

Just a Survivor's Perspective and Reflection

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

Voiceover [00:00:21] 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 one of our 2021 Sexual Assault Awareness mini season, Just Science sat down with author, nonprofit founder, and survivor Natasha Alexenko to discuss her book and the impact of Sexual Assault Awareness Month. Every survivor of sexual assault has their own story. Some have successful conclusions, many more do not. But as Natasha Alexenko says, each survivor is more than just their story. From advocacy to legislation, Natasha works tirelessly to improve the response to sexual assault in our country. Listen along as she discusses the impact of her book, the introduction of new legislation to improve sexual assault investigation, and best practices for supporting survivors 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 [00:01:35] Thank you for joining us. 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. April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month, and in this mini season, we're going to be talking about some emerging issues in the sexual assault response reform arena. Today, our guest is Natasha Alexenko. Natasha is the author of a book, *The Survivor's Journey: From Victim to Advocate*. She's also the founder of Natasha's Justice Project, a nonprofit organization focused on ending the sexual assault kit backlog through education, advocacy, and funding. Natasha, welcome to Just Science. I'm thrilled to have you here today.

Natasha Alexenko [00:02:09] Thank you so much for having me. I am thrilled to be here.

Tyler Raible [00:02:13] Let's get started. We're going to dive right in. As you're aware and as I've just said, April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. Can you tell me a little bit about what that means to you?

Natasha Alexenko [00:02:20] Yes. April, Sexual Assault Awareness Month is such a special time. I think that as I go to years past in April, it's an opportunity for me to really meet and connect with other survivors. That helps with my healing process and bring to the public's attention the issue sexual assault survivors face - the perils, the challenges - and really focus on ways that we can improve sexual assault response. And it is really just such an important month for survivors. And it really is a chance for me to really remind myself the power we have, the power our voices have in a unified fashion. So I always look forward to it.

Tyler Raible [00:03:09] I completely understand. And from my experience talking with you and from talking to other people, you know, power and choice is a huge component of the awareness aspect of it. I want to talk a little bit about Natasha's Justice, if that's OK. Can you tell me a little bit about this initiative?

Natasha Alexenko [00:03:25] Certainly. You know, after, you know, I received justice - and again, justice looks different for everybody, and in my case, I was very fortunate to have the man that assaulted me at gunpoint found, and I had my day in court - and after

he was sentenced, I approached the prosecutors in my case and I said, you know, what can I do? Because I just wanted to ensure that everybody also had the access to justice, the support that I had. I wanted to not be an anomaly. I wanted to ensure that my story was utilized in a way that others could kind of find the same sense of peace I did. Again, perhaps not in the form of a trial, but something of that nature. And the prosecutor, Melissa Mourges in New York City, in my case, she said, just really talk about what happened. Use your voice. And that really empowered me. I started an organization. This is in 2011. There was so much growing to do. I learned so much. I learned to sit and listen to others, other survivors, experts in the field, prosecutors, law enforcement, all these individuals really, really are the ones that created Natasha's Justice Project. But I still continue to learn. I still continue to listen. That's so very important. And primarily, of course, things, as life is, that they get busy. But I still really work hard on initiatives, particularly around rape kit reform. In fact, right now I'm working on a legislation in California that is so very important and working with Joyful Heart Foundation, the amazing Senator Connie Leyva and a prosecutor, District Attorney Nancy O'Malley, who has been fighting for rape kit reform for decades. And we're really creating this bill that will include a survivor portal and a tracking system. So in other words, we really want to empower survivors in the process. So after a rape kit test is done, we want to give survivors an opportunity to see where their kit is in the process. At present, law enforcement, the labs, they're aware in California where the kit is. And we thought, gosh, it's so important to include survivors in this process. And Connie Leyva, DA O'Malley, they recognize that by empowering survivors and including them in the process, it kind of creates this symbiotic relationship between law enforcement, between the labs, so that, you know, at the end of the day, it's about public safety. And when you include us in that process, we feel empowered. We feel more comfortable to share. We become better, I guess, complaining witnesses, as it were. And, you know, I'm just so pleased to be a sponsor of this legislation through Natasha's Justice Project. And that's where we really are today. We kind of started going, OK, there's all these rape kits. And then, of course, funding came along to process these kits. And so it's kind of always evolving. Natasha's Justice Project, really, I mean, it's a service organization. It's there to serve the needs of survivors.

