And you probably would have never heard it, because at the same time, there was a young girl named Gabby [Petito]—another counterpart. She was murdered at the same time Brittani was murdered. She got a Lifetime movie, her parents have money because they were from Long Island, she was on the news every day, they talked about her case for almost three months. These two women were murdered at the same time, but because this is marginalized communities that we living in, communities where there's lack and deserts, and where there is lack of services.

Just another Black woman. Like Dr. Malcolm, said “Black women are the most disrespected and unprotected.” And I can vouch for that today because I'm

living in this skin, and I've experienced that. Brittani Duffy—we had a march for her because we wanted people to know that she was a life, she was a woman, she had children, she worked in NYCHA. She was getting her life together. But murdered, domestic violence.

As you can see [*shows slide*], this is a police officer, and she has a gun—Adrianna, murdered.

June 15th, 2020 in the Bronx. And as you know (and if you don't know, I'm going to tell you now,) the Bronx has the highest rates of murder of Black and Brown women in New York City according to NYPD. It's real serious out here. It is not only a pandemic or an epidemic, it is a national health crisis, right here in our beautiful, cosmopolitan—look at what we see [*gestures outside*], look at this world! But I, the women that I deal with, they have never been able to see such great beauty. Look, everything is out here, everything you want in this life is out here. But, it's different strokes for different folks. So what are we going to do to make a difference?

She was a police officer. She got her life together. She was from the Dominican Republic, and she had her four-year-old son. Murdered, domestic violence. He waited for her because she decided, "I'm going on with my life, I want something different." That's why we all matter in our community, because we have to educate, because I was not educated. I did not know that my life was in danger. I did not know that I was, almost, in the process of almost being murdered, because I changed my mind. And I said everything that I knew at the time: "F'ing F, F'ing F, and F'ing F." Those are four letter words. Well, that's all I knew at the time, because I came off that ground. When I came off that ground. When I came out that fetal position, I got off that ground with no GED, no basic understanding, I didn't even have an education. But when I came off that ground in 2010, I knew there's *something* I had to do different. I knew that there was something out there that no one can ever take away from me. That is my dignity and my education. So, I went back to school, y'all.

As I built this organization. I used to leave BMCC [Borough of Manhattan Community College], run over there to Hannah, "Hannah, I got a victim, met her in my classroom. And she's a victim, and she needs help." I'm leaving BMCC, running over to the Family Justice Center, taking a victim of domestic violence straight up to Hannah. You know, it's all God. I ain't got nothing to do with this. I'm just showing up. However, when I got off that ground, poor in 2010, with nothing—nothing—I decided I want to do something with my story. This is not about me, my story is about you, it's about you, it's about all these women, it's about this woman right here [*Gestures to Adrianna on slide*].

My story is to help someone else gain. My pain is to help someone escape. So, use your life as a classroom, and that's what I've been able to do, okay? I got my GED at the age of fifty. Okay, healing is sexy, I'm telling y'all. So, get your healing on. Okay? You ain't got to be all tight. No, life is happening. It's good. It's good—I can tell you how good it is. It's good. Even when it's bad, it's good. I'm free today. I'm free. I'm free to help someone else.

So, I got my GED. And then somebody whispered in my ear and said, "Baby just get going, get some college education," and I'm saying, "What? I can't do it! It's too hard. I have a learning disability." My mother was not capable of meeting her children's needs, so I didn't know I had a learning disability until I got to fifty-something. And they said get over there and get a diagnosis. And it's like, "Wow, this is great! So, I can get accommodations?" And my accommodations helped me get through school. You ask me to spell something? You're going to be in trouble. But you ask me to speak about something? Baby, I have dyslexia.

So, it's a good thing. It's a good thing. I went on to get my GED, and I went on to get my college education, and I built this organization. I went from \$6,850 to six figures. I went into the welfare office and they said, "Oh, Miss McGraw, who are you working for now, because you have to turn in your papers." The lady said, "Uh, what's the company?" And I said, "Oh, here, I work for myself. I'm the founder and CEO of W.A.R.M., and I work for myself. I'm at a point now where I'm finally able to pay myself, I don't need public assistance anymore." Freedom! Freedom, freedom.

