

Raped, Then Forgotten Until a Community Intervened

In Detroit, women like Ardelia Ali, who have survived sexual assault, now know they are not alone thanks to a large scale effort to uncover secrets hidden for years in thousands of untested rape kits



Ardelia Ann Ali. Credit: Monica Morgan

BY KIMBERLY HAYES TAYLOR, AUGUST 23, 2016

The memory of Ardelia Ann Ali's rape sticks to her like plaster.

She works hard to peel off the thick depression, anxiety and fear her rapist left after gripping her neck, sliding a knife against her face and violently raping her in November 1995 when she was 18. She says he stripped away her self-esteem, and as a result, she can't seem to move on.

The sexual assault has impaired her physical and emotional well-being, plaguing her with an inability to engage in a normal sex life in addition to an array of life-threatening challenges: morbid obesity, diabetes, hypertension and congestive heart failure.

Not knowing who the tall, skinny Black man was who so deeply damaged nearly half her life ago has haunted her because she had no idea whether he was a neighbor, friend or foe. Now, Ali, 38, can say his name—Marshall Alan White—and she finally is working on the healing she

so desperately desires.

"It made me close myself in," says Ali. "I stayed home and never went out. I didn't even go to the movies. I missed my 20s and most of my 30s."

Ali is one of more than 11,000 people in Detroit whose rape kits—DNA, sperm, hair and other specimens—sat untested and collecting dust on racks in a vacated Detroit Police Department evidence storage unit for decades before being discovered.

Some of them had been sitting more than 35 years. Each represented a woman—or a man—whose violent crime had never been investigated. The rape kits remained untested and the perpetrators remained free to rape again. Hundreds did. Like Ali, 81 percent of the victims were African-American.

But the chance discovery of the kits and a community-based initiative to raise the needed funds to get the kits tested and find justice for the victims has slowly developed and has given people like Ali hope.

The story behind the finding of the kits began in August 2009, when Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy assigned then-assistant prosecutor Robert Spada to help find some missing ballistics evidence that was to be transferred from Detroit Police Department to the Michigan State Police. During a tour of an old, annexed overflow property storage unit, he noticed stacks of banker's boxes in the property room.

As he walked with the group of police officers, he asked what was in those boxes. Rape kits, someone answered.

Curious about whether the kits had been tested, Spada fell back from the group, walked over and opened a box. The rape kits inside were sealed, meaning nobody had bothered to test or investigate them. He opened another box and another.

All the kits inside were untested.

"I thought, 'My God! How could there be that many rape kits?'" says Spada, now the deputy chief of the Special Victims Unit for the Wayne County Prosecutor's office, charged with heading task force to investigate and prosecute the sexual assaults. "That's a person who has gone through an invasive exam. I was just shocked. It was just unbelievable."

He began estimating how many there were—at least 10,000. He called Worthy on his cellphone to share the disturbing news.

Spada's disbelief was more even profound after some rape kits were tested and prosecutors realized hundreds of the perpetrators were serial rapists, some whose DNA has been linked to more than 10 cases.

The discovery sent Worthy on a mission to get each of the 11,341 kits tested. She estimated she needed at least \$17 million, \$1,000 to \$1,500 for each kit. (The price was later down to \$490 per kit.)

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**-- Peg Tallet, Michigan Women's Foundation
Chief Community Engagement Officer**

For Worthy, getting funding to test the kits has been like slowly weaving together pieces of a quilt. In 2010, she received funding from the Office on Violence Against Women to test a random sample of 400 kits. Based on those results, her office received a \$1.5 million grant from the National Institute of Justice that paid for another 1,600 tests. From the initial 2,000-kit sampling, prosecutors got 670 hits in the national DNA database, including links to crimes in 26 other states and Washington, D.C. They identified 188 serial rapists and obtained 15 convictions, including Shelly Andre Brooks, who is serving a life sentence for raping and murdering seven women.

That's when \$150,000 poured in from private donors. In 2013, the Michigan State legislators set aside \$4 million to test remaining kits, and the Michigan Attorney General's office allocated \$3 million for prosecution in three years. Worthy later received \$1 million from Wayne County. It still wasn't enough, though. That's when she approached the Michigan Women's Foundation for help.

The foundation collaborated with the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office, forming the initiative **Enough SAID** in 2014, which has raised \$1.5 million since January 2015.

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against women have to count," said Peg Tallet, Michigan Women's Foundation chief community engagement officer. "This is such a passionate cause and it pulls on people's heart strings. We've had donations from \$5 to \$500,000. The best part is I'm asking the good people of Michigan and other parts of the world to care about this."

In October 2015, dozens of African-American women representing organizations, business leaders and sororities wanted to show they cared by joining Enough SAID's initiative with an ambitious grassroots fundraising campaign, the **African American 490 Challenge**. Together, they represent more than 10,000 individuals.

"I feel like this is my mission," Kim Trent, president of the African American 490 Challenge and herself a sexual assault survivor, tells EBONY.com. "This is the reason I get up in the morning. I am so passionate about this; it feels like this was something I was born to do."



Photo courtesy: McConnell Communications

The group Trent leads pledged to raise \$657,090 to test and investigate the estimated then-remaining 1,341 rape kits [the pledge was made in October 2015, when there were 1,341 still-untested kits] has collected more than \$300,000 with creative fundraising ideas, including a competition between members of Delta Sigma Theta and Alpha Kappa Alpha sororities, and among fans during a football game between rivals Michigan State University and the University of Michigan. Businesses, restaurateurs and boutique owners have donated proceeds from sales.

