

SAO Profile in Passion - Sandra Lawrence



Sandra Lawrence is one of the pillars of the SAO. Her smile and her distinct laughter are only surpassed by her tenacity, work ethic, leadership and ability to inspire others. As the Administrator of Victim Services, she has the crucial task of making sure that victims of crimes are supported and guided through the criminal justice system. With 30 years of service at SAO, she is a trusted advisor to the State Attorney and is responsible for the components of every new office initiative that impact victims.

“Sandra is a godsend to me and the entire SAO team,” says State Attorney Fernandez Rundle. “We could never do what we do without her. With her invaluable leadership, our victim/witness coordinators are able to ensure that all of our victims are given the support they deserve.”

Everything that Sandra accomplishes, she attributes to her mother and father who instilled the importance of education and service to others. Though they have passed, their values, morals and ethics live on through Sandra, her older brother and two younger sisters.

“My parents raised us with certain values that come full circle in my position here,” says Sandra proudly. “You have to care and have compassion for people.”

Though Sandra has spent her career working in the legal field, growing up she dreamed of being an educator. “I always wanted to be a teacher. I was always playing teacher with my younger sisters.”

At 16 years of age, Sandra graduated high school and went to Community College in Jamaica. She also worked for a while. When she was 21, she moved to Miami. “Over the years I would visit because I had family and friends here. So, it was an easy transition.” Sandra attended Miami-Dade College for two years before going to Barry University, where she earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Liberal Arts and a one-year paralegal degree. Upon graduation, Sandra went to work at SAO.

“I school, I heard a speech from someone at SAO and I was extremely interested. So, I came in to apply on a Friday and Denise Moon interviewed me. I really liked what the office stood for. I got call the following week and I took the job. Denise ensured I got the support I needed to get off to a fast start and became my mentor.”

Sandra began as a Victim Witness Counselor I and worked her way up the ranks. She worked in County Court Domestic Violence Unit and Felony Domestic Violence Unit. “As a Victim Witness Counselor, you explain the system to victims and families. Our job is to guide them, support them, and literally hold their hand.”

“When you are in DV unit you see all types of cases and make strong connections with the victims,” she says. “There was a case that I had almost 20 years ago where the victim was killed by her boyfriend. She left behind a small child and I worked closely with the victim’s mother. Thought it took a long time for the case to go to trial, the boyfriend was found guilty and is in prison. To this day, I get calls periodically from the victim’s mother. She reaches out to say hello, see how I am doing, and update me on to what has been going on in their lives.”

During this time, Sandra earned a Masters Degree in Social Work from Florida International University. But her love for learning and for helping others led her to attend University of Miami School of Law where she earned her Juris Doctorate.

During her final semester of law school Sandra was eight months pregnant. Chief Assistant Kathleen Hoague was her professor or Litigation skills that semester. “She was always asking me if I was okay because I think they were all afraid that I was going to go into labor at any moment!”

“I always enjoyed and was intrigued by the law. I wanted to have a better understanding of it and how it is applied. Law school put a lot of things in perspective. Adding that knowledge to my background in Social Work helped make me much more effective.”

Sandra went on to become the Administrator of Victims Services. Now, she leads and supports about 130 employees. “As an administrator you have to be open, hire the right people, and treat staff as they deserve to be treated. It’s a team effort and we all have different strengths. It is important to listen to them and their perspectives. I was lucky to have Denise and Carrie Soubal (Sr.) as mentors. I’ve learned so much from them.”

When asked about her achievements at SAO, Sandra is quick to credit State Attorney Fernandez Rundle. “I cannot express how much I admire, respect and like her and her values. She is a visionary. She is and always has been so far ahead of her time. What we have been able to create under leadership is bar none. The State Attorney has allowed me to expand Victims Services to what it is today. I am honored that she asks me for my input. I thoroughly enjoy working with her.”

Sandra has contributed to and/or overseen numerous key improvements to victim services, including:

- **creating of the Early Expedited Intake System (EIS), which allows staff to intervene much earlier and ensure attendance at the first pre-file conference.**
- **assisting the State Attorney in staffing of the State Attorney’s Institute for Coordination, Advocacy and Prosecution (ICAP) Building for survivors of Human Trafficking. ICAP, which now serves as a national model, provides a one-stop center housing specialized prosecutors, investigators, victim specialists, paralegals, and support staff who a Trauma-Informed Model for recovery services and counseling to victims.**
- **helping set up a rapid response net with a dedicated local Human Trafficking Hotline where victim specialists respond 24/7 to calls and the team is prepared to recover victims of**

Human Trafficking in preparation for the 2020 Super Bowl.

- establishing a local resource hotline and other virtual communication processes for domestic violence victims that provides them with easy access to our office during the pandemic.
- providing invaluable service and support to the victims and families of the Champlain Towers South collapse.

Sandra enjoys the tremendous impact her and her team's work has in the lives of victims and their families. "We have highly trained specialists who know how to deal with them in their time of need. We bring compassion, empathy, and understanding to them and ensure that they understand how the system works. We assess their needs and connect them to community resources. We even attend hearings with them. Our support takes away their fear and helps them heal. They know that they are not alone."

Sandra is passionate about her work and the community. There is not enough we can say about someone like Sandra who does so much for so many. Thank you, Sandra, for working every day to better the lives of others.