Tyler Raible [00:06:44] It definitely sounds like Natasha's Justice has this national reach. As you were talking about this, it reminded me of a section of your book. Near the end, you talk about you as a child of immigrants now participating in lawmaking, helping lawmakers make the country a safer place. And I know you've been doing this - well, are there any other large initiatives that you've been a part of on a national scale outside of the one going on in California right now?

Natasha Alexenko [00:07:10] Yes, I actually recently joined an organization called Voice Amplified, and they have been doing incredible work globally. They work with WHO, UNICEF, UN Women on really addressing the needs of women and girls in areas of conflict nationwide. The incredible work, they're actually just getting ready to release the data in a report they did with UNICEF on surveying organizations around the world about what their needs are with COVID being a major, major influencer. And so I'm really pleased to be creating a similar survey with them for the United States. We want to find out these organizations that serve women and girls, particularly around sexual assault, how are they dealing with COVID? What are some of their hurdles? Are they financial? Are they PPE? How are they communicating with their constituents? Are they able to continue the programs they're doing? And at the end of the day, release this data with a lot of thought, with just a really good effort towards bringing this to the public awareness so that we can help these agencies better serve survivors.

Tyler Raible [00:08:22] And you said that was Voice Amplified, correct?

Natasha Alexenko [00:08:24] Yes. Yes.

Tyler Raible [00:08:25] Perfect. Yeah, I've heard some talk about, about the work they're doing. And I think they did a survey in Europe already, if I'm not mistaken.

Natasha Alexenko [00:08:33] Yes. I think it was like forty-four different countries across the world that this survey was distributed. And, you know, I really believe in this idea of cross-pollination. When we take our country - and again, it just kind of like brings back my immigrant roots - but, you know, if we take what's happening worldwide, see what's working and kind of cross-pollinate ideas, share ideas that work with one another - understanding, of course, that there are differences in every country in terms of how laws work, etc. - but at least the base ideas. What's working? If it's working elsewhere, can we utilize it here in the United States and vice versa? I mean, I was recently in Brazil and met with their team there, their CODIS team. And it was incredible to learn from the officials in Brazil all the things they learned from our CODIS system here in the United States. And the fact that they're really taking that so seriously, the training they're doing. They're doing victim centered, trauma informed interviewing processes. They're finding perpetrators through DNA matches. And they're just like, it's really fun to see this kind of fledgling group of people who are just excited at this new project. And really, that's what it's all about. Right. You know, when you look at us globally, like, why not take some of the lessons learned elsewhere and bring them to us? And why don't we share the amazing headway we've made in the United States to ensure the needs of survivors are met across the globe?

Tyler Raible [00:10:10] I think you raise a good point that, and this is something that Just Science has talked about before, but the value of partnerships, especially when we're looking at things that might be interdepartmental, that might be, you know, interstate, intercountry, I guess, in this case, it's a global situation. You did mention, though, talking a little bit about trainings, and I know that you participate nationally in trainings as a subject matter expert. Can you tell me a little bit about what interests you about being involved in these trainings?

Natasha Alexenko [00:10:36] One thing that I have to say has just really, I can't even put into words how it makes me feel is, you know, groups like the Sexual Assault Kit Initiative to understand the value of putting a survivor at the table, that what we have to say and our opinions are essential to moving forward. And that is, again, that's an approach that I would love to see shared elsewhere, because we're really valuable when it comes to the process. So being included as a subject matter expert has been amazing on that, on that end. But on a very personal level, besides being just really honored with the opportunity to share, is just how much I've learned. I really, I'm humbled by the fact that I just have so much to learn and that I get to learn from people who have been doing this for years and really to be part of a group with so many just different practices. We've got law enforcement, we have the advocates, we have scientists, and just bringing us all to the table together to share and really come up with fantastic solutions. It's incredible. And it's really helped me really learn more about sexual assault evidence kits, what barriers they are, what I can do with my voice, what's possible, what's not, what's not possible and what we're working on for the future. So it's just been one of the greatest honors of my life, truly.