Let's get back to what's happening to us in the hood: Murdered! Murdered. Murdered. Laid up behind the steps like a villain, like a horror movie. When she came out, she didn't have a chance of walking into her house. Murdered. May she rest in peace.

Azhia Johnson was a twenty-year-old beautiful woman [*shows slide*]. She was in a shelter at the time, walking her baby on 95th. I know you all heard about it, because it was in a neighborhood where many people were scared, and they were talking about it, okay? She was murdered, gang style like the mob, just straight shot the head. And because Azhia did not have W.A.R.M.—and the interesting thing is, we weren't that far from the shelter—but in her mind, she thought (like I thought as a battered woman). That's why we are here, to do the job, to let women know, to educate them that the most dangerous time is when you're trying to get out. She got out and he lured her back, "I want to see my baby, you gave birth to our child, our child is three months old, I have clothes, I have stuff, I have Pampers for the baby..." And she went to 95th Street between Lexington and 3rd Avenue, and she lost her life.

With this family here, we worked on the whole unit because once one Black and Brown woman is killed in our community, a part of our community dies. Ask me why. Somebody? Well, you don't have to ask me why, I'm going to tell you. The Black woman is the pillar of the community. When they brought our ancestors over here 400 years ago, the Black woman had to take care of the plantation, had to take care of their families, and to raise someone else's children. And today when a Black woman is murdered, our whole community suffers, a part of our community dies.

Because in our communities, the Black woman is the pillar of the community. So, it's not only that this woman [Azhia] was affected, and she's not here and she left two children behind, but she left her community, her family, her mother, her whole family, because the boyfriend was in one of those gangs. The whole family was in jeopardy of being executed. So, what we did, in the middle of the night, because we are the critical response team, we got out, we went in, we got the family packed up, and we got Azhia's mother and her family to a safe location. That's what we do. We take action. We can't sit around and talk about, "well, maybe we can look at a policy and procedure," okay? At the end of the day, they're good—don't let me get up here and talk about how policies are not good—because we have to have them, right? However, we need to understand that when lives are at stake, we've got to take action. So we took action. Her whole family, her daughters, they're all in abusive relationships. We are giving them services right now, myself and Lisa.

I just want to tell you quickly before I move on about this beautiful woman, Gabriella [Muniz] and her daughter [*shows slide*]. We did a candlelight vigil for this family because this woman was murdered and the abuser not only murdered his girlfriend, but he went into the bedroom and murdered her six-year-old girl—innocent child, could not hurt anyone. Did Dorchen tell you? I don't play, I'm real "gangster" about what I do, because women's lives are at stake. We called the commanding officer,

"This is what I need you to do..." I don't go ask him, "well, can you maybe..." because I know their job is to be there, to help and assist. And we don't know that because of the pain and suffering that Black people had to deal with at the hand of NYPD. It is a big gap. However, we were able to use that gap at the height of the pandemic, because our women were suffering.

We got a call, one day, from a commanding officer (who I know very well) and he's like, "I need help." We went to work, we opened up our doors, we were on 125th Street and we just started bringing victims and their children there. And from there, we went into the precinct and said "look, we're here."

Because we know and, our community knows, that during the pandemic a lot of Black and Brown women were the ones that were really being affected. So, we called the commanding officer, her school came out, she worked in a law firm, they were all there. But not only that, we come and we show up for these candlelight vigils, it gives the community an opportunity to heal.

And every single time I do this, I ask a question before I leave: “Do you know that all the seventy-seven precincts have a DV unit in them?” And no one in our communities knows that every precinct has a domestic violence unit. So, it is my job to get that information to our people, to let them know that you can go in there and demand everything I demand. Everything I do, you can do. As a matter of fact, come on down with me and I’ll show you. She [Gabriella] lost her life, her daughter—no services. And if she did have services maybe she didn’t get the information.

But our unique way of addressing victims of domestic violence is very simple. We just tell our own struggles and our own pain, and help them walk out of that through our own lived experience. It’s not that deep, I’m telling you. I didn’t go to the University of, what do you call it, Harvard. I went to the University of 125th Street School of Hard Knocks, and it’s not that deep. There’s no difference from Harvard to 125th and Lenox Avenue because it’s not that deep.

