

Just Victim Advocacy During a Pandemic

Introduction [00:00:05] Now, this is recording, RTI International Center for Forensic Science presents Just Science.

Voiceover [00:00:22] Welcome to Just Science, a podcast for justice professionals and anyone interested in learning more about forensic science, innovative technology, current research, and actionable strategies to improve the criminal justice system. In episode two of our Sexual Assault Awareness Month mini season, Just Science sat down with Marya Simmons, founder and CEO of Shift in Notion Consulting, to discuss victim advocacy during a pandemic. The arena of sexual assault response has seen a gradual shift toward victim focused thinking over the last few years. Marya Simmons and Shift in Notion Consulting are at the forefront of this movement. They provide training and technical assistance for trauma informed, victim centered approaches to sexual assault investigation. Listen along as our guest discusses the beginning of Shift in Notion Consulting and resources available to victims during the Covid-19 pandemic in this episode of Just Science. This season is funded by the National Institute of Justice's Forensic Technology Center of Excellence. Here is your host, Tyler Raible.

Tyler Raible [00:01:28] Hello, hello, hello and welcome to Just Science. I'm your host, Tyler Raible with the Forensic Technology Center of Excellence, a program of the National Institute of Justice. We are smack dab in the middle of a sexual assault response reform mini season in honor of Sexual Assault Awareness Month. In order to continue the conversation in this arena, our guest today is Miss Marya Simmons, the founder and CEO of Shift in Notion Consulting. Ms. Simmons is a nationally recognized victim advocate and trainer with a specialty in the formation of multidisciplinary teams and sexual assault response teams. Welcome, Marya. I'm thrilled to have you here with us today.

Marya Simmons [00:02:02] Good afternoon, Tyler. Thank you for having me.

Tyler Raible [00:02:05] So, Marya, before we dive into today's conversation, I want to make sure that we're, that we're using the words correctly, that we have the appropriate nomenclature. So depending on which community you're working with, which group of people you're working with, some prefer the term survivor, some prefer the term victim. Can you talk a little bit about maybe this dichotomy between these terms or even how we're going to use them today?

Marya Simmons [00:02:25] So through my professional experience working as a victim advocate, I worked within a community-based agency supporting survivors of sexual assault and the terminology survivors use more with community-based agencies. I also worked in the capacity of being a systems-based advocate where we identify victims as victims of a crime. And so a lot of my conversation, I intertwined both because I worked on both sides of the fence. But no offense to a victim or a survivor throughout the process, but really just how my engagement has shifted throughout my career in how we identify victims throughout the process.

Tyler Raible [00:03:06] So please correct me if I'm wrong, but it sounds to me that we're going to kind of use these words interchangeably, especially as we're shifting the conversation between law enforcement, between prosecution, between survivor support, between advocacy. It's just to kind of prime the rest of the conversation we're going to have.

Marya Simmons [00:03:22] That's correct. If you think about another discipline that works with victims of sexual assault, medical professionals would consider them as patients.

Tyler Raible [00:03:31] OK, great. So I'm glad that we're able to establish that. Of course, as you're aware, April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. What does this mean to you?

Marya Simmons [00:03:39] What Sexual Assault Awareness Month means to me is spreading awareness about the critical importance of educating the realities of sexual assault and how it impacts victims and their families. It's giving acknowledgment to survivors and treating them with dignity and respect. But it's also about breaking the myths that may exist surrounding sexual violence and sexual assault and really just having the opportunity to filter in the facts that exist that need to be shared to the public about really the impactful work that's available for survivors of sexual assault. And giving them the platform to know that they don't have to live in silence, that there is support available for them, not for just this month, but also for every month throughout the year, and really just elevating that message.

Tyler Raible [00:04:27] That's one thing that always intrigued me about having Awareness Month. It's almost as if it's not talked about for the rest of the year. So I think it's a great point that you make that, you know, it's not just April. There are resources that are made available 24/7, 365. And I'm thrilled that we get this opportunity to promote a lot of this, to help give that voice, especially in such an underserved population. Can you tell us a little bit about maybe one aspect of being a victim advocate that you find really resonates with you or you find really impactful?