Tyler Raible [00:12:12] It really speaks to the value of the interdisciplinary aspect. Right. So we've got law enforcement, we've got forensic scientists, we've got advocates, we've

got survivors - making sure that everybody has a seat at the table, and we all kind of do better working in conjunction with each other. I want to switch gears a little bit. I want to talk about your book. So I read your book last week. I sat down and I just cruised through it. It's powerful. It's compelling. Some of it's a little hard to read, not necessarily because of how it's written, but because of the subject matter. Overall, it was incredible. I would highly recommend it to everybody. But can you tell me a little bit about how this book got started and what it means to you?

Natasha Alexenko [00:12:50] And thank you. So I'm just really touched that you read it. Truly, it's incredible. You know, I'd always kind of enjoyed writing. I really kind of saw my route as being maybe a science fiction author. I didn't think I would be like a memoir writer. I think I'm like anyone else. Right. Like, I don't think my life is particularly interesting. And I just had, really my partner, Scott, he was really encouraging me to share the story. Other friends and family were encouraging me. I ended up just finding this amazing agent who connected me with potential publishers and eventually Grand Harbor Press, Amazon Publishing. We went with them in terms of who would publish my memoir. And it was just such an incredible experience and so incredibly hard, kind of carving out time to sit down and write, particularly something so personal, was really challenging, but also just such a joyful experience and getting to talk to people I hadn't spoken to in years to get their input and just the editing process. Again, a very humbling one. You know, you're like, oh God, I, maybe I'm not a writer here, but it was such a great learning experience and just really like learning about how much support I had through the process. I mean, there are times where my family wasn't exactly happy with me when I was pulling the hair out of my head. And, you know, it's interesting, Tyler, because right prior to the pandemic, Amazon and my agent were talking about doing like a second book. And I was really excited to do it because I think one of my biggest regrets in the book is just not talking about enough people. And then just time going on and saying, oh my gosh, I didn't talk about this person or that person or more about survivors or more about this issue. It's always going to be the case. Right. But still, really, we were like, OK, let's do this. Let's do the second book. Pandemic happened, you'd think, oh my gosh, now you have a lot of time to write the book, but that's really not what's happening. And I've heard this from other people, too. It is just so incredibly difficult to just kind of motivate yourself and be able to kind of find that deep place inside to be inspired. But I think it's OK because even through the pandemic, as I've met with survivors, law enforcement, I'm like, OK, after this is over, there's going to be a lot to talk about. So I'm hoping book two is going to come from an amazing place that I can just carry and share more people's stories and how they've touched me, because there is never going to be a book long enough to thank every single human being who's just made my life better.

Tyler Raible [00:15:41] I totally understand. The book's excellent. One thing I want to, I wanted to cover is that throughout the book there's this underlying message of hope. And as strange as it sounds, because you know, the starting point, for lack of a better word, for the book is pretty grim. It's dark, it's an attack. But the way you write it actually had me laughing at certain points because of some of the stuff you had just pop in and out. The one that immediately came to mind was a conversation you had had with your mother. She said, how did it feel? How did it go? What did you do when you got home? And you said, well, the first thing I did when I got home was clean up dog poo. And it's just, it's such a, like, an interjection from the story as you're reading it. Can you tell me a little bit more about how you can find silver linings, find positive things to talk about in all of this?

