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## uppitywomen

### Have Justice, Will Travel

**Born:**

July 4, 1951

Lebanon, New Hampshire

Lives in Vershire, Vermont

Truck Driver, 1979-1996

B.A., Vermont College, 1995

J.D., Vermont Law School, 1998

Founder, **Have Justice--Will Travel**



# Wynona Ward

BY ALEXIS JETTER

**Wynona Ward keeps her eyes on the rutted dirt road as she drives through the undulating mountain valleys of central Vermont and into her past. She rounds a bend and there it is: Beanville. Just a cluster of trailers and weathered clapboard houses clinging to a hillside by a small stream, a few miles up the road from tiny West Fairlee. "See that?" Ward asks, chuckling, pointing to a hair-raisingly steep slope. "My brother and I used to sled down that on car hoods. The most dangerous thing you could imagine!"**

Ward, a trucker turned lawyer, is heading north to counsel a battered woman who, after years of abuse, is seeking legal help. But on the way, she pauses to view the remains of the homestead where she, too, once quaked with fear.

"My father would come in from the outhouse, drunk, demanding to know why there wasn't any beer in the house, or anything other than venison stew to eat," recalls Ward, a stocky, energetic woman with an easy laugh and a stubborn refusal to feel sorry for herself. Her mother, Ward remembers, would stare into the pot she was stirring and mutter, "Because you haven't worked in three weeks." Enraged, Ward's father would throw his wife into the corner, stick his knee in her stomach and start choking her.

"They don't call it choking anymore; they call it strangulation," Ward says matter-of-factly. "She'd get in a few screams and all of us kids would come running." The children would try to pry their father's hands from their mother's throat, only to have his

women, poked holes in them, and offered an exciting revisionist view of our bodies. Oh boy, did she ruffle some feathers!  
> by Marilyn Milloy

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wrath vented on them: her brother was beaten, and the girls were sexually abused.

There was no phone and no one to call. The neighbors were within earshot, "but when they heard screaming coming from our house, they just turned their heads," Ward says. "And when we heard screaming coming from the neighbors, we turned our heads, too." Just three doors down, a man shot his wife to death in front of their children when Wynona was eight, and nobody thought much of it.

Even today, Vermont, known for its progressive politics and pristine environment, has a chillingly high rate of all-in-the-family brutality. More than 70 percent of female murder victims are killed by their husbands, ex-husbands, or boyfriends--over twice the national average. For women who live on the back roads, with unreliable cars, no telephones, and no money to hire attorneys, there's often nowhere to turn. Wynona Ward is determined to change that.

In 1998, after graduating from Vermont Law School, Ward won a grant to start "Have Justice--Will Travel," a law office on wheels. Today, in her four-wheel-drive Dodge Ram Charger, Ward visits battered women who are too isolated to get legal help and finds assistance for their abused children. The vehicle is outfitted with a CB radio, scanner, and cellular phone, as well as a computer and printer--all equipped with batteries, in the event a woman she is visiting has no electricity.

"Instead of making them come to an office with leather chairs, where they have to wait for an appointment to say, 'Here I am, shame on me, I just got beat up,' I come to them," says Ward, wearing casual black slacks and a houndstooth jacket. "I sit in their chairs, at their kitchen table, and listen to their stories.

"And even if it's not perfectly clean or the Trump mansion, I'm comfortable there," she says with a smile that lights up her open, friendly face. "I grew up in a poor household. They understand that. And if they don't, I tell them."

Today she's visiting Sandy (all names of Ward's clients have been changed), a 32-year-old administrative assistant and mother who recently divorced her husband after 12 years of abuse. Sandy is outwardly upbeat, funny, and sure of herself. The bruises on her face have faded, her fractured wrist has healed, and once-missing clumps of hair have grown back. But there's still a hairline fracture on Sandy's nose where her former husband broke it.

Sandy credits Ward for giving her the confidence to leave. "One of the first things you did, well, it wasn't something you wrote on a legal pad," she says, looking fondly at Ward. "You hugged me. I was just so embarrassed. And you made me feel welcome." But without Ward's free legal help, Sandy says, "I wouldn't have been able to do it."

With a population of just under 600,000, the state has only five part-time attorneys--partially funded by the federal Violence Against Women Act--who work exclusively with victims of domestic violence. Consequently, many battered women go into court--seeking a relief-from-abuse order, a divorce, or custody of their children--without legal representation. Their husbands or boyfriends are more often able to afford an attorney. Clients are usually referred to Ward through Safeline, a local hotline and advocacy organization.



