

1. [sustain](#)
2. [case to cause](#)
3. [act](#)
4. [victim to champion](#)
5. [systems-based solution](#)
6. [beyond Brooke](#)

On Crime Victims Rights Week ([OVC](#), OJ)

Sustain [top](#)

As my grandmother, Brooke Astor, now rests in peace, I could have resumed my life as before.

For years my battle *for* my grandmother, and my battle *against* my father consumed my life—and consumed our family.

In 2009, after a six-month criminal trial of my father, a friend familiar with my circumstances said, “You must be glad that’s all behind you.”

But, I realize: When elder abuse hits home, it hurts.

I realize: While my grandmother was emotionally and financially abused...and isolated, her case is far from isolated; there are millions of victims, today, suffering similar injury.

I realize: If my grandmother, Brooke Astor, can be victimized, elder abuse does not discriminate; any elder is vulnerable: more than one in ten will be a victim.

I realize: The aftermath of elder abuse far exceeds any dollar amount. Most costs are irretrievable. Some, compounded.

And I realize: To be complacent about elder justice is to be complicit in elder abuse.

In fact, our national negligence is a proximate cause of elder abuse—and an injury to our mores...and morality.

Our inaction protects perpetrators, not their victims, our loved ones—or, on another day, ourselves.

When our elders lose their sight, it's natural;
when we turn a blind eye to their plight, it's negligent.

When our elders lose their hearing, it's natural;
when we are deaf to their cries for help, it's negligent.

When our elders lose their voice, it's natural;
when we choose not to voice our concerns, it's negligent.

And when our elder's capacity is reduced, it's natural;
when their assets are reduced, without consent, it's criminal.

Case to Cause [top](#)

Over a decade ago, I was filled with angst, frustration, and a sense of impotence as I watched my grandmother's world, which had spanned the globe and a century, become so diminished and compromised by her own son, my father.

I did not know what to do or who to turn to.

Yet, when bad things happen, good people get together.

In helping my fragile, abused grandmother I was not alone.

Her abuse galvanized a collective response by family, friends, staff, and caregivers all united by compassion and a common cause. Individuals-in-sum with a great mixed skill-set. The strength of our diversity contributed much to our success. To them, I am forever grateful.

Staff and caregivers could have walked away any day, but they stood firm and helped my grandmother. Yet, some saviors endured secondary or vicarious victimization.

I filed a guardianship petition to save my grandmother *and* help those who were helping her.

In filing my petition, which was to have been sealed, I was hoping that this matter would be quietly settled. Yet this was not just a family affair, nor was it civil—it was criminal.

If I could do it all again, I would have gone to the DA—right away.

I am but one of many people who stood up for my grandmother in her last years—and who then took the stand, in 2009 in criminal court, for the greater cause of elder justice.

In our effort to help my grandmother, and then the cause she represented, we advanced from tribulation to trial. From the tribulation of her abuse...and a determination by the guardianship judge that “elder abuse was not substantiated,” to a six-month criminal trial that proved otherwise.

Here, I am particularly grateful to the Manhattan DA, whose elder-abuse unit provided compassion in action, coupled with capacity—and who did so much to respect our anguish, help us heal, and find our voice in the years up to and including trial.

At trial, for me, taking the stand was difficult. But not taking *a* stand, and not helping my grandmother, would have been more so.

The jury’s verdict: My father was found guilty on 15 of the 16 counts against him. Later, all but one were upheld on appeal.

After a spring and long, long summer of my father’s trial and after heart-wrenching testimony, this was a very bittersweet harvest.

Yet, this harvest has so nourished the cause of elder justice.

Act [top](#)

I could have disregarded heart-wrenching accounts and calls for help from staff, caregivers, and friends.

I could have found false consolation in thinking my grandmother had “had a good life” and, in the throes of dementia, wasn’t cognizant of her circumstances.

I could have maintained the fallacy that families should not air their dirty linen in public—even when financial assets are being “laundered.”

I could have been made complicit by the false prospect of “silence money” that would have increased my inheritance significantly.

I could have enabled my father by thinking “family first” and presume that my grandmother’s only child, only son—“natural object of her affection”—deserved all he sought...and stole.

But, I could never, ever live with any of these choices.