When someone is in trouble, they just need someone to help them execute and get out. She was in trouble and didn’t know it. She was in trouble, and she lost her life. She lost her life.

Ayden Wolfe, our youngest victim. He was ten years old. He was murdered in one of the bellies of the beast. We work very closely with PSA 6, that’s what one of our partner precincts and St. Nicholas Housing, they have one of the highest radio calls. And Ayden Wolfe’s life could have been saved. But when you grow up in so much suffering and pain, you become numb to the call. Because I grew up in I grew up in 201 West 93rd Street. It sounds nice, right? The Central Park, but it was one project that they put there, and we grew up in that. And, so, you become numb to the call, to the pain, to the suffering because it’s such a norm that you don’t even think, “Well maybe this kid that was hollering and screaming is being beaten and broken and sexually assaulted...” I know it’s kind of hard for y’all to hear, but I really need you to understand how serious and dangerous domestic violence is. This young man lost his life, Ayden Wolfe.

And we did a walk through the projects, we rallied with PSA 6, and one of the things that I noticed about our partnership when we are out with NYPD, is that women—in particular Black women—are a little more comfortable coming

over when they see us. Because the first thing they say is “What are y’all doing with the police?” You know, that kind of talk. It’s not, “Excuse me, Miss McGraw, what is the nature of your business with police?” This is what we’re doing sister, we’re here to save lives. And we have to make them accountable. Let me tell you something about the police, no one’s perfect. I’m not even perfect, but if I keep looking at you or blaming you and saying you, you, you then I’m not looking at what I did. If I’m pointing one finger at you, it’s three coming back at me. So, I have to take my three, look at me and say, “What can we do in the police department to make a difference?”

Let’s educate them, let’s teach them, let’s share our stories, let’s tell them where we are from—our struggles. We know we have not been treated very well throughout history, when it comes to NYPD. Let me not get too deep. I’m going to keep it moving.

Ayden—lost his life. He was ten years old. I spoke at his funeral. I helped the father. They had to do applications. They needed help navigating through the investigation. We were right there with them. Not only do we just do these candlelight vigils, but we are there to walk the families through.

This woman right here: Ana, left two daughters in the Bronx [*shows slide*]. We got the 43rd Precinct the phone—“We need you there, commanding officers.” He brought his whole team out. It was one of the most heinous murders because she had left two sixteen-year-old twin daughters. There are stories behind these faces, ladies and gentlemen. The abuser, the ex-boyfriend, went to his mother’s house and took the keys from the twins. The twins were at his mother’s house, sleeping. He took the keys, and he went to Ana’s house, and waited for her to come home, and he killed her. Now there’s no mother and no father. And in this case, they were sending the body to the Dominican Republic. They didn’t understand how to navigate the policy and procedure, what needs to be done. They needed to get in the house to get her passport to ship the body.

And because we’re boot-to-the-ground and grassroots, and embedded, we were able to help. I’ll play it, “Excuse me, I need someone to get in that house now and just go get the passport. That’s all we need, get in there now!” You talk about “Oh, well, I’m sorry you got to go to Surrogate’s Court and you got to do this...” No! Because I know *you* have the power to go into that house and get those passports. That’s the commanding officer of the 43rd Precinct. And he was able to get his detectives in there, get them passports, and they were able to ship her body to the Dominican Republic.

That’s what we do at our agency, by any means necessary. We’re going to get the job done because we know the trauma, and what these families are dealing with. And they have no understanding of how to navigate. So, we just

simply take them by the hands and we help them navigate. *That* process would have taken over three months. Now, I ain't no lawyer, but I know that some serious lawyers are here, because Dorchen is one of them, and my girl Jennifer, and Hannah. I don't know how many other lawyers are here. But I know you ladies understand the process of Surrogate's Court. I'm not a lawyer, but I know everything about Surrogate's Court. You know why? Because I went down there, started asking questions, and got to the 'deputy-somebodies.' And so now I call her,