Marya Simmons [00:04:54] Absolutely. That's being the survivor's voice. I truly believe that in my work that there are so many victims that I have worked with that may not have the courage to be able to come forward to report what has happened to them or having, knowing that there is the support that's out there to help them navigate through the system, which could be very scary and fearful for a lot of people who have never engaged in the system. It's being able to give them the ability to just focus on the things that they need to focus on as far as engagement with their cases. There's a lot of different nuances that that occur in the paths of victims lives that turn their lives upside down due to their assault. Being able to really just individualize my interactions, identifying with their immediate needs are so they can focus on their cases, but letting them know that they don't have to go through the system or this experience alone.

Tyler Raible [00:05:50] I think there's incredible value in that, especially from the survivors and the victims that I've spoken to. They really, they really talk about how imposing the system can be. So having somebody there along the way makes it a little less imposing. It's still, you know, a terrifying prospect. But having an experienced person in your corner probably makes it easier, right?

Marya Simmons [00:06:08] Correct. To be able to explain what the steps are and what they're going to have to experience, who they're going to be working with, understanding that this process is not easy, but it can be a process where you can come out with resiliency, healing, and being able to have that empowerment throughout the process to say that I did participate and I was able to hold my offender accountable.

Tyler Raible [00:06:32] That's wonderful. I mean, the advocate's role is so important, both normally and then also now that everything is happening virtually. We can also talk about the transition to virtual stuff in a second, though. Before we get there, I do want to talk a bit

about your experience with national trainings as a subject matter expert. So what interested you about all these national trainings?

Marya Simmons [00:06:51] Well, I think my real passion with being able to train on these specific topics began with my position at the Cuyahoga County Prosecutor's Office while I was a supervisor for the victim witness unit, where I worked with prosecutors. I worked with law enforcement and really just strengthened the support for survivors throughout the criminal justice system who have been impacted by the untested rape kit initiative, which started in 2013 for Cuyahoga County, and being able to really influence a trauma informed and victim centered approach among all the disciplines that I was working with and strengthening their skills in building rapport and sustaining engagement with victims on their cases. But really just having the experiences from chemical dependency and working with individuals with mental health and how those two components contribute to the trauma that a lot of the disciplines were experiencing as to a lack of engagement or involvement with cases. Because there were so many other layers that were existent that weren't being dealt with at the time that I was able to assist with in helping them understand how to best support the victims who brought their cases.

Tyler Raible [00:08:02] So, Marya, aside from the national trainings that you're involved with, it's my understanding that before travel restrictions were really in place, you were working on something in Switzerland. Can you tell me a little bit more about, about what was going on?

Marya Simmons [00:08:14] I had the ability to train on an international level in Switzerland last year with investigators who handled sexual harassment cases within their organization. It was a full day training where I worked with the investigators and really just diving into understanding trauma informed approaches and engaging with the employees who have reported sexual harassment in cases that they were investigating. And really just diving into what trauma looks like, the neurobiology of how trauma impacts the brain and how that affects a victim's engagement throughout their cases. And so they would be able to strengthen their outcomes and the investigations that they were working on.

Tyler Raible [00:08:55] The neurobiology of trauma itself could be its own season of Just Science. So hearing about this training in Switzerland, where you're, you know, you dive in head first, it's fascinating in terms of a research angle and also from a victim support angle. Right? To make sure that they're being taken care of in every way that we possibly can. I'm still fairly new to the arena of sexual assault response reform. But one thing that I have noticed in a lot of conversations is that it's fairly recent that there's been this focus on mental health, on these mental health issues, you know, that this wellness aspect. Can you talk a little bit more about the importance of mental wellness, especially on the victim side?

Marya Simmons [00:09:31] OK, so when we're talking about mental health and just building resiliency for victims of sexual assault, there's a strong focus of being able to, to be able to identify any types of triggers that could exasperate the experiences that a victim may have, because as we know, we are engaging with victims at certain points of their cases, but they also still have their lives that they're dealing with outside of their case. So being cognizant of being able to mentally and emotionally support victims throughout their case while still considering those barriers and addressing those barriers, for them to be able to be stronger throughout the process is of utmost importance.