I so I chose to act—and in so doing help my grandmother and those helping her.

And in so doing, now, help empower others to recognize and report abuse...so victims can recover their dollars and sense; their stolen assets and their sense of self and self-determination.

Victim to Champion [top](#)

In 2014, before an annual conference of the National Center for Victims of Crime, I expressed the parallels between my profession and elder justice; both involve victims and address preservation—and “elders,” with such embodied worth.

My profession, historic preservation, started out in response to the damage or destruction of our cultural resources; harm inflicted due to poor policies, practices, disinvestment—and a discount, sometimes until it is too late, of the ageless value of that which is old.

Early on we were good at saving buildings that were victim to neglect, maltreatment, and horrible interventions. This work, which continues, is heroic and visible.

Witness the beautiful, respectful restoration of the State Capital and, here, the Alfred E. Smith Building—just two examples.

But now, while still working with those who are vulnerable and victims, we realize that community concern and engagement, vigilance, protection, and prevention are just as important as professional “restoration,” which is damage-control-after-the-fact.

Here, today, “restoration” (or relief and recovery) of elders’ lives for their, and our, benefit—also informs our proactive, preventive work.

There is a positive feedback loop along the continuum of care; with victims, as they heal, informing our preventive efforts against abuse...and in so doing coming full circle—becoming whole, even holy.

This is why efforts of the Office of Victim Services are so critical to our common cause.

Systems-based solution [top](#)

Elder justice is in its infancy compared to other realms that define our social and moral obligations. Here, elder justice can help *complete*, not compete with, other causes.

Social justice is not about *just* one cause or *just* another. It's inclusive and embracing.

Yet causes have their special concern and needs— these are being reaffirmed, today, for elders.

Elder abuse is a pervasive, profound, and systemic problem best addressed though a systems-based approach to understand better our elder-justice universe with its constellations, the alignment of its shining stars, and the forces that keep them apart or draw them together...by the gravity of elder abuse.

Today, the Office of Victim Services focuses on elders' needs to advance work with elders while enhancing our multidisciplinary approach, in concert with all sectors.

There is research I cite as I travel from border to border, coast to coast; it's titled *Under the Radar: New York State Elder Abuse Prevalence Study*, which examines self-reported prevalence and documented case surveys and,

“found an elder abuse incidence rate in New York State that was nearly 24 times greater than the number of cases referred to social service, law enforcement or legal authorities who have the capacity as well as the responsibility to assist older adult victims.”

For elder financial exploitation the incidence was 44 times greater. ([PDF file](#). 2011.)

Efforts by the Office of Victim Services provide one more reason for victims, and anyone else, to report abuse—knowing that help is available.

Beyond Brooke [top](#)

My grandmother would certainly never want to be known as one of America's most famous cases of elder abuse.

Nor did she, while in the throes of dementia, choose to be victimized; to be deprived, manipulated, and robbed—all as part of a calculated “scheme to defraud,” as characterized by the Manhattan District Attorney.

Yet, the sad circumstances surrounding my grandmother have informed a timely, and timeless, cause in elder justice. This may be one of her greatest, most lasting legacies.

At 104, she unknowingly entered her “encore career” as an advocate for elder Americans, including elders two generations younger.

Just as her timing was critical with her intentional, quality-of-life philanthropy so, now, in her advanced age, she unintentionally advanced the cause of “quality at the end of life.”

By 2030 in the US there will be over 70 million shades of gray ([Profile](#), AOA, 2014); the world will have a billion ([Maisano](#), 2014), each one with its own hue, value, and chroma to color our world far beyond that provided by the polarizing perceptions of a black-and-white approach to “graying,” to individuals, and to age.

Our “global,” today, is our global, 360-365 approach: 360-degree perimeter protection and care of elders—year round. This protection involves: awareness, detection, rapid response, and recovery of victim’s assets and lives, while empowering elders to, as “wounded healers,” come full circle and, in turn, to help inform others.

To victims, I say: before you endure the next fall, know there is a safety net at other end of your call.

Thank you for inviting me to share my story and our dreams.

All this is bipartisan: the campaign color for elder justice is purple—and equal measure of red and blue.

Thank you, more, for all you do every with elders...to autograph their lives, center stage, in the limelight—and with supporting actors in each of us.