"Excuse me, Deputy So-and-So, I need you to help me with this. We need to get this done." This is what took to get this. This is what we were able to do with this case, right? These are our partnerships [*Slide: W.A.R.M. Partnership With NYPD Precincts*]. These are our partnerships. We have nineteen partnerships, and I'm going to tell you how we got we got them. I started with the 2-3 [precinct]. Greenie is the commanding officer. I did a panel one time, he saw what we were offering. I got these partnerships, because when the pandemic hit, there was nothing to little available because people were dying and everything shut down. Greenie called me at the height of the pandemic and said he had a young Black woman who was just leaving the hospital who was broken and beaten, and had a cast, and had a three-month-old baby, and they needed to get services for this woman. He brought her to me and that is how my partnership started. They started saying, "Oh, call the response team, oh call them, they are coming." So, when we went into a precinct and we looked at the numbers and we saw where there were high numbers, we just simply went in. This is who I am, this is what we need, and this is what we are here to help with. Do you want help, or do you just want to look good? Because if you want to look good, then I will see you later, but if you want to make a difference and you want help for your officers, we are here. So, from that, we have now evolved into nineteen precincts and we hold them to the fire.

This is one of the officers on our rescue mission, at our physical location, with a mother and her five children, everything they own in those bags, because we are the critical response team [*shows slide*]. We don't wait to get the women help, we get them help right then and there. Packing them up, getting them out. As a matter of fact, I called the commanding officer of the PSA 5 and said, "Send a man over there, they have a woman and five children and they need to get out," and he sent the officers with the van, and we did two trips to get all of her stuff out.

This is another story, out of my bed on a Sunday [*shows slide*]. The short guy with the lot of hair [*laughter*—his name is Maseo. He called me on a Sunday, December 5th.

I don't work on a Sunday, I need a little rest for myself. But this commanding officer called me, and I said "Who are you?" He had a little crackle in his voice, but there was something very profound about what I heard. I heard concern. He moved me. His spirit touched my spirit. He said I am calling because I am calling One Police Plaza because I am trying to get help for a mother and her six children. On that Sunday they called every other agency, 800 numbers, trying to get this family help and he could not. He reached out to a chief of the department and the chief of the department, who I have a relationship with, told this commanding officer, "Oh, call Stephanie, she gets stuff done." This gentleman called me, and because of his voice, I got out of my bed. He said, I have a mother and six kids who need some help. We tried everything under the natural sun to get this family help and we could not get her any help. I said I am on my way. He said okay. I am out of my bed and on my way to wherever he lives. I don't know where he lives, he lives upstate. Wherever. He came to my office, he had two officers bring that mother and her six children down to my office. They were dirty, their hair was nappy, they were hungry, and they were in danger because the abuser was lurking and saying as soon as the police leave... He had cameras in the house, had them sleeping in the dog cage, true story.

When they got her to my office, we got them clean clothes because we have a storage. Ladies and their children and friends who want to make a donation, I am going to give you all of that information. We have a storage, so we had everything those families needed, because we offer rapid response for every need necessary. We got this woman out, and her six children, and ACS was involved. The school called ACS, guess why? Because the kids' hair was nappy and wasn't combed. I suspect that there may be some judges sitting in this room. When you don't get an opportunity to understand the story of where she came from, you have someone that has you sleeping in a dog cage. I saw it—after we got the family, my crew with those officers went back in that apartment, packed that stuff up, took the stuff to storage, and she didn't ever have to go back in that apartment.

Sometimes, you just need that kind of help. You don't know what way to go, which way to go, because when you are coming out of a dog cage with six children, how do you navigate? We got that family out.

ACS was involved, the courts were involved, the school called ACS because the kids' hair was matted.