Tyler Raible [00:10:14] This concept of barriers, a lot of people maybe outside the system that aren't necessarily experienced with it will look and be like, well, you know, why aren't these things getting reported? Why is the criminal justice system so intimidating? But we've looked at the numbers surrounding different cultural barriers, why things are getting reported by people of color. The Native American communities have this high number of unreported assaults is one thing that I've noticed is this gathering of momentum around the need to support all of these marginal groups and one that is of particular interest are transgender survivors. There's, they are significantly under supported population, especially in this arena. What are your thoughts on ensuring that transgender survivors get the support that they need?

Marya Simmons [00:10:53] Well, first, I think it's important to support the idea that a survivor, no matter who they are or how they identify themselves, they're still survivors. And I think that believing in the philosophy of ensuring that transgender survivors get the support that they need ultimately begins with the fundamental belief that every survivor should be treated with dignity and respect and their needs should be individualized and they should be able to have equitable access to the services that specifically address their individual needs, their unique needs. In order to look past and remove any biases that may exist regarding the transgender, cultural, the LGBTQ community and populations and really just seeing them as a person or being able to give them the safe space to be able to be who they are and just focusing in on the situation that brought them to the attention of law enforcement or the prosecutors and being able to say, this is my focus. I'm not worried about what lifestyle that you're living or who you may identify as, but that you are a victim, that I'm trying to make sure that you have a healing process through this, that we're holding offenders accountable and that you have a voice and your voice is impactful through this process. And that comes with understanding that people should be treated with dignity and respect no matter who they are.

Tyler Raible [00:12:21] It's like -.

Marya Simmons [00:12:22] I think I want to redo that.

Tyler Raible [00:12:23] OK, go for it, absolutely, take another crack at it. Do you meet a prime question again or do you want to are you good to just roll right in?

Marya Simmons [00:12:32] I think I'm gonna - I'm going to just start and dive right back in.

Tyler Raible [00:12:36] Sounds great.

Marya Simmons [00:12:39] So first, I would like to support the idea that a survivor is a survivor, no matter who they are, who they identify themselves as. I believe that the philosophy in ensuring that transgender survivors get the support that they need ultimately begins with a fundamental belief that every survivor is unique and so are their individual needs. Removing any biases, truly submerging ourselves and identifying what is best for a survivor by allowing them to feel safe enough to open up and trust that the individuals that are working with them truly have their best interests at hand, and that they will be fear of intimidation or fear of victim blaming or frustrations with the system because they are going to be seen as a survivor and not by an identity that they represent themselves with. I think that every personal, excuse me, I believe that every professional entity working with victims of sexual assault should have specialized training, especially working with this population, so that they understand how to really, truly engage with them and

communicate with them and being able to be comfortable with having conversations with how they identify themselves and identifying them as they wish to be identified.

Tyler Raible [00:14:03] It really is kind of the application of this people first language, right? I mean, this is kind of at it's, at it's ideal, taking the individual person, looking at the individual person, the victim, the survivor, and making sure that their needs are being met. Not necessarily that you could fit them into a mold within a certain system, but to make sure that every action kind of revolves around their wellness or their well-being to the point where we can make this scary system a little less scary. It's going to be a little more likely that people are going to engage in the system itself.

Marya Simmons [00:14:35] And that's definitely the importance of collaboration, and working with multidisciplinary teams, is understanding that when you work together as a team, you're more impactful in supporting victims of any type of crime, but specifically victims of sexual assault. Because they see that there's a team behind them. They see that there's a passionate dedication to really, truly diving in to support them throughout the process - whether that's through a victim advocate, whether that's through law enforcement, whether that's at the prosecution stage - that we are all here to help them through the fear or intimidation of going through the criminal justice system.

Tyler Raible [00:15:10] So is that the thought process that kind of got Shift in Notion to start?

Marya Simmons [00:15:15] Actually, exactly where Shift in Notion was founded, standing on the principles of education and training for law enforcement and prosecutors and victim advocates and strengthening their skills and knowledge in really effectively supporting survivors of sexual assault throughout the process. My passion for the training and the education for the professionals that work with survivors of sexual assault in giving them the tools and the resources that they need to really boost their techniques on victim engagement and bettering the outcomes of their cases. I believe that understanding how to treat people and shifting the way that people think about perceived notions and being able to just truly appreciate the fact that we all have unique talents and skills that we can contribute in this process to be able to better elevate victims voices and execute a more efficient process for victims as they go through the system.

