



Project Beloved
By: Tracy Matheson

I have often said that walking this journey is the hardest thing I have ever done in my life. It is a journey no mother should ever take...ever. The realization that my daughter's rape and murder was preventable is one that keeps me awake at night and haunts me to this day...more than six years later.

March 18, 2022, the person (whose name I do not say) who was responsible for the rape and murder of Molly Jane pled guilty. He **also** pled guilty to the rape and murder of a second victim, Megan Getrum, killed five days after Molly. He **also** pled guilty to four different charges of sexual assault...all charged AFTER Molly and Megan were killed. The criminal trial was supposed to begin on March 22, and the state was seeking the death penalty. At the last moment, after a jury had already been selected, the defendant recognized the writing on the wall so to speak. He would not escape justice this time. [*View allocution at trial](#)

We waited almost five years for the criminal process to work. The wheels of justice are indeed slow. The serial rapist turned serial murderer is now in prison...finally... and will never ever see the light of day as a free man again. He is guilty. He has stated he is guilty. Case closed.

But not really. The truth is there were others who hold some responsibility for what happened to Molly and to Megan. The system could have stopped him. The system knew his name. The system interviewed him multiple times. The system knew his pattern of rape and strangulation. The system collected his DNA. The system knew there were CODIS hits that connected him to multiple cases. The system did nothing. The system failed Molly and Megan.

It is these facts that drive the work I do through [Project Beloved](#), the non-profit I founded on the one-year anniversary of Molly Jane's murder. Our mission statement reads:

Project Beloved strives to educate, advocate, and collaborate to change the conversation about sexual assault and empower survivors to find their voices.

Once I recognized the multiple system failures that involved multiple agencies in Texas, I knew I had to do something. I could not sit silently. I had to find a way to take these failures and use them to illustrate why we cannot keep doing things the way we have always done them. We cannot speak to victims of sexual assault as if they are the criminal. We cannot misinterpret trauma for lying or inconsistencies. We must recognize a CODIS hit for what it is...a valuable investigative tool...whether the suspect is known or unknown. We must conduct investigations through a lens of understanding trauma. Not a one and done, take a class, check a box understanding of trauma. Instead, the understanding of trauma must be woven into our DNA and guide everything we say, we ask, and we do. And if we cannot do this...we need to find a new career.

While I am a lifelong supporter of law enforcement and hold them in the highest regard, I have learned in far too personal a way that when law enforcement does not do their job well, the consequences can be devastating. I say over and over and over again...we must do better. We now know better. **We must do better.**

One of the ways I have channeled my frustration, grief, and anger is by providing an essential tool to assist the investigative process. Project Beloved installs [Soft Interview Rooms](#) to facilitate a trauma informed response to the investigation of sexual assault cases. We create a design plan and select and order all the necessary components (furniture, lighting, decorative items, rug, art) to transform the existing interview space so that it becomes a space that is warm and inviting rather than cold, stark, and sterile. It is my hope that when a victim bravely decides to report a sexual assault, and they are asked to come to the law enforcement agency to share their story...a story they would likely prefer not to share...especially with law enforcement...the Soft Interview Room can help them to feel safe and know that they will be treated with dignity and respect. When victims feel safe, they may be better able to recall details. More details can mean an investigation yields the evidence needed to make an arrest. Ultimately, we can hope to take serial rapists off the streets before they rape again, or their pattern escalates. We have installed more than 70 Soft Interview Rooms all over the country.

The systemic failures fueled another passion I never imagined I would have. I recognized the need for legislation. Somehow, I believed it might be possible to pass some laws that could prevent what happened to Molly from happening to someone else. I figured maybe I could save another mother from knowing this pain if we worked to get some laws passed to close some of the gaps that allowed our serial rapist to keep walking the streets raping and strangling women at will.

[Molly Jane's Law](#) (author Rep Craig Goldman/Sen Joan Huffman) was passed during the 86th Legislative Session and became law in Texas in September 2019. Molly Jane's Law mandates the use of [ViCAP](#) when law enforcement in Texas investigates sexual assault cases. ViCAP is run and administered by the FBI and was created to identify serial rapists and murderers. When law enforcement uses ViCAP they are better able to connect dots between cases and identify patterns. The experts tell us many rapists are actually serial offenders. ViCAP is an excellent tool that helps law enforcement do their job better. We know it works. A serial rapist has already been identified and sent to prison thanks to Molly Jane's Law and the efforts of [Tyler PD and Arlington PD](#).

HB 4628 (author Rep Craig Goldman/Sen Joan Huffman) was passed just this past month, May 2023, and it awaits the Governor's signature and will go in effect September 2023. HB 4628 establishes a framework of duties for labs and law enforcement when a CODIS hit is returned on a case. Not only does it outline the responsibilities, it also includes timelines in which the duties shall be completed. The folks at TX DPS were a huge resource as we drafted this commonsense legislation.

HB 4628 was inspired by the bravery of survivor, Melissa Winton, who reported her sexual assault and strangulation to the Plano PD in 2012. She was not believed and ultimately decided there was no point to continue with the investigation because nothing she said, and no amount of evidence, would convince the detective otherwise. When a CODIS hit was returned in late 2014 that connected Melissa's case to a case in South Padre, Plano PD made the decision that the CODIS hit was irrelevant to their case and Melissa should not be told about the CODIS hit. The same individual who raped and strangled Melissa also raped and murdered my daughter five years later. Another driving force behind my desire to see HB 4628 become law was the fact that Allen PD received notification in February 2017 from the lab that the DNA found in a 2014 victim's rape kit belonged to the same suspect who eventually killed Molly...41 days later.

HB 4628 also provides for victims to be notified by law enforcement within 5 days when there is a CODIS hit...as long as it will not impact the investigation process. I live every day with devastating pain because CODIS hits were either misunderstood, undervalued, or ignored altogether. It is my hope that HB 4628 will do for CODIS hits what the Lavinia Masters' Act did for rape kits and the need for expedient processing of the kits.

Every day I awaken determined to get to work to find ways to let our story be a light for why we must do better. I am committed to do this work so that one day we can live in a world where the mere thought of reporting a sexual assault does not bring more trauma than what has already been experienced. In the words of James Baldwin:

*Not everything that is faced can be changed.
But nothing can be changed until it is faced.*