Now, I saw the kids' hair and inspected the mom's hair, and turned to my officers on a Sunday, and I immediately said, "Oh, my mother, Josephine, with her nine children, no money to take care of her children, don't know how to get their hair, incapable, can't meet their needs." I understood when I saw their

nappy hair. And what did we do? And what did I do? A hundred dollars out of my own pocket, not from the agency, because sometimes you need to go above and beyond. I met Dorchen one time, she got in the car to meet a victim to give them a gift card. That is the kind of action that we have to take when we are dealing with these families because I know, I come from that. So, what we did is we just supported the family because when you are in a community and you and working in these kind of environments, you know how to execute. That is what makes the difference, because we are in the community, we know what the needs are when we see it because we are from it. So we simply took the kids to the Africans, got their hair done, my friend Big Ross, he is a barber on 131st and 8th Avenue. "Big Ross, I need a solid, I have these three boys. They haven't had their hair done in about a year." We took them around the corner, and every three months she came up and got her kids' hair braided. And then we had to deal with ACS. This is what we do with our partners with NYPD. They know I will hold them to the fire in a heartbeat. I don't have a problem with speaking my voice, because my voice is not only for me, but it is for the women who have no voices. These are our partnerships, we do intense outreach. A part of our job is we are out there in the community working with the police because we know that this has never been done before. Somebody asked me how I did it. I just did it because there was a need.

This officer right here [*shows slide*]. His DV officers came to this house in the Bronx. The woman was choked up. The house was a wreck. She had bruises on her neck, and the two officers did not arrest. Because the universe is so silly, this young lady found us, and when she told us this story, I called downtown to a higher-up, had those body cams taken and looked at, and those officers got into serious trouble because they did not do their job. So, when we called back and said we were going back, they sent the Sergeant and I said "Sergeant, I need you to get up there, help move the stuff out, we have to get her stuff out." This is an action right here [*points to slide*]. That Sergeant is going up and down the fifth floor with us, taking bags, packing them up, getting them out. This is a visual [*points to slide*], the woman who was killed in the Bronx and we had to get family passports out. That is a commanding officer there. Not only them, but us. We are better together. I know we have had some difficult days, and we are probably going to have some more. However, we had to start somewhere, and we had to start reimagining what we want to do, how we want to do it, and what kind of result we want from the NYPD.

So, these are all a collaborative effort. This is the woman who was murdered. We had over 500 police officers coming to her building, we did a candlelight vigil. Her sisters came out, her aunts came out. They took her to the Dominican Republic. This is what we do, this is the kind of outreach that we do in our community with the NYPD. This is a story before I shut it down. This was during the pandemic in 2020.

Because we knew how serious it was, we would go to all of our commands, do roll call, give them every piece of literature that we had, if you have to get them out in the middle of the night, bring them to us. I have a woman who has apartments, she has two empty rooms, and we use those rooms for critical removals because sometimes those shelters are full. The 800 numbers are full.

A part of our goal is to one day have affordable housing for women. The money in this room can help us move in that direction. I am throwing it out to the universe. This is at the 32nd precinct [*shows slide*].

This gentle teddy bear, that is Mora. During the pandemic we went to every precinct. That is how we were getting the officers to bring women and children to our offices because we went to all of the precincts, we went to roll call, we told them who we were, we are there 24/7— not 24/7, but we are there. If we have to be there, we will be there. That is Mora right there. If you see what is in my hand, you see I have my business card. And I am saying to all of them in that room, and you see Mora, he is looking directly at me, he is staring at me, he is hearing what I am saying. And what I was simply saying to Mora is that when you are going to a domestic violence call, it is the most dangerous call because it is matters of the heart. That's Mora, who was murdered. You all heard about it. We all know about the two officers who were murdered at the 32nd precinct going to a radioed domestic violence dispute on 135th street. That was Mora. As we poured into those officers about domestic violence, and we said, "If you need some help, we are here. Send them to us." He didn't make it.

He and Jason (Rivera) didn't make it out. We did a big candlelight, we honored them. A part of what we do to honor them, every time we go to one of these precincts, we do a moment of silence and we talk about how they lost their lives going to a domestic violence radio call on 135th street.

Let me go back. So, what I want to say to you, as you have seen all of that, and seen the work, and seen who we are, and what happens to women and children and Black and Brown women when it comes to family court— when it is "just us," it is not "justice" for all.

Let me just tell you a little story. In 2016, I was charged with beating and starving my adopted son, Devonte McGraw. I was brought into family court. ACS was called. No evidence, no priors, and ACS took me to court and said we are going to do something called a removal because you put your child in imminent danger. No evidence. So let me tell you about the bias that Black and Brown women experience when they are entering the family court. I went to that court.