Natasha Alexenko [00:16:34] Well, you know, I have to say that I recognize that the privilege I've come from is a very supportive network of friends and family. I also recognize

that I've been very privileged in terms of how I was, the process kind of unfolded and the support I had all the way around. So having said that, you know, that had really given me just such great supportive mechanisms. And, you know, I was really fortunate to have gone into therapy immediately following the assault. And, you know, my friends really helped me continue to remember that things were funny and that life was funny at its core and that people were silly and that at the end of the day, through the whole process, I mean, after the assault, just always remembering the core of who you are, which is, like everyone else, a human being with fears, with hopes. So, yeah, it was funny. The incident you talked about was I had just met Joe Biden and I did this huge press conference. And I think this is, it could be any of those issues. But there are amazing events that have, I've been fortunate to be, have been a part of. But in that one in particular, you know, my mom's like, how was it? What happened? And my poor dog had been left alone for so long that, yeah, you know, I came home and, you know, and clean up dog poo. I mean that, because that's who we are at the end of the day. And that's who everyone is. Right. So that's kind of like the equalizer, as it were. But that part being equal, I do recognize that I have been very, very fortunate in terms of the tools that really brought me to a place where I had hope, where I had humor, where I had anchors, and not everybody has them. And one, it's really important to recognize that not everybody has that and why they don't have that. That's a discussion that is essential to be having. And then what ways can we make sure they do have it? Because everybody, everybody, everybody should have what I had. I'm not anyone special at all. And everybody should feel supported and loved and believed like that. So really underlying everything I do, particularly as I grow and talk to people and learn and see what's going on around me, is to find ways to give other people the strength and the voice that I had. All voices need to be heard, not just mine.

Tyler Raible [00:19:20] That's actually an excellent kind of segue into the next little part of our discussion. You mentioned the importance of the support, of giving voice. I know in your book you mentioned that when you first started telling your story in a national setting, there was an outpouring of other survivors who came forward to talk to you, to confide in you. I'm assuming that continues over the years. But have you, did you see any contacts coming out from the release of your book?

Natasha Alexenko [00:19:50] It was incredible. And, you know, here the book was published in 2018, and to this day, I still hear from people through social media, reaching out through Natasha's Justice Project or through contacts. I mean, I'm so incredibly moved to hear from people across the world who have had similar experiences. Again, there's just a sense of humility and it's just such a humbling thing to know that the words that you have put on paper are connecting you to others, and I've made friends through the book that have made my life better. I've had comments and heard stories that live with me forever. And I've heard from a lot of people in law enforcement who, who've reached out to me through reading the book and said, "I have a survivor that I work with that reminds me of you a lot. This was a really good way for me to understand them better." That is so humbling to hear something like that. I'm surprised, the fact that years later I still continue to hear things.

Tyler Raible [00:21:01] It seems like there's always going to be a need for more people on the front lines of this. And I think that you make an interesting point that even now, you know, we're coming up on three years since the release of the book. You're still getting calls. You're still getting contacts through every possible avenue. Since the release of your book, have you seen any changes in the way the criminal justice system responds to sexual assault? Do you feel that your book is helping or is it helping people? What's your take?

Natasha Alexenko [00:21:29] Yeah, I certainly hope my book is helping people, but I really think, you know, the Me Too movement, there's just so many powerful voices out there that are so much louder today. That doesn't, that doesn't mean that we've cured everything, but I think we've brought a lot of things out into the light. And if anything, there's hope. And I've seen a lot of changes. And perhaps that's not something that somebody who has just been assaulted is seeing. So it's hard, right? Because I don't necessarily want to say, well, gosh, we've cured everything. We're moving forward because it won't feel that way to a lot of people out there. It won't feel that way at all. But I think it's important to note that we're doing things like trauma informed, victim centered interviewing. I mean, that was not the case years ago. I mean, we're growing in that manner. We're creating legislation state by state. I think that's important to note, too. And, you know, we have things on the federal level, but really the states need to address this. And I'm seeing that happen. Like waves, just laws passing, being approached by legislators on both sides of the aisle who are like, we need to do something about sexual assault reform, rape kit reform. And I'm seeing that happen so much more frequently. I'm seeing training going on, you know, again, things that I really hope the survivor that may not be aware of that is aware. And I hope that gives them some sort of help. And truly, it's the voices. It's the voices that the women and men that have been brave enough to share their stories and say, this happened to me. That's what's made the difference. That's how powerful our voices are. It's incredible. It's inspiring.

