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SPILLING THE BEANS | A COFFEE BREAK WITH DONNA PALOMBA

A Victim Turned Advocate

Donna Palomba of Prospect is a survivor. The marketing business owner, wife and mother was raped in her home in 1993. The lead investigator for the Waterbury Police Department at the time accused Palomba of making up the story and threatened to charge her with making a false police report. But the case stayed alive, with the help of a new police chief and forensic expert Dr. Henry Lee. In 2004, a DNA test found a perfect match between Palomba's assailant, a man who was later convicted of kidnapping her, although he was not charged with rape because of a statute of limitations on sexual assault charges. Palomba, who was referred to as "Jane Doe" in court papers, recently went on "Dateline NBC" and the "Today" show to talk openly for the first time about the assault.

She has also established a national nonprofit organization called "Jane Doe No More" to increase awareness, break stigmas and develop training tools for those dealing with sexual assault crimes. Earlier this month, the state Department of Labor, Westfarms mall and L'Oreal Paris named Palomba Connecticut's Working Woman of the Year. She recently took some time from a hectic schedule to "Spill the Beans" with Java.

Q: *You have been through so much with your assault, the aftermath and your new organization. Have you done everything you want to do as far as initiating change when it comes to perception, and the way professionals handle sexual assaults?*

A: This is just a beginning for "Jane Doe No More" and creating awareness of sexual assault crimes. People should get it by now, but they don't. The reaction



from "Dateline" was overwhelming. The show's message board had so many people, including victims, commenting that better awareness and training is still so needed. The whole message for my initiative is to shorten the time from the crime to the healing for the victim. You would not think that what happened to me could happen in this day and age. We need to change that. We need to make it clear to everyone as a society that we need to do a better job of treating the victim. The trauma of the crime should be the beginning and the end of the trauma. No one chooses to be a victim. They have no control.

Q: *What do you think you have that makes you a "woman of the year"?*

A: I think, particularly in this case, it is about working woman who have overcome some kind of adversity. I'm not used to being in the spotlight, and the award makes

me a little bit embarrassed. I think the committee that chose me was looking for perseverance. I am an ordinary person who had extraordinary things happen to me. It's quite an honor to be chosen.

Q: *How do you envision the award changing your life?*

A: I look at it as an opportunity to help give "Jane Doe No More" more attention. Being on "Dateline" was truly a big step forward for me personally. I had worked behind the scenes, not bringing attention to myself because my children were younger and my perpetrator was not sentenced. I didn't know who knew about me or what happened. It was a big nightmare. It is freeing and empowering to at last come forward. There is a lesson to be learned from that.

Q: *So what was it like to come out on "Dateline?"*

A: It was emotional for both my husband and me. I am one of those people who weighed out the pros and cons as far as doing the show. I talked to "Dateline" for over a year before I made the decision to come forward. It's been kind of surreal to see myself on television. I watched the "Today" show segment online. It's always difficult to watch yourself.

Q: *Did you win any prizes?*

A: Well, there was no crown, but there were roses, a shopping spree and trip to a spa in Tampa, Fla., that I still haven't worked out yet.

Q: *Do you consider yourself a role model?*

A: That's a tough one. I have been told that I am. I think people could learn from my experience.

Q: *What is your best piece of advice for other women?*

A: Do the right thing, and never give up. Check your moral compass. Stuff will get thrown in your way, but you have the ability to choose your reaction. Keep persevering, no matter what happens. You will get through it.