Maybe my experience—I know today—I had to have that experience to be able to help Black and Brown women when they are dealing with the court systems. I was charged with neglect and abuse of my adopted son. I adopted him on St. Patrick's Day, 2016. Four months later, I was whisked into family court. I don't know that the judge is in here, I don't remember her name, all of my files are packed away here. The judge looked at what ACS wrote on those papers that this child was in imminent danger and that his needs were not met. He was at Columbia College, going to one of the most amazing programs there—I got him in there with my contacts. He was one of those explorers. I got him in the best schools, I got him a trauma therapist. He had the very best life. But because the trauma and because of what I had to experience with the courts, because of the system, because of the systemic racism, and because of this steepness and this denial, because that is what we experience. I did. And because of the deflect of what I experienced in those courts, and the dismissing of "Excuse me, you have been charged with this and that's it." There was no evidence. I had my child removed. Four months later. The judges, the district attorneys, the lawyers, and ACS, no one in that system wanted to find out how a woman that adopted a child, four months later, he was being removed because he was in imminent danger. There were no marks, there was no abuse. They took him down to where they took him to. There was no investigation. But this is one I want to tell you about, the experience of Black and Brown women as opposed to their other counterparts. And I will just leave it like that.

There are two different justices when it comes to the courts, when it comes to Black and Brown women and their children. They are the new modern day slave trade, they are going back to the plantation, and you want to know why I say that? Because when you take one child, and you put them in the system, the family court gets paid, the judges get paid, the lawyers get paid, the foster agency gets paid, the therapists get paid, the director of the foster agency. Everyone is getting paid off of one child. I once had a meeting with twelve people, and at this meeting everyone was saying that they can't get this child the help that he needs. I was innocent, I was innocent and accused of badgering and beating and starving my fifteen-year-old son. I went through a system that was unjust, unfair, and it had nothing in place to resolve my issue. We were just passed around, tossed like salad, and there was no resolution, so I just had to sign the paper saying I put him in there so I could relieve myself. And I had to fight to get my name off the registry.

At the time I was building my agency, and any of you know, if you have a city agency and you work with the city, you cannot have any charges against you. So, I was in jeopardy of losing everything, and no one, even the judge who signed the papers to remove my adopted son, no one asked the question, "How? Why? Let's maybe see what happened and get some services for this family." There was absolutely nothing in place. Absolutely nothing in place. And today I

go to the courts and fight battles with these women. I had a woman recently—she is a Black woman and she was married to a white man. He went down to the courts and everything he told them, every single thing, was not true. And they took her children away. But we were able to get her children back. We were able to get her children back. So, part of what we do as a critical response team is get in there and get these women the help that they need.

We respond, we take action. We go in because we understand that there is a critical issue and that domestic violence is real, and that if we are going to make any change in these courts, and if we are going to change that “just-us” to “justice for all,” every single body in this room is going to have to take some accountability. Just take a deep dive, it won’t hurt. It won’t hurt for you to just say, “Wait a minute, let me just investigate for myself. I don’t have to look at what ACS is always saying.” Because that system needs a lot of help. I am not going to blame anyone because blame is not going to help. But what I am going to say to you today is that you have an opportunity right now in this room to use your power to make a difference for Black and Brown women, because they are incapable of dealing with the marginalizing and the disenfranchising of where Black women come from, the circumstances that we come from.

The sad thing about that, and what I had to realize very quickly, is that the court systems and the systems are machines. It is impossible to beat a machine because it does not have a pulse. What is this? It is a piece of wood. There is no pulse, there is nothing there. It is designed that way, so what are we going to do to change that? Women come in here who are broken down and beaten and need help. What are we going to do to have some kind of compassion and take that machine away and give a heartbeat to these systems so that we can begin to change them?

So, two things I want to leave you with. One is the mathematical miracle that I am here today. I am here today because fifteen years ago I left New York City. I didn’t read too much. You know what I did? I watched Erica King get better. She got fine men, she got therapy. Erica King was doing her thing and I was sitting on the couch like, “Erica, do this!” And I was sitting on the couch, my life just withering away, and I was watching somebody else get some therapy, smoking my cigarettes, drinking my Coca-Cola. But when I was shifted and moved by the power greater than myself, I went up north. I was so battered and beaten and broken. I didn’t know where I was. I left in the middle of the night, I didn’t know where I was because the person I was with, he was very dangerous. And if I didn’t get out, he would have killed me because that is who he was. God bless him today.

