

Just Trauma-Informed Approaches and Advocacy for Vulnerable Populations

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

Voiceover [00:00:19] 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 the final episode of our 2022 Sexual Assault Awareness Month mini season, Just Science sat down with Natasha Alexenko, a sexual assault survivor, advocate, author, and founder of Natasha's Justice Project, to discuss advocacy for vulnerable populations and trauma-informed approaches to sexual assault. As a sexual assault survivor and advocate, Natasha Alexenko has dedicated her career to improving the lives of sexual assault survivors. She has worked both nationally and internationally to discuss past, present, and future directions for an improved response to sexual assault. Listen along as she discusses sexual assault response reform and her recent trauma-informed advocacy efforts with refugees and Native American populations. This episode is funded by the National Institute of Justice's Forensic Technology Center of Excellence. Some content in this podcast may be considered sensitive and may evoke emotional responses or may not be appropriate for younger audiences. Here's your host, Tyler Raible.

Tyler Raible [00:01:23] 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 honor of this campaign, we're releasing episodes specific to current topics and issues in this arena. To help guide us in conversation, I'm joined today by our guest, Natasha Alexenko, creator of Natasha's Justice Project, a sexual assault advocate, survivor, and author. Natasha, it's great to have you back on the show. How are you?

Natasha Alexenko [00:01:50] I'm doing well, Tyler. It's good to be back.

Tyler Raible [00:01:53] Natasha, you've been a guest on Just Science before, and, you know, it's always just great to see you. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Natasha Alexenko [00:01:59] I'm a survivor of sexual assault. I also like to say I'm a survivor of the rape kit backlog. I was assaulted at gunpoint by a stranger when I was a college student in New York City. I did a rape kit afterwards - I went to the hospital. It really probably was the last thing I wanted to do - I just wanted to take a hot shower - but I did do a rape kit. I was urged by my roommates to do so. I cooperated with law enforcement. At that point in my life, I just wanted to make sure that this dangerous person was taken off the streets and unable to harm others. In a state of trauma, it's often difficult to recollect the details, but I did the best I could, and unbeknownst to me, my rape kit remained unprocessed, collecting dust in a storage facility for nearly a decade. In the interim, we didn't catch the man that assaulted me at that time, and I blamed myself. My memory recall was so poor - I assumed my rape kit was tested - so I thought my description of the events and the man that raped me weren't accurate enough. So I blamed myself in the interim, and I grappled with guilt, blaming myself for other victims. It was really difficult to heal because of that. My rape kit was eventually tested nearly ten years later. We did what's called a John Doe indictment - in order to stop the clock on the statute of limitations, we indicted the DNA in my rape kit. So ten years after the fact, the kit was tested. In 2008, there was a match in CODIS to the man that assaulted me. He was a career criminal. He

committed crimes across the country. He harmed others across the country. He was a one-man crime spree and a public safety hazard, but we did find him. I'm very fortunate to have received justice in my case. He is presently behind bars where he can harm no other individuals. I never wanted to take for granted the justice I received. I didn't want to be an anomaly. I wanted to use my story as best as I could to articulate what healing was, the value of processing rape kits for survivors and also for the public at large for public safety. I published a book about my experiences, and I've had an opportunity to speak across the country, to work on legislative measures across the country addressing rape kit reform, addressing sexual assault reform, and also just being able to speak before Congress, Senate, and most importantly, to other survivors and get to meet with them across the country. And so it has been quite a journey.

Tyler Raible [00:04:49] Last year, I sat down and read your book, *A Survivor's Journey: From Victim to Advocate*. What made you decide to write a book?