Tyler Raible [00:16:15] You really are, especially with Shift in Notion, kind of at the forefront of this paradigm shift, right, where my conversations with members of law enforcement, this kind of, this kind of training, this kind of consulting is essential. You and I have spoken to certain members of law enforcement who used to approach victim interviewing and stuff of that nature as if they're interviewing a perp, right? And that's not the kind of conversation you'd have, that doesn't get the job done. So it seems like Shift in Notion then is kind of bridging the gap between what was being done from, you know, when they first started listing these crimes in the 80s, maybe even before up until now. And now, trying to make it so that it's more of a victim focus instead of a crime focus.

Marya Simmons [00:16:54] And so if you're thinking about the cases that are associated with the untested rape kit initiative per se, we're talking about cases that may have gone back 20 years. And so there was not the same caliber of training of the law enforcement officers or prosecutors as there is today. There wasn't an understanding of the importance of victim advocacy, engagement, and supporting victims throughout the process. And so I truly think that victim centered interviewing is completely different from suspect interviewing and transforming how law enforcement understands that in the ability for them

to say, you know, this technique works a lot better than it used to. I'm able to be more comfortable with having conversations with victims and allowing a victim to talk about their assault in their own words and their, at their own pace and just being able to give them the space and the time that they need to truly process what they're going to have to go through and what they have gone through with perfect strangers. And so knowing that you have professionals that are all working together with that common understanding truly makes an impact on how that victim is going to engage throughout their case.

Tyler Raible [00:18:03] You're right. So the concept of just supporting the victim throughout the whole process is paramount to success. And last year when you spoke to Just Science, we talked about the importance of advocacy in terms of reinforcing communication, in terms of ensuring and protecting the rights of the victim and overall just being a resource throughout the entire journey of, the entire journey through the system. So now that we're a year into the pandemic, has this changed? Is it still the same, the same plan as it was last year, even though the means are different?

Marya Simmons [00:18:31] I think that because of the pandemic, there have been opportunities to truly advance in the access for victims of sexual assault, not just from having virtual platforms and engaging with law enforcement, but also with therapy. I mean, there there's access to therapy where victims can participate at home. They don't have to necessarily have to weigh going to work or missing work and being able to really address their needs and desires for being in therapy. The access for being able to speak with law enforcement virtually gives them a safe space to be able to talk about what happened to them and participate in the process. I also think that the creative opportunities for community agencies have also increased in providing access to survivors as well in being able to meet the needs and coming out to the community and providing twenty four hour access to survivors that may not have been available prior to the pandemic. The creativity that has been implemented within the systems to truly ensure that there are not so many gaps in communication with law enforcement, with victims, but also that there is the option that victims can participate in their cases without having to come forward in person, which reduces the anxiety and the fear of having to come down to a police department, sometimes even having to go down to the courthouse to, in facing their perpetrator that way as well.

Tyler Raible [00:20:01] So you mentioned therapy, right. Which I can only imagine is, for a lot of people, going to be essential. It's going to be something that really, really helps. And we talked about the importance of multidisciplinary teams. I guess my question is, is therapy generally included when we talk about multidisciplinary teams or is it specifically just law enforcement and advocacy?

Marya Simmons [00:20:20] So I think the therapy goes hand in hand when we are engaging with victims. We definitely want to make sure that they have access to those types of services because as we know, we're opening up the wounds that they may have tried to suppress over the years or just suppressed, period, if it's a more current case, without having to deal with it. But if they know that there's access available for them to participate in, that can truly help their healing process as well as their ability to be able to engage in their cases. That's one of the primary focuses that I have when I am doing individualized assessments of working with victims, is asking them, have they ever participated in any type of therapy or do they need to participate in any type of therapy? And a lot of times survivors may not be ready at that moment, they are still trying to process what was happening around them or trying to process what happened. And so giving them that opportunity to have a safe space with a trained professional who is able to

really just dive in and work with the survivor at their pace when they're ready is important for the process as well. And not just for victim advocates to know that that piece of working with survivors, but also for law enforcement and prosecutors. With the multidisciplinary teams that I work with, they understand that importance. And it's also an increased presence for mental health providers to be able to participate with multidisciplinary teams as well so they can share their experiences and their expertise to the team as well.