But when I got up to this shelter, all the way Upstate—Lifetime movie, middle of the night, whisked out, a car comes to get me, and I am like “Where

am I going?" But someone handed me this Bible, good old Bible. I didn't read it because I just thought I was God. Isn't that strange? But I knew I had to do something different. So, I get up to this place, I open this Bible, I asked the counselor in this shelter, can you show me where the church is? I just want to go, and somebody told me to pray so I am going to try this because nothing else seems to be working. So I get up to the place, they find me this big beautiful church, I get up on the steps, and God as my witness I stand here with you, I opened the book, started praying for protection, and I said, "God if you want me here, and if I'm supposed to be here, if at the end of the road my life is here, then I need you to show me a sign that I need to be here." Because I was getting ready to go back to find him like Lisa's daughter—remember she went back to talk to the abuser? And she lost her life. But I didn't know any better, I wasn't educated. And I went and I got on the steps, and I started praying, and as I lifted my head there was a white man and two Black men and there was some other white men and a dog, and I lifted my head and God as my witness I am like, "What are you doing here?" It was the President of the United States: Bill Clinton. He lived somewhere there and he was walking his dog and the dog came and jumped on me and I was like, "What is this?" And I said "Mr. President, what can I do? Can I come talk to you? What is protocol?" He said come. I went to Bill Clinton, God as my witness.

I dropped my story like I was Run-DMC, rapping down baby. I said, "Let me tell you my life." He said, "I know your life." I said, "I used to have a little drinking problem. I don't drink anymore." He said, "Yeah I know." I shouldn't have said that because that might go national. Who cares? You can look it up. Anyway, Bill Clinton and I sat there, and we talked, and I told him my whole life and how I got there and that I was scared and that I asked for protection before he can come find me and kill me. And he said Secret Service and the President of the United States are here and this whole town is safe.

I am in the safest place ever. I said "What?" Because that was a lot back then. Now I am like "This isn't right." Now I have some education, I would change up the language. And Bill, President of the United States of America told me, "You are going to be all right. Come here, Stephanie. Let's walk. You are going to be all right." And I said, "Well, Mr. President, I have the Bible." He says, "give me the Bible." He signs the Bible, God bless you, the date and time, and 'you are going to be all right.'

That was my mathematical miracle. That was something, there was a calling on my life, and there was something for me to do. I prayed at the 11th hour and the President of the United States showed up with the Secret Service. That was it. I was on my way.

Let me close with this. Domestic violence is a pandemic. We must address this as this is so unfortunate. Domestic violence is not going to be changed or it won't get better until we all make a difference. We have to challenge ourselves to make a difference. Because of domestic violence we see all the murders which are happening in our city. Domestic violence is increasing, and there is nothing being done about it, so let me challenge you, as I did that real nice Bill Clinton.

What are you going to do to make a difference? You, my sisters, fabulous with the hair, the hair is fabulous, what you going to do to use your privilege? Maybe you didn't have to come from poverty? Maybe you didn't have to go to bed hungry? Maybe you didn't go to school because you didn't have clothes or shoes? Maybe you had an opportunity to have choices or to have food at your table? So, as you leave this conference today and you go out to the universe, I want you and you and every single last one of you to just raise your conscious level. Stay woke— don't fall asleep because it is comfortable. I want you to get a little bit uncomfortable because that is what shifts things. Get a little uncomfortable. Get a little deep. Get off the surface. I have been tossed around all my life. Get a little deep, because my experience as a Black woman, I am pretty sure, was not your experience or where you come from and what you had to experience. But I am not the only one— there are thousands of women who are experiencing horrendous bias and structural racism in these systems. And just because we don't want to get a little uncomfortable, we just go along with the power—that is the way it is. So, I challenge you, get a little uncomfortable, and make a difference, because you all— we— have the power to make a difference.