Tyler Raible [00:23:22] The themes of bravery and hope that are present in some of your talks, that are present in your book, that are present in our conversation right now. But they seem like they're essential to part of the healing process, to the fight to try and, you know, look at this response reform movement as a whole. And I think that one thing we'd be remiss to not discuss here would be, we're entering year two of a pandemic. Obviously, the stress of living in these situations creates additional challenges. There are all sorts of other barriers. Do you have any advice for survivors as far as healing can go during or under quarantine, under a pandemic?

Natasha Alexenko [00:24:01] Really fortunate to be connected with surviv- other survivors through this process, because we have some unique challenges with the compounding pandemic going on in the background. And I get to speak to other survivors. Not, again, not everyone has that opportunity. And I think everyone's journey is different. Everyone's kind of go-to support thing differs. With me that, the biggest thing I've had through this pandemic, again, is just having this network of survivors where we kind of make each other laugh, maybe cry a little because that's OK too, and just kind of recognize how flawed we are, but that we're in it together. And, you know, for me personally, it's just been a joy to be a subject matter expert - do some of that work during the pandemic has been, I just, I'm so fortunate to have that opportunity to continue my work and being able to work. I live in a multigenerational household that also keeps you, kind of keeps you centered, a little frustrated sometimes, but that's great. Ninety-nine-point-nine percent of the time, it's enjoyable. I've really learned to do some self-introspection through this. Transcendental meditation has been key for me. Reading, learning, keeping an open mind, being aware and really just seeing people coming together, but it's so important again to recognize a lot of survivors out there don't have access to the Internet. They may not be able to be in communication with others. They may not have access to certain support mechanisms. And I think for those of us who do have access to those privileges, we need to one, be very grateful we do. And two, what can we do? What can we do for survivors out there who are suffering, who are alone, who don't have access? How do we use where we come

from to help them? So that's a really important discussion that other survivors and I have with one another frequently.

Tyler Raible [00:26:09] It's interesting because you mentioned like an internal method for dealing with loss of, you know, the meditation, the introspection, which is great. But sometimes that's obviously, that's not going to be enough for some people, right? And I think the isolation is a huge factor in addition to the barriers that are going to be in place under normal circumstances. This makes it even harder, right - the induced isolation. Are you aware of any virtual support groups or other ways in which survivors can connect even now that we're entering year two?

Natasha Alexenko [00:26:41] Yeah, I, you know, and again, right. What you say is really important because maybe that's what this pandemic is about, right? It's like going, OK, what are we learning in this and what can we carry on once we've all kind of gone back to the way things were before. But, you know, the groups that I'm a part of are kind of ad hoc. We're just kind of informally meeting. And it's something that probably every time I speak to the other survivors. So, like, what do we do? Like, we need to, like, make some kind of group, a thing. And I have some ideas for that. I think on social media trying to come up with a way we can communicate and make everyone feel safe too, right, because that's a very important component, safe to share, comfortable sharing, making sure that we're addressing everyone's needs, that we have the appropriate mechanisms in place. None of us are necessarily therapists ourselves. We're not mental health experts, recognizing, it's important to recognize we're not. So we're really trying to brainstorm on finding what to do about that. And that's one of the things I'm really interested about doing this, the US survey duplicating the one that happened globally, to just see what - is there a need for that? How do we do that? Because that's a huge recommendation I want to make. How do we create a system for survivors to be connected to each other? Because we all recognize how vital that is. There is not a survivor I've ever spoken to that hasn't said, oh my gosh, speaking to other survivors has been a huge part of my healing journey. We all say that, we all come out of those kind of conversations as better people, as stronger people. So that's certainly something I think that is my next major mission that I'm not doing alone. Again, and just recognizing that we do this, we need to make sure we bring in the right resources. And that's something I've learned from being a subject matter expert. You know, this team, this multidisciplinary team, you're like, OK, I'm a survivor. I see this from my perspective. And now that you, now you speak to an advocate and you're like, oh, right. We really need you for this too. Of course we know that. But you know what I mean, like all the things. Right? So for us to kind of talk to one another, it's important. But we need to make sure that everyone is on the same page and that we are being safe with each other, not just from a privacy perspective, but from a mental health perspective.