As part of this effort, proceeds from an Erykah Badu concert that took place Aug. 12 in partnership with events company Right Productions, went toward helping to fund the African American 490 Challenge including money from a \$100 pre-show reception and a \$1000 per person VIP reception.

Badu announced on Aug. 12 that she will continue supporting the campaign by donating a portion of ticket sales from remaining shows on her 2016 tour.

Shahida Mausi, president and CEO of Right Productions and member of the African American 490 Challenge steering committee, arranged the highly anticipated fundraiser.

"This is a huge day for Enough SAID/AA490," Worthy said in a statement. "Everyone knows that Erykah Badu is a major, major talent in the music and songwriting industry. For her to lend her name, talent and time to this work is nothing short of a miracle. Justice for these forgotten sexual assault victims has been given a phenomenal assist."

Dozens of men also have joined the ongoing effort to raise money to get the rape kits tested and investigated, declaring the month of July Men's Month, in which organizations and businesses vowed to raise at least \$125,000. Rod Rickman, campaign chair of the African American Men's 490 Challenge, who said Black men must stand with Black women.

"I have six sisters, three daughters and I have granddaughters," he explains. "When I first found out about the untested rape kits, I was shocked. I was just lost for words, and that turned into anger and frustration. I had a lot of different emotions trying to determine why those rape kits hadn't been tested. I wanted to be involved to see what I could do to get them tested and to make sure this doesn't happen again."

Although the raising of funds means the goal getting all the rape kits tested is nearer, the disturbing fact remains that they were swept aside in the first place.

But attitudes 20 years ago were different. Even when women reported their rapes, they were discouraged from prosecuting or undergoing an examination to collect evidence.

"They were vulnerable, homeless, they may have been drug addicted or in the sex trade at that time," says Spada. "The police officers investigating these cases had a different perception of who could be a rape victim. Some people may have believed that a prostitute could never be raped. A woman who is living on the street and drug addicted *can* be raped. Not every one of these women or men, for that matter, lived those lives. The demographics

at that time were people who were easy targets. When they came in, the impression was different than it is today."

Approximately one in five, or 22 percent, of African-American women will be raped at some point in their lives, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found in 2010, the latest data available.

The pain, psychological and physical problems Ali has experienced are classic for rape survivors, particularly for African-American women, says Carolyn West, Ph.D., a rape expert and associate professor of psychology at the University of Washington in Tacoma, who has spent much of her career studying the impact of rape on women of color.

"These physical and emotion health problems just radiate throughout your life," West adds. "It's so much more complicated for African-American women. Oftentimes, we don't have access to mental health care to move on."

"We live in neighborhoods where we're called b*tches, h*e's, 'hood rats; we're oftentimes also living in unsafe neighborhoods and chronically and constantly in jeopardy because of [the lack of] safety. We also live in coercive sexual communities where there are other problems, where women are generally disrespected and victims."

Worthy's office is providing the blueprint to help many other prosecutor's offices unravel the process of testing kits, conducting the investigations and prosecuting offenders. Her office is planning to host a national convention in Detroit in September for prosecutors,

police, evidence analysts and others in cities such as Cleveland and Memphis that also are dealing with backlogged untested rape kits.

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**--Carolyn West, Ph.D.,
University of Washington,
Tacoma Associate Professor**

"It is very gratifying," said Worthy, who survived a rape herself more than three decades ago. "We had a very, very slow start. When my staff discovered it in 2009 in the warehouse, almost nobody would help us. Even more important in getting justice for the sexual assault victims, we want to try to eradicate sexual assault. We want to make sure this never happens again."

As of August 4, their hard work has resulted in identifying 765 suspected serial sex offenders in 40 states. Of the estimated 10,000 rape kits that have been tested to date, Michigan State Police have logged 4,512 cases in the Combined DNA Index System, the national DNA database, and have gotten hits on 2,616 of them.

At least 265 cases are actively being investigated, and 1,201 cases have been linked to DNA in a rape kit or have been connected to another sexual assault case are awaiting investigation as of August 2015.

Sadly, says Spada, so much time has passed that some of

the victims and perpetrators have died.

But in Ali's case, justice was a possibility.

So far, 54 people have been convicted, including Marshall Alan White, who was sentenced in August 2015 to 15-to-30 years for raping Ali. The then-53-year-old pleaded guilty to first-degree criminal sexual assault and already was serving time in prison on a robbery charge.

"When I looked at him, I thought, 'This man did a lot to me. He damaged me,'" says Ali. "I wondered what would my life would have been like if he hadn't [assaulted] me,. I wanted to make sure he died in jail for ruining my teen years and my young adult life."

The earliest White can be released for the rape is 2027, when he will be 65 years old, but his maximum release date is 2040.

When White began serving a prison sentence for raping her all those years ago, it freed her. She no longer was his victim, realizing she was worthy and didn't have to allow people to abuse or misuse her.

"I took care of people, and did everything they wanted to me to. I watched children for two or three weeks at a time. I gave people money," she said. "If I did it, no matter what they would love me. Today, I look at my life in a totally different perspective."

Her rapist's conviction also gave her a renewed sense of hope.

"Everybody that did me wrong is not getting away with it," she said. "It's like something out of a movie—It's like God is saying, 'See, Ann, I haven't forgotten about you.'"

For more information, visit

<http://www.aa490challenge.org/>

and <http://enoughsaiddetroit.org/>