Tyler Raible [00:21:47] So I want to shift gears a little bit here. We talked about this very briefly in terms of having access. And when we spoke last year, one of the major challenges that we talked about was underreporting and having access, especially when you're, when you're stuck at home and you might be living with your abuser. You might be in a situation where you can't drive somewhere. You don't have access to Internet. Do you think these challenges have gotten a little easier for victims or are people still struggling to approach the system?

Marya Simmons [00:22:13] I believe that the access could definitely be getting easier for survivors. One of the barriers that existed when the pandemic first started was going into the hospital, the fear of going into a hospital to have an exam completed. There was a lack of victim advocacy support within the hospital settings because everyone had to practice social distancing. And so having access to a victim advocate during a forensic exam at the hospital was very minimal or not existent at all. And so having that support system within hospitals for survivors when they're coming in at their rawest form, the most vulnerable form, was a critical piece that was missing at the very beginning. I believe now that that access is more available for survivors to have that victim advocate there, if not in the room, but directly having that access and that linkage to a victim advocate directly after their visit to a hospital. I also think that having access to the community has opened back up as well. Now that agencies are opening back up that are essential, agencies are opening back up, they may have more opportunities and access to transportation to get to the places that they want to go.

Tyler Raible [00:23:25] For sure. You raise a good point, though, and I might be showing a little bit of my privilege here, but there are barriers that I don't even think about. Not everybody has a car. Not everybody can get to a hospital quickly. Not everybody can afford to take time off work or to go through all of this stuff that follows an assault. Now that we know we can address these additional barriers and stressors, do you have any advice for survivors who are trying to seek support or trying to gain access to support during the pandemic?

Marya Simmons [00:23:52] That there are resources available. If you don't know what resources are available within your communities, you can definitely reach out to the national platforms, such as RAINN, or your local rape crisis centers that would be able to link you to services and support that are needed. Most agencies provide the twenty four hour access to hotlines that are confidential, that you can text or chat with trained advocates that would be able to answer questions or kind of just process some of the things that victims may be going through to be able to address their immediate concerns or their needs or questions, and that they're there to help in an authentic and transparent manner.

Tyler Raible [00:24:31] I love the use of authenticity and transparency. I feel as though the survivors that I've talked to, one thing that they've expressed to me is of the utmost importance is feeling like they know what's going on. They want to know where their cases are. They want to know what the status is. If there was a CODIS hit, if there wasn't a

CODIS hit, you know. So I can imagine that transparency that you mentioned is probably crucial for at least the psychological well-being, if nothing else.

Marya Simmons [00:24:58] It's critical to keep victims informed about their cases. There may be victims that may not want to engage initially on their case, but once they truly see that the professionals that are working on their cases are staying engaged with them, they have built rapport with them. They're building that trust and they're actually seeing the consistency in communication with them makes a huge difference. And throughout the case, if victims are not getting their immediate needs addressed and they're feeling that no one is calling them back, that they're not getting the information on what's going on with their cases. Whether that's a continuance. Whether a case is still under investigation, those little nuggets can make so much difference for them in engaging in their cases because they know that if they pick up the phone and they have a question, someone's going to call them back. They know that they're going to get an answer to a question or concern or even if it's just I don't have an answer for you right now, but as soon as I do, I'll follow back up with you. Follow up and communication consistently throughout the case is so empowering for a victim to have in giving them the control throughout the process.

Tyler Raible [00:26:04] We've talked a lot about the negatives. And I think just across the board, the human, the human condition right now is not thrilled about being cooped up inside all the time, not being able to go out where you want to go. And when we talk about restriction of access, we talk about barriers in terms of supporting survivors, is there anything that the pandemic has brought to attention that's been positive?

Marya Simmons [00:26:24] I think that the momentum is still there. Regardless of the pandemic, the work still needed to be done. The work is still being done. The impact of really just addressing the need for supporting survivors of sexual assault is still there. There are increased advocacy groups. There are, there's more of a passion and dedication from the multidisciplinary teams that I'm working with, that I have worked with, and that I'm seeing across the board that really, truly want to invest in the importance of providing trauma informed and victim centered approaches, and really just being able to strengthen their skills and their knowledge and abilities to be able to strengthen their case outcomes, but ensuring that victims have a voice throughout the process as well.