Tyler Raible [00:29:06] That's one of the reasons that I love talking to you, is because we worked, we've worked on a couple of projects together before, and you're a problem solver, right? You see an issue and you're like, all right, you're going to attack it from every different angle. How can I make this better? How can I fix things? So in terms of supporting survivors of assault, is there anything that the pandemic has brought to attention that's been positive? You mentioned a little bit, you know, the need to connect with each other. Is there anything else that you'd want to share that you might have seen from your perspective, that's not necessarily as bad as the world would have us make believe right now?

Natasha Alexenko [00:29:38] You know, from the group of survivors I've spoken to, I think we all really need to come to a place where we are kind of faced with ourselves, right. I

think that prior to the pandemic, there was always a distraction somewhere. Right. I think that's true of whether you're a survivor, just like a general human being walking around. It's like, it's easy to kind of put things off because you're distracted by this or I'm just going to go grocery shopping, and I'll think about this later. And I think when you're kind of faced with yourself and you're alone with yourself, those thoughts are something that they have to be truthful. It's not something you can put off or find a distraction elsewhere doing. And I think that's helped us all, at least the group of individuals I've been speaking to, kind of have this like self-reckoning, as it were, and just kind of do some introspective thinking and finding ways that maybe we thought we were kind of healed or we thought we were over this and talking through that, finding techniques to deal with some of that or maybe finding some deep issues that we really never fully dealt with and being able to say, OK, I really need to dive into this. I need to heal this part of me that hasn't really been acknowledged before.

Tyler Raible [00:30:53] I totally understand. It kind of speaks to, once again, that bravery angle. Right. It's looking at, OK, yes, we're in a situation and it's terrible. But the real strength, the real bravery is finding something worthwhile to take from it. Once again, your book is excellent. I would highly recommend it. If somebody wanted to read it, one of our listeners wanted to read it, how would they go about finding it?

Natasha Alexenko [00:31:15] Well, certainly, you know, it can be found online and in, the major bookstores carry it as well. I actually had someone, a friend of mine from back in high school said that they got it at like a major bookstore and just had them order it in when they couldn't find a copy. So, yeah, it's certainly out there. Tyler, I have to say, I'm really touched that you read it. You and I have worked on so many amazing projects. And I think it's amazing that you kind of have this other layer of myself, of me that you know, and I'm always honored to work with you, Tyler, and the rest of the team. That's just so cool.

Tyler Raible [00:31:57] We're always happy to have you. And I agree with you. The community at large is so passionate about what they do about helping people, about making the world safer, about making the world better, about improving, you know, the voice that survivors have. So there's obviously all sorts of incredible things in the works, in the hopper. So what's next for you? Do you have anything coming up you're excited about? I know we talked a little bit about Brazil. Is there anything else going on that you'd want to share?