Natasha Alexenko [00:04:56] Well, I think that, you know, any time I had an opportunity to speak, it was really difficult to hit all the points. And I really, really wanted to let everyone know my story, my journey, just kind of like in more of an intimate kind of portrayal of what happened to me. And I wanted to be really honest about what it was like going through the process of healing. I wanted it to be raw. And I wanted to honor the survivors that I had met and the questions they were asking me. You know, after I would get up and speak at a school, you know, survivors had generally the same questions for me, and I never really had an opportunity to articulate all of that when, when I'm speaking. So I wanted to be sure that I hit all the questions I was being asked, to be open and honest, because there are so many questions asked behind closed doors that we just don't talk about. I think it's important for survivors to know there's nothing to be ashamed of and that it's okay to be open. We did nothing wrong. And also kind of get that feedback for myself too, that when we all are in different stages of healing, and healing isn't something that happens overnight. I'm still healing now. I still have my days. I still have my moments. And I think that what's helped me along the journey is not only articulating what happened to me and finding catharsis in that process, but also connecting with others and seeing that I'm not alone in some of the emotions, some of the feelings, some of the challenges I have. It's really empowering to know there's others out there whose feelings and hopes and dreams are so similar to mine. I just really honored every time I'm in touch with someone.

Tyler Raible [00:06:37] And that makes perfect sense. I could see where the sense of community that would be created through this very, very personal account. You're also the creator of your own nonprofit, *Natasha's Justice Project*. So could you tell us a little bit about *Natasha's Justice*?

Natasha Alexenko [00:06:51] I started *Natasha's Justice Project* in 2011, and it's really changed and evolved to kind of suit where we are in terms of processing backlogged rape kits. And that was really what it was about. You know, its impetus was to really educate, to get the word out there. You know, in 2011, not many people were aware of the fact that there were unprocessed rape kits, that there was a rape kit backlog. You know, any time I talked about it, people would just be shocked and say, how is this possible? And I thought it was really important to get the word out. Certainly, law enforcement was aware of it. Prosecutors were aware of it, but the general public was not. And I really set it up with a group of others to just use it for educational purposes and find out how we could assist jurisdictions throughout the country that were facing issues with unprocessed rape kits, like find out how could we help them? What funding was out there? We had funding to process kits that were sitting in labs. We had funding for labs. But how do we get funding to kits like

mine that weren't at a laboratory, that had not made it to a lab yet - they were still sitting in storage. So advocating for that, really fortunate to have funding streams that are now dedicated to that and a public that is aware of unprocessed rape kits. So presently NJP really has evolved into something that just ensures that every state has legislative measures in place to address backlogged rape kits and to support survivors. For example, you know, I worked recently with the California Senate on a legislation that will give transparency so survivors can track their rape kits in the process. They can be aware-made aware of where their kits are - have they made it out of the hospital or are they at the laboratory, are they still in law enforcement? So they could really kind of watch the process unfold. So Natasha's Justice Project presently is really working towards that, more the legislative measures.

Tyler Raible [00:08:57] And, Natasha, you've mentioned that you consider yourself a survivor of sexual assault, but also a survivor of the sexual assault kit backlog. And I know that that's kind of the driving force behind NJP, Natasha's Justice Project. So I guess I'm just trying to get your- get your, your thoughts. What are the thoughts on the backlog? Are we making progress in addressing it and on a national scale?

Natasha Alexenko [00:09:21] I see a tremendous difference in processing of sexual assault evidence kits since 2011. It is remarkable and there's certainly a lot of room for improvement. And I think that it was really the catalyst kind of creating other- recognizing there are other issues, right. So the fact that the sexual assault evidence kit backlog, it was just really kind of like the tip of an iceberg, recognizing what else was involved in that. Well, are we addressing trauma in survivors? Are we recognizing what that looks like? Is that why some of these kits weren't processed? Was law enforcement perhaps not trained appropriately when dealing with survivors? Are practices survivor centered? So it was really kind of the catalyst for a host of other issues that needed to be addressed in order to fix the backlog of rape kits. You could send all these sexual assault evidence kits off to a lab and test them all. But it's just going to occur again if you don't address the reasons behind why it began in the first place. But you're now have this multidisciplinary team that's tackling the issue and they're vital to the process and people are recognizing how important it is and the things that are necessary in order to process rape kits.

Tyler Raible [00:10:47] One of the recurring themes on, on the podcast when it comes to sexual assault response reform has always been improvements. How do we do better? And I hear often that we are improving. I know that you provide training and expertise on trauma-informed interactions with survivors, and you had mentioned that that's part of the areas that we're still focusing on, is making sure that the people interacting with survivors have the tools that they need to be successful in the position. So could you tell us maybe a little bit about this training? You know, what's the experience like? What's the response like from law enforcement?