Ward maintains a small, tiled-to-the-rafters office at the Vermont Law School's community legal clinic. But going to her clients instead of having them come to her is more practical: women keep their files, such as they are, tucked into drawers at home. And by being "on site," Ward can easily check to see if there's a neglected medical condition or no food or heat in the house. "If the kids don't have hats and mittens, I know people who do."

Isolation compounds her clients' problems. One third of them lack phones, because, in a state as sparsely populated as Vermont, the cost of maintaining telephone lines across long distances results in staggeringly high monthly rates. And though most families have a car, "it may go to work with the batterer," says Judy Szege of Safeline.

But isolation is also about lack of skills and hope. Sometimes Ward helps clients get a high-school equivalency diploma or a job. Other times it's as simple as working up a budget to pay off debt that an abuser has accumulated over the years. Perhaps the best measure of Ward's success is that so few of her clients have returned to their batterers or entered other abusive relationships. "Don't let him frighten you," she tells a client whose ex-husband has threatened to take the kids. Rhonda, a tiny, birdlike woman who's determined to appear cheerful, is clearly rattled. "There's nothing he can do," Ward tells her, giving her a bear hug. Rhonda's eyes are troubled, but she breathes deeply and promises to keep in touch.

Ward never intended to become a "domestic violence road warrior," as the American Bar Association has dubbed her. For 17 years, she and her husband, Harold, were big-rig truckers. Ward got her college degree by mail, writing papers on a laptop in the sleeper of their 18-wheel Diamond Reo, while Harold drove through the night.

But her childhood abuse haunted her. At truck stops, weigh stations, on the CB radio, "there wasn't anybody I talked to who wasn't dealing with it, directly or indirectly," she says. In the sleeper, between shifts, she started reading about incest, child abuse, and domestic violence--and finally faced the fear and shame that had twisted her youth.

Unfortunately, that legacy wasn't just a specter from the past. In 1991, her sisters paged her on the road. Her brother, Richard, had raped a child in the family, and after two years of holding back, the girl told a counselor about it. "My God it's happening again," Ward breathed. The youngster had already been molested by Ward's father when she was three--the same age Ward was when he began raping her. Prosecutors felt then that the girl was too young to testify. But now Ward and her three sisters stood firm. "We did for her what wasn't done for the rest of us," she says. "We told her we believed her. And we told her it was important that she come forward."

It turned out that Richard had already sexually molested two other little girls. "In Richie's case, he was just living up to his

father's expectations," says Harold angrily, sitting at the couple's kitchen table in Vershire, Vermont. "He was expected to grow up to be a child abuser. It was like putting a goddamned deer head on the wall. It was a trophy."

Alarmed, Ward put the brakes on her cross-country trucking until she made sure that her brother was safely behind bars. "Please get treatment," she wrote him in prison. Despite his refusal, the state parole board announced it wanted to release him after two years.

And so Ward led the charge to stop that from happening.

She wrote a 15-page report to the parole board arguing that it was misinterpreting state law. Faxed press releases to newspapers and television stations urging them to attend the hearing. And brought photographs of the little girl to make her point in human terms.

"This is the child that he has abused," Ward told the board. "When she was three years old, she was abused by her grandfather. When she was six, she was sexually assaulted by her uncle. When she was nine, she had to testify in court. Now she's 12. What am I supposed to tell her is going to happen to her when she's 15?" Anger flickers in her eyes: "I'll tell you what happened," Ward says, her foot on the accelerator as she recalls how, despite a successful campaign with the parole board, the girl, at age 16, had to face her abuser again, when he was given a furlough to attend a family funeral. Ward is lost in thought for a minute, then resumes. "But that is a lot of why I'm doing what I'm doing. The legal system is really hard on victims. They get victimized again and again." That experience convinced Ward to enroll in law school, where she focused on family law and won a bevy of awards, including the 1998 Outstanding Law Student of the Year from Who's Who in American Law Students.

Alexander Banks, Ward's supervising attorney at the clinic, points out, "Wynona brings something to the equation that's unique, something that, even if I tried my hardest, I couldn't do. She says to the women: 'I have been where you are, and I have gotten out. Walk beside me and I will help you get out.'" Today, she's as concerned about how to keep the aging Ram Charger on the road as she is about keeping her work on course. Her original grant runs out next September. Ward is hoping to raise enough money to hire another attorney and a secretary.

But she never wants to lose the personal touch. "I don't feel that I'll burn out the way other people do," she says. "Because, let's face it, this is my life."

*Alexis Jetter is the coeditor of "The Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices from Left to Right" (Dartmouth College).*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALLAN PENN