Natasha Alexenko [00:32:23] You know, I think you had mentioned earlier and as I'm thinking of going, oh my gosh, I can't wait to go back to Portland and see so and so, you know, thinking, you know, it's hard. Right? I think I'm in a really unique position that I'm seeing all the work being done. And I say this genuinely, like, you know, I'm not, I would be completely honest, and I have been and you know that, Tyler, if I think things aren't working, I always put the needs of the survivors first. But I don't think everyone gets to see the people that we see that are working on this and see their level of commitment because they are committed to change and they're so incredibly knowledgeable. That's the thing. And I continue to be humbled by their amazing breadth of information. And I think if everyone were to see what's going on and see the changes being made and the changes being projected for the future, I mean, that's one thing actually is to just see on paper what those are, but to see the people behind that and the level of altruism and the level of compassion, I think that would give anybody hope. So for me to say that I'm hopeful is easy because of the people I'm surrounded by and what I'm seeing and what I get to see. And I really, I'm looking forward to amazing things being done. And here's the other thing. The pandemic isn't stopping us from getting that work done. I mean, we, you know, I talked

about the fact that I'm still getting to work as a subject matter expert. I'm still doing work with Natasha's Justice Project and Voice Amplified. Everyone is so committed to survivors that we're, like, not going to let a pandemic stop us. Like, we'll figure out a way, you know, we're going to do it anyway. That's not going to stop us. And it would be easy to say, well, we can't work on this right now. If everybody could just see through my eyes how great and committed everyone was, I think everyone would be as optimistic as I am and hopeful.

Tyler Raible [00:34:26] I think you're right. It's a lot easier to be hopeful once you see the passionate and frankly brilliant people that are working on all these projects, that are working tirelessly to keep things going, to keep the wheels moving. And you're right, especially in the middle of a pandemic when it would be very easy to hit the pause button and then come back to it, you know, when things get better, as trite as that sounds. So the fact that there are droves of people, all these just brilliant, passionate people still working to making the world better is inspiring. So that your message of hope kind of resonates both in your writing and in the people that are still out there fighting the good fight.

Natasha Alexenko [00:35:04] Right. It's hard to articulate, right? I mean, it's almost something you have to witness. You can't necessarily like I can sit there and tell everyone how great everyone is, but it's hard unless you see them in action. Because, you know, the people I work with don't necessarily get the accolades and they're not necessarily the, uh, and they don't want it, that's the kind of coolest thing. They're pretty laid back and don't want the attention focused on them. They want the attention on survivors over themselves. I mean, amazing.

Tyler Raible [00:35:37] Unfortunately, we're running near the end of our time together. You've been amazing as always. Are there any final thoughts you'd like to share with our listeners? Anything you want to, you know, let resonate as we get ready to close out our conversation?

Natasha Alexenko [00:35:49] I think the most important thing is really to thank everyone for all of the hard work. Thank them for really and truly allowing me to share my story and utilize it to kind of move forward to make this country a safer place for the general public. Because at the end of the day, all this work we're doing is about survivors, about giving them peace and justice, but it is also about public safety. You know, I always talk about the fact the man that raped and robbed me at gunpoint was on a nationwide crime spree afterwards. He was harming other people. He was putting people in danger. I mean, he created a lot of pain for people. So it's important that we do this work for all of those reasons and so much more. And I'm really grateful to be able to be part of that. And with survivors, I think that we're stronger together and we're all at different points in our journeys and we all have bad days and good days. I have really awful days. I think as human beings, we're all like that. But you're never alone, even if you never speak to another survivor. We always kind of, always thinking about the other survivors out there who need to be believed, who need to be trusted, who need to be understood, and that I think that really making a lot of headway. And I don't think anyone in any of the groups I work with is going to stop. And so we're kind of in a place where survivors aren't afraid to come forward, where survivors don't feel alone, where survivors are believed, and where justice is served more, more frequently and where we're holding rapists accountable. And I think that day is on the horizon. I really do. I truly do with all my heart.

Tyler Raible [00:37:46] Thank you for sitting down with Just Science. We talked about your book. We got to talk about Natasha's Justice. We get to talk about all sorts of cool stuff. Thank you for being here today.

Natasha Alexenko [00:37:53] Thank you, Tyler. And thank you very much, everyone, for listening.

Tyler Raible [00:37:58] Everyone, 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 [00:38:16] Next week, Just Science sits down with Marya Simmons, founder and CEO of Shift in Notion Consulting, to discuss victim advocacy during a pandemic. 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.