



Profile in Passion – Carmen Duran

Even as a little girl growing up in Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, Carmen Duran was helping those around her. “I have always been a social worker. I would always be helping the other kids with their problems,” she says.

Her father left his native Peru and his wealthy family at 16 years old and jumped on a ship that ended up in California. He eventually settled in New York City. Carmen’s mother was from Puerto Rico and arrived in the Big Apple when she was 17 years old. They met, married, and had Carmen and a younger son.

Having been raised to follow her passion for helping those who need it the most, Carmen chose a career that allowed her to develop her vocation. “In high school, you were able to start studying nursing beginning freshman year. That is what I did and when I graduated at age 17, I was a licensed practical nurse.”

Carmen worked as a nurse while going to college. She worked at Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital, Lenox Hill, Creedmore Psychiatric, as well as private doctors. This not only supplemented her income, but also complemented her studies. “I went to John Jay College of Criminal Justice and studied forensic psychology.”

During those years, she would meet her now ex-husband and married. It was at this time that her professional life would take her in an unexpected direction.

Working in the South Bronx, she dealt with a lot of crisis cases that were challenging and sometimes heartbreaking. Then she began her first job at a community health center at Fordham Tremont Mental Health. They saw all kinds of patients come through our doors, but it was the ones who didn’t come in that intrigued her.

“Hunts Point Market was right across the street and that is where the girls “in the life” would be working. Back then, we didn’t use the term human trafficking because we didn’t know everything that we know now. “

“One day I said to my coworker, ‘Let’s go talk to the girls to see if they need medical services.’ We went and spoke with them in a very open and non-judgmental way. Some of them came in and we were able to provide them with what they needed. We started establishing communication and trust with the girls by reaching out to them where they were. The pimps weren’t happy with this at all.”

In 1994, Carmen and her then husband moved to Miami and started their family and raised three children.

She transferred her nursing license to Florida and began working in different hospitals picking up shifts. And then her past met her future when she started working at Kristi House when they opened a shelter for minor victims of human trafficking.

“The victims in New York were hard core because they didn’t trust anyone. Our minors here (in Miami-Dade), once they trust you, they open up. Once you engage to develop trust, you can move forward.”

In 2014 Carmen applied to a job opening at the State Attorney’s Office Human Trafficking (HT) Unit that was created two years prior. The first HT director, ASA Susan Dechovitz, spoke with State Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle and advised that they needed someone to work with the victims who was specialized in this population. “I was hired as the first HT Victim Specialist and worked with the victims as a case manager and social worker creating treatment plans focused on long term goals. I worked with them and advocated for them even after the criminal case was over.”

“A fundamental strength of the State Attorney’s Office lies with the vast number of individual employees who are deeply involved in making their communities better, “said State Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle. “Carmen Duran is one of those individuals. I always refer to her as an angel on earth. She has helped give hope to some of our most needy victims, helping them find stability in a world that they felt was far beyond their control. She has salvaged lives, lost lives, and we are all the better for it.”

“I love working with State Attorney Fernandez Rundle because she facilitates the work that we in Victims’ Services do. She is the only State Attorney who allows us to work as an integral part of the process with the victims. KFR believes in victims healing, not just about winning cases.”

“One day I was walking across the parking lot with a pregnant victim who also had a toddler with her. The State Attorney stopped her car, got out, and came over to us. She spoke to the victim and listened to her story. She really connected with her and gave her words of encouragement. At the end of the conversation, she hugged the victim and assured her that we were there for her.” The victim never forgot that encounter.

There are still victims who reach out to Carmen to update her on their progress no matter where they are throughout the United States. “One of our girls is now a mother of two and received her degree as a nurse’s aide. Another one opened a very successful nail salon.”

Carmen attributes the breakdown of the family, lack of supervision, being in foster care, and the pimps who romance their victims, as contributing factors to these girls becoming victims of human trafficking.

In March of 2020, right before the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, State Attorney Fernandez Rundle asked Carmen to be a part of her new Elder and Vulnerable Adult (EVA) Unit. “EVA victims are vulnerable in every sense. Many have medical issues, there is a lack of family support, and they don’t have the strength to fight for themselves.”

When Carmen works with one of these vulnerable adults, she advocates and fights for them as if they were a member of her own family. “We are put on earth to do the right thing. We need to be fair and treat others with respect.”

All of the victims of Elder and Vulnerable Adult exploitation cases that make the news are handled by Carmen. She has created personal bonds with the victims as she stands up for them in court. She reviews their medical history, speaks to their doctors, family and friends, and reports to the court. Carmen has earned a reputation of being a trusted champion of these victims.

As a member of the SAO Crisis Team led by Victims Services Administrator Sandra Lawrence, Carmen and her fellow Victim’s Services colleagues were part of the Surfside Collapse relief effort. They spent days at the scene helping those affected by the tragedy, frontline workers and first responders.

She also presents at trainings, workshops, and represents the office in matters related to Elder Abuse.

Carmen is currently finishing up a Juris Master’s in health care law at Florida International University. This 20-month hybrid program has given her insight into how healthcare is affected by law. It has also motivated her to go to law school. Along with everything else she does, she is studying for the LSAT.

With all this responsibility, she still takes time to de-stress and refresh herself by practicing yoga, running, and spending time with family. She just recently became a grandmother and is enjoying that role.

Her children are a source of pride. Her daughter has a master's in social work and works at a federal agency with victims of domestic violence. Her oldest son is an executive chef in Maui, and her youngest son is a financial analyst in Philadelphia.

When asked about the future, Carmen assures that she is not going anywhere. The SAO is her home, and she loves it here.

"This work is not 9am-5pm. It is seven days a week. I go home at the end of the day feeling good because I believe that we made a difference. Knowing that I did good today, at the end of the day, that is all there is."