Natasha Alexenko [00:11:23] I think that it's- it's so essential because we were hearing when we had these unprocessed kits that a lot of times there was kind of an assumption that every victim is going to look this way, is going to come and be crying, is going to be hysterical in tears. That's not always the case. Trauma looks different. It looks different in everyone. And it's essential that that is something that's recognized as we move forward. You can't really have a victim or a survivor centered approach without including a trauma-informed approach. They have to coincide with one another. Trauma is something that needs to be recognized in the entire process. And it's really interesting because, you know, as I've, you know, continued my work and some of the work that I do globally on gender-based violence, you know, we always look at this, whether you're looking at sexual

assault survivors, looking at survivors of domestic violence, these are all things that we need to recognize because when we work with people, if we don't have an understanding of the feelings that someone might be going through, the emotions, then it's- it's really not as powerful. We're not going to reach them in the same way if we don't approach them from the perspective of someone who is informed in understanding trauma.

Tyler Raible [00:12:45] Natasha, you mentioned some global work. Tell me what's going on, what's happening with that?

Natasha Alexenko [00:12:49] So, yes, so I've been working globally with a group called Voice and we have just done some amazing things with major global organizations, whether we are designing their policy for sexual assault reform internally, how they approach others. Also a lot of work around gender-based violence, particularly among refugee populations, which presently is something that the world is focused on right now. And just kind of applying trauma-informed, victim-centered approaches to how we deal with individuals being served by these global entities, making certain that staff members are sensitive to the needs of the survivor, whether they're a sexual assault survivor, whether they're a survivor of domestic violence, and understanding, they're- they're just not a number. They're a human being. And what you say and your interactions can change their lives. I really felt honored to kind of bring some of what we've learned here in the United States, and really because it's been an evolution, right? Like it's really evolved from 2011 and taking that and applying it to situations that are occurring globally. And then also cross-pollinating that because there are, there are things that we've learned globally among refugee populations, among survivors of calamities that we can bring into sexual assault and how we're approaching survivors because there's a lot of data that we can bring in, but there's also human stories which are way more important than any data can ever relay. So that's been really exciting to just kind of be a witness to this idea of cross-pollination and bring what I've learned in the United States globally.

Tyler Raible [00:14:43] I am just kind of struck by curiosity. What are your impressions of sexual assault response at an international level? On the show, we have a pretty good idea of what it looks like within the United States, but I was hoping to get kind of your perspective on a global response.

Natasha Alexenko [00:14:57] One thing that was really striking to me, in the United States, each state has its own set of laws and regulations that you kind of have to go through, especially when we are talking about sexual assault kit reform, right. So you kind of have to navigate through each state almost operates as its own country in certain ways. You know, globally that, that is just kind of multiplied over. So it's always a challenge as you're working in different countries to kind of work that in and understand where they're coming from, not only their laws and procedures, but just culturally how things can kind of differ. Even things like confidentiality, like here in the United States, if- if I disclose I've been assaulted, there's not necessarily a rule that's going to say, no, we have to have your name out there. And so that's kind of been a challenge, is- is how to kind of work around situations where disclosure is mandatory. But it's also a good way to kind of, again, utilize what we've learned and be able to say, well, this is why confidentiality is important, why we put survivors first in every circumstance. We want to encourage reporting. You know, we have found statistically that areas where privacy, where confidentiality is taken out of the equation, there is less of a chance of someone coming forward and talking about it and the value behind that. It's interesting, you know, while countries and the way they approach sexual assault may vary, not everyone, for example, trauma-informed is fairly new concept globally. What is the same is trauma and survivors - how it affects not only their lives, but

their lives of the communities in which they live. The things that encourage survivors to report are the same. Trust, understanding - those things are universal, are global - communities, public safety. All of those things are the same. In my situation, one thing that was really something I recognize in myself is, you know, I was in a very fortunate situation. I had support from family, support from friends. I had a good relationship with law enforcement. And that is not the same in every case. Absolutely far from the truth, and certainly globally that's even multiplied, especially in survivors in areas of conflict.

