**Forging Community Collaborations: An interview with Rachel Gregory**

*Introduction:*

*You are listening to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center Just Rural! Podcast series that highlights innovative programs and success stories from rural communities across the United States.*

*[Music: Cattails]*

**Ali**:

Safe Harbors of the Fingers Lakes is a rural program serving 3 counties in upstate New York. They were established in 1982 and provide both sexual and domestic violence services for the area. Safe Harbors has a history of successful collaboration with their local Child Advocacy Center. To better understand their approach to this collaboration, I interviewed Rachel Gregory who is the Prevention Education Coordinator and Youth Counselor at Safe Harbors. Rachel discussed some basic logistics for her center’s collaboration, but ultimately focused on the importance of forging through difficulties to show the value of an advocate and that every community partner plays a role in keeping services child-focused. I asked her to share about how this collaboration got started and some of the everyday logistics of providing advocacy at the CAC:

**Rachel**:

The collaboration kind of started back with a core group of some of the people in our community who work a lot with children and had looked into doing a CAC. It started with the CART team, a CART committee and expanded to an advisory committee and all that to start the CAC and improve the response to child sexual abuse and to help our victims and serve our victims better.

Some of the main ideas came from the DA’s office and Victim Services. In Ontario County, we have a great Victim Service Coordinator who helped to spearhead some of those programs and ideas for a Child Advocacy Center. Some of the people who first introduced to the child advocacy center some of the people who first started it were law enforcement, DSS and child protection who really spearheaded the movement to get the CAC up and running. Everyone was pretty supportive at first and in collaboration was really encouraged in the community.

Our CAC is not housed in our organization. It’s a separate entity, so it has its own director and we advocate—we have an advocate who goes to each interview and hopefully, eventually we’ll have an advocate who is housed at the CAC but as of right now, we do go into the CAC for each interview.

**Ali:**

One of the driving purposes behind Child Advocacy Centers is to provide a single entry point for children and their families to interact with all of the different systems that are involved in investigating child abuse. Law enforcement, district attorney’s offices, medical professionals, and advocates all come together to provide services and support, all in the hope that they can provide more trauma-informed services and achieve better outcomes within all of the different systems. At times, the role of a sexual assault advocate is not clear to other members of the CACs. Rachel reflected on how Safe Harbors needed to demonstrate the value of having an advocate on board for families.

**Rachel**:

I think especially for the advocates at the beginning, it was a lot of forging our way and helping people to understand what the value of an advocate was. So at the beginning it was difficult for us as advocates to go in there and not really feel as much of the team, part of the team as we knew we were. We were valuable and that we had a good role there and we could really help the families to get some of the services that they needed. But when we first started as I said, it was difficult. It was just making sure that we were staying child centered and really kind of showing what our value was and our role and making sure that we made the connection with the different committee members to show that we were just as much a part of the team and a valued part of the team as other members were—you know law enforcement has to be there, child protective has to be there in a lot of the cases, but the advocate sometimes is seems like they aren’t needed as much, but really through the CAC and where are we are today was really important and working with the non-offending caretakers takes a lot of stress off of CPS or off of law enforcement. So just kind of showing your value and what you do was difficult at first, but now we’ve come a long way in making sure that the team knows that we’re there to help them as well.

**Ali:**

In this case, Rachel described a tough start to the collaboration between all of the different community organizations and services involved in establishing the CAC.

**Rachel:**

Working together has really come a long way in the last couple years. When we first started our Child Advocacy Center it was hard to get everybody on board and make sure that everyone was there for all the meetings and that sort of thing, but the director that we have now has really come a long way in making sure that we all feel welcomed and feel that we have a part in the team and that our opinions are validated and that these kids really are getting a better service.

We’re trying to make sure that we keep the main focus on children and the program did meet a little bit of resistance at the beginning with some of the counseling agencies who really didn’t want to change the status quo. They wanted to keep serving the child victims and didn’t really see the need for some of the collaborative means of interviewing children, but eventually came around and the group has been working together really well.

At times the diplomacy was kind of hard and people were not really wanting to listen to each other’s different perspectives and eventually it came around where we needed to get a director who really could kind of spearhead the different disciplines and opinions to make sure that everybody was kind of in the same neutral ground and often today we kind of kid about her being like Switzerland and making sure that everybody feels valuable and they understand that there’s a place for each one of us and there’s a reason that we are all there to make sure that children are served the way they need to be served and make sure that they are not, we’re not missing anything and we’re getting along even when we don’t agree necessarily.

**Ali:**

While it took some leadership and conflict management on the part of the CAC director, Rachel emphasized that this work was worthwhile. The outcomes for children and their families within the many different systems were improved and the community team members were able to celebrate some major successes along the way.

**Rachel:**

Some of the successes that we’ve had are you know that we, first of all we had the accreditation, so we really all came together to get state certified and nationally accredited which was a huge success and really was such a wonderful thing for all of the team members to feel like we really came together and made this happen for our community and so that’s really been a wonderful part of the CAC. The team pulled together and accomplished what was needed to be done.

Another thing that I think was really important was we really been able to maintain the focus on the child and making sure that we keep that focus on the child no matter what, which I think is hard to do sometimes when you have different agencies who all have their different mission statements and different reasons for being there but when you make sure that we really keep our focus on the kids, we have accomplished a lot with that.

**Ali:**

I asked Rachel if she had any parting words she wanted to share with other sexual assault programs who are thinking about building better collaborations with a local child advocacy center.

**Rachel:**

You know, don’t give up. I think a lot times communities and team members, they get at each other and things start to go in the wrong direction and everybody just wants to kind of throw their hands up but it’s important to keep working together even when you don’t necessarily agree and to remember that this is all about the kids and in the end I think, as long as you can do that work through those differences the team will come together and it really will be an important part of your community—your child advocacy center.

**Ali:**

The words she offered were encouraging and mission-focused, reminding us that overcoming difficulties and disagreements ultimately creates a better community program for the children.

*Outro:*

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*[music: Cattails]*