Tyler Raible [00:27:10] We're getting close to the end of our time together, but there are a couple more things that I'm interested in hearing about. One, I know that you're about to graduate with your master's. Can you tell me a little bit about your degree? What's going on with that?

Marya Simmons [00:27:20] Sure. So I am going to be completing my master's in criminal justice administration. This will be my third degree on criminal justice that I am going to be completing. So I'm very excited about that. And prior to doing criminal justice, I engaged in the social work field, which prompted my experience as being a chemical dependency counselor. But again, I also noticed the gaps that were in the system when I was doing chemical dependency counseling. And that's what prompted me to go into the criminal justice field to be able to provide that impactful systemic change that was needed for victims.

Tyler Raible [00:27:54] And then can you tell us a little about what you've got going on in the future? Is there anything you're excited about now that you're almost done graduating?

Marya Simmons [00:28:00] Yes, I am definitely excited about graduating. I have definitely invested in my professional career and trying to advance my educational experiences so that I can elevate my message to broader populations and in groups that need to be able to understand how to really support survivors of sexual assault, but really just shifting the notions of ideals and treating people with respect and dignity, no matter if it's a victim or whether that's an employee, whether that's anyone else that you work with, that everyone deserves to have that type of engagement with people. I am excited about potentially being able to start traveling again. The pandemic has truly impacted my willingness to be able to travel across the country right now. I'm looking forward to that potential, but more so continuing my conversations around these topics and training and educating multidisciplinary teams and strengthening those multidisciplinary teams to be able to continue their work that they're doing with survivors of sexual assault.

Tyler Raible [00:29:03] I completely understand on the, on the travel bug. I used to travel for the Forensic Technology Center of Excellence and then all of a sudden, I just wasn't. So I understand, but I think that, you know, when we can get back out there, especially when you can get back out there, your impact is palpable. And, you know, at the national level, you can see it.

Marya Simmons [00:29:21] It has impacted my ability to just really connect with my audience. You, I missed that aha moment where they catch onto something that they may not have thought about and just that personal engagement, shaking a person's hand or, you know, introductions that way, but really just authentically connecting with the people that I'm working with. So using the virtual platform is new for me, it's taking me out of my comfort zone. But I also know that it's also another ability for me to connect and continue to provide my message to those that need to hear it.

Tyler Raible [00:29:54] Before we wrap up here, are there any final thoughts you'd like to share with our listeners? We've given them so much digest.

Marya Simmons [00:30:00] That the work that you're doing is critical, that it's important and it's needed. And so I think that the work that we do, we absorb so many other people's experiences and just trying to stay focused on the work and the goals that we all have is important and impactful for the victims that we're working with. I also believe that having a voice at the table is important for all of us. Our contributions matter - how to make systemic changes, how to continue to educate and spread awareness about sexual assault and sexual violence, how we can mitigate the barriers that that exist in victim engagement and rapport building, and how we can support each other through the process. The work needs to be done, but we also need to be able to take care of ourselves in the process. And I hope to be able to continue with my mission and my purpose in really just elevating that message to others.

Tyler Raible [00:30:52] And I have no doubt in my mind that you will. But unfortunately, that's all the time we have today. So first, I'd like to thank Marya. Thank you for sitting down with us to discuss Shift in Notion, to discuss supporting survivors, to discuss just everything going on in the world. So thank you so much for taking your time out of your day to be with us.

Marya Simmons [00:31:08] Absolutely. Thank you for having me.

Tyler Raible [00:31:10] It was an absolute pleasure. And I'd also like to thank our listeners for joining us today. If you enjoyed today's conversation, be sure to like and follow Just

Science on your podcast platform of choice. For more information on today's topic and resources in the forensic field, make sure to visit forensiccoe.org. I'm Tyler Raible and this has been another episode of Just Science.

Voiceover [00:31:30] Next week, Just Science sits down with Dr. Patricia Melton, co-director of the Bureau of Justice Assistance National Sexual Assault Kit Initiative Training and Technical Assistance Program to discuss a recently published resource geared toward sexual assault response reform. Opinions or points of views expressed in this podcast represent a consensus of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of its funding.