Tyler Raible [00:17:16] Yeah, I don't think there's any way we could really understate the value of a support network. So what strikes me is when we're talking about groups of people who are displaced, when we're working with refugees. So what exactly are you doing with these, with these displaced peoples?

Natasha Alexenko [00:17:30] Well, certainly recognizing and trying to get an informed analysis of how countries that are accepting refugees, how they're approaching them as they enter into a new country. Are they recognizing signs of trauma? How are they prioritizing that, especially with COVID? So, you know, we had a lot of situations where if you have refugees coming in from another country, families are kept together because of COVID, and they're isolated in quarantine. And sometimes those families, that's not like a healthy family unit. There's domestic violence occurring. And that can be exasperated by the quarantine process, by the process of keeping these people close together. They've already come from a traumatic situation. So ensuring that countries are prioritizing that in that situation. I just actually did some work in Canada, and domestic violence is the number one priority, COVID is secondary - if they do see signs of that occurring in populations that are entering the country, and from the refugees I've spoken to that have been welcomed in that manner with that trauma-informed approach as they've been brought in, it's just been a great experience. I mean, they- they've just gone through such a tremendous ordeal. It's very emotional. They've lost everything. They're coming to a new country with a new language. And at the very least, we can respect where they're coming from and recognize they may be safe now from the country they're fleeing from, but how do we make sure they're safe here, too?

Tyler Raible [00:19:05] I love the concept of taking lessons learned from one area and putting them towards another. And, you know, on Just Science, we're huge fans of taking research and theory into practice. And the fact that we get to see this theory both, you know, applied to sexual assault response but also into other humanitarian efforts is remarkable because I know that on top of all of the other stuff you're doing, you're also involved in supporting sexual assault response reform for Native American women. How did that get started?

Natasha Alexenko [00:19:36] If you could just see for a minute the other people working on this, like, I feel like I never do enough. It's impossible to stop when you just meet people who are just working so hard. And I have to say, I'm such a novice at this experience of helping globally, helping Native American women. I'm like a novice, and I recognize kind of my infancy in this process. And I'm grateful that people are, like, open to me helping. But yeah, presently, I'm working with this amazing group called Strengthening Nations, and we're working together. We're doing a survey right now speaking to groups that are serving Native American women and girls and finding out what their constraints were during COVID. Did they have enough access to PPE? Did they feel safe? How was staffing? Finding out what was missing because COVID, we learned a lot of lessons during the process and we really wanted to kind of gauge historically what we did right, what we did wrong, and what we can do should another crisis occur, and heaven forbid it does, but

I think that we can take a lot of the lessons we learned during COVID to be able to apply it elsewhere. And I think that when I started this journey and disclosed as a sexual assault survivor and did a lot of speaking, I really heard the stories from other survivors who didn't have the opportunity to speak like I did. And I think that the time has come for their voices to be amplified and for me to take on a more supportive role in supporting survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence in any way that I can. So, you know, I'm kind of behind the scenes writing toolkits and, you know, literature reviews and proposals and policies. So I don't take what I do lightly.

Tyler Raible [00:21:31] With all of the time that you dedicate to supporting others, into helping others, what do you find most rewarding about all of the work that you're doing?

Natasha Alexenko [00:21:39] Honestly, it's the people. It really is. I mean, I think that just meeting people and learning from them and just being inspired by everyone in this field that genuinely does this altruistically. No one's in this for the big bucks. I mean, not that I know of. I think we're just all kind of built out of the same stuff where we're just very mission oriented, very driven. And that's the thing that just everyone kind of keeps me on my toes, whether it's the populations we serve or my colleagues at Voice. Those are the people, right, that just kind of make you just strive to be a better person and, you know, recognize your faults. Like, sometimes I feel like my faults are under a bigger microscope just because I'm surrounded by these brilliant people with so much experience. They just keep me motivated. And I'm also very mindful of, of where I came from. And I'm mindful of what I've learned in the process, the mistakes I've made. As a survivor, I was trying to kind of push my way in because there's all these experts and I'm like but listen to me. And, you know, it took me a few years to say, okay, let's take it down a notch and just listen and give the floor to people who are the experts, but also find a way to have my voice included in there, right. There's a happy medium between taking over and sitting back completely of having your voice included and at the time when it's most needed and most necessary.

Tyler Raible [00:23:13] Yeah, I think the importance of having a seat at the table for survivors is the utmost importance, right. And Natasha, I agree with you in that the investigators, the law enforcement, the advocates, the policy makers, the prosecutors, everybody is so inspirational. And as we're- as we're getting ready to wrap up the episode, I want to know, as a survivor, what does Sexual Assault Awareness Month mean to you?

Natasha Alexenko [00:23:38] Well, it is just such an important month. And what it means to me now is to really listen to the voices of sexual assault survivors who don't get a chance to speak, who are unable to speak, recognize that they're there, recognize how valuable they are, and also understand that not every sexual assault survivor is at a place in their life, nor should they be, where they want to talk about their assault. And that's okay, too. And I think Sexual Assault Awareness Month for me is a way to articulate to survivors everywhere that we're all one unit together supporting each other - different places in our journey, but there and listening and growing. I hope that this year I have noticed just with everything going on, it's so hard for Sexual Assault Awareness Month to take a priority. And I know there's so much going on right now, but I think that it's such an important time to reflect that sexual assault is still happening. It's still out there. And, you know, I think that it shouldn't be something that is a trend that comes in and out of the news media, and now everyone's interested in it and now no one else is, because it happens every second of every day. I think that when we take in a month like April and just kind of offhandedly talk about it without doing things like you're doing right now, where we're having these discussions and dialogues and learning, we're not going to get any farther. And, you know, the goal of Sexual Assault Awareness Month, yes, is to recognize

survivors, recognize that we're not alone, but also think about ways that we work towards, you know, eliminating sexual assault. The backlog, as we discussed, was just really the tip of an iceberg. There's a bigger issue at hand. I mean, it was a symptom, right? Unprocessed sexual assault evidence kits are a symptom of a larger disease, a pervasive one, one that we need to tackle. We can't just treat symptoms. So I really hope that this April, we focus and work towards a world where people aren't afraid.

Tyler Raible [00:25:47] That's one of the things that I love about being part of this podcast and the work that I've done with the Forensic Technology Center of Excellence is that we, we have this opportunity to give platforms to the people who are out doing the work on the front line. So it's a powerful month. Natasha, any final thoughts that you want to share with our listeners? This has been just such a wonderful conversation.

Natasha Alexenko [00:26:06] I hope we can continue these conversations, and I hope that we continue to bring survivors into the conversation. I think that our voices are so valuable. And it's not just my voice. My voice is one tiny one in a giant sea of amazing people out there who have stories that are unique and important and valuable and very, very much a part of sexual assault reform. You cannot do this without the survivors. You can collect data and do research, and that's all well and good, but these personal interactions, these personal stories are really what's going to make a big difference, not only in change as we move forward, because I think voices are vital for that reason, but it really changes minds, people's minds, the way we interact with a survivor, we need those personal stories. Data- reading data and research report and literature reviews are wonderful but hearing personal stories that affirm everything that we've learned and even teach us things that we didn't know before, that is what is going to be the catalyst to change.

Tyler Raible [00:27:15] What an excellent way to end. Natasha, thank you for sitting down with Just Science and for all of the incredible work that you do all year round, not just in April.

Natasha Alexenko [00:27:25] Thank you so much for having me on here. I always enjoy my time with you.

Tyler Raible [00:27:29] And for those of you listening at home, on your drive, if you've 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, remember to visit [ForensicCOE.org](https://www.ForensicCOE.org). I'm Tyler Raible, and this has been another episode of Just Science.

Voiceover [00:27:50] This episode concludes our 2022 Sexual Assault Awareness Month mini season. Tune in for the next season of Just Science, which will cover various topics on the Forensic Science Education Programs Accreditation Commission. 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.