ALERT FEATURED TOP STORY EDITOR'S PICK

Keynote speaker at CARDV fundraiser returning to place of safety

Maddie Pfeifer
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The Center Against Rape and Domestic Violence advocacy center has a room filled with toys for children to play wit
Kylie Graham, Mid-Valley Media

Maddie Pfeifer

Saadia McConville was just 4 years old when she arrived at the Center Against Rape and Domestic Violence center in Corvallis in 1984. She doesn't remember much.

She knows she felt safe, which was important considering the circumstances.

Her parents were at the center of what would become a landmark case in Benton County and beyond: one of the first successfully prosecuted marital rape cases in the country.

Now, at age 42, she's coming back to the place she sought refuge as a child.

"I don't think it's hyperbolic to say that I don't know if we'd be alive if we didn't have that shelter," McConville said.

She'll be returning to Corvallis to give the keynote presentation at the **CARDV Safe Families Benefit** at 7:30 a.m. Tuesday, Oct. 4. To RSVP to the virtual event or to donate, go to **www.cardv.org/events/sfb**.

Saadia McConville

Michael Conti

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CARDV Executive Director Kate Caldwell said the goal of the event is to raise $80,000 which will help ensure the agency's services — which include a 24-hour crisis hotline (541-754-0110), legal advocacy, confidential shelters, support groups and more — continue to be free.

From Pakistan to America

McConville's father, Zafarullah Hafeez Siddiqui, and her mother were graduate students at Oregon State University. McConville was born in Pakistan but traveled as an infant with her parents to Corvallis in 1980. Her mother, whose identity is shielded here, has a different last name.

McConville said her parents had a semi-arranged marriage, although her mom didn't really want to get married. But when her father spoke of his dreams of traveling to America to study, McConville's mother couldn't pass on the opportunity.

"My mom was really excited about (going to America) because Pakistan is a very patriarchal culture," McConville said. "She had grown up idolizing Western culture, and she really just wanted that experience and that kind of a life."

It was far from a perfect marriage. McConville said her father was abusive to her mother, but her mother was willing to take it as long as he didn't hurt their daughter. One day her mother came home and saw Siddiqui had hit McConville. That was the turning point.

Her mom connected with a local church that had a program for foreign exchange students, and she met a couple who became parental figures to her and McConville. While Siddiqui returned to Pakistan to get some more money, the couple helped her find a divorce attorney and get a restraining order.

Upon returning to Corvallis, Siddiqui lived estranged from his family for a while. The couple came from a Muslim culture in which a woman divorcing her husband was considered inappropriate. It could even be seen as shameful.

Crimes committed

The pending divorce and consequential shame overtook Siddiqui.

McConville said her mom woke up one night with a gun pointed at her. Siddiqui then raped his wife multiple times and threatened to kill her and their daughters, according to McConville.

After surviving the night, McConville's mother reportedly wrote a note asking for help on a scrap of paper, hid it in her shoe and later slid it in the neighbor's mailbox.

The neighbor called the police, who arrested Siddiqui.

"I remember visiting him in jail. I have very distinct memories of what that jail was like, and it was just so gray and suppressing and scary," McConville said.

"I went back in July just a couple months ago, and it looks exactly the same."

A trial ensues

In 1984, a Benton County Circuit Court jury found Siddiqui guilty of raping his wife. The conviction culminated a high-profile trial that put the Muslim religion and Western culture and beliefs at the forefront.

Pete Sandrock was Benton County District Attorney at the time.

“It was certainly noteworthy to me and to my office, but I think that it was noteworthy in the longer arc of spousal rape as a crime because it really was one of the first trials in Oregon, and certainly one of the first convictions at trial in the nation,” Sandrock said.

“There had been some others, but very few, and one of the things that made this case especially noteworthy is that this was a Muslim immigrant family,” he added.

Corvallis Gazette-Times articles written about the 1984 trial reported that Siddiqui sat with a copy of the Koran on the table in front of him during the trial. The defense referred to the crimes as an intercultural conflict and said the problems arose from the victim’s desire to create her own identity and break away from the traditional pillars of the Muslim faith.

In the end, the jury found Siddiqui guilty. Just hours after he was convicted, Siddiqui hanged himself in his cell at the Benton County Jail.

Despite Siddiqui never making it to prison, the conviction still marked the beginning of a shift in the perception of marital rape.

“Everybody involved in the case recognized that it was important in the development of the law and the ability to proceed in cases like this,” Sandrock said. “I don't want to claim something that's not our due. We were certainly leaders in this, but we weren't the only ones.”

Marital rape laws took time

Marital rape is illegal nationwide today, but that wasn't always the case. Until the 1970s, marriage was a legal defense for rape. At the time of the case, marital rape was still a hotly discussed topic. It wasn't made illegal in all 50 states until 1993.

Oregon, in particular, was a state that put spousal rape in the legal spotlight. In the 1978 Marion County court case Oregon v. Rideout, John Rideout became the first man in the country to be charged with raping his wife while living with her.

Although he was acquitted, the case kickstarted the conversation. Sandrock said Oregon was fairly progressive when it came to marital rape legislation.

Her time at CARDV

Although she was quite young, McConville remembers the way she felt at CARDV. She moved there after her father was arrested because of fears that Siddiqui or his friends would try to “finish the job” and kill her and her mother.

“I think (the shelter) did a really good job of making sure that the kids felt like it was more of an adventure, rather than like you're hiding for your life,” she said. “I was 4, so I don't really have clear memories, but I felt safe.”

She remembers the children's playroom and racks of clothes from which to choose. It was like a slumber party, she said.

But because of the threats on their lives, McConville said her mother and she were on strict lockdown. There were even discussions of sending them into the “underground,” where they would be sent to a new place with new identities.

“It was something that I remember very clearly we were going to do,” she said. “I remember that I wanted my name to be Kelly.”

Despite not making that drastic move, it was a time of great upheaval and trauma. McConville's mother told her bits and pieces of what happened over the years, but she didn’t like to discuss it.

The two don’t talk much anymore, despite McConville actively working on a book about the experience.

Sharing her story

Around five or six years ago, McConville decided she wanted to try writing about what happened. She started with a chapter and a friend put her in contact with a literary agent, who said it was publishable.

But she wasn't quite ready to tell the full story.

"I didn't talk about it for the longest time. I was really embarrassed about it," she said. "I thought that you're a certain type of a person if you do end up in a situation like that.

"It took until I was well into adulthood to finally understand that it's not my fault. It's not my mom's fault. And there's actually power in talking about it and hopefully challenging some of these systems and making them in theory work better.

"But it just feels like it's such an uphill battle."

After working on part of the book, McConville hit a wall and didn't really know where to go from there. She returned to Oregon to research more about what happened in 1984. She redirected her writing, sharing her experience of discovery, about the case and her time at the shelter.

"The fact that we ended up somewhere that had a domestic violence shelter considering it was a relatively small town is fortunate.

"And then that we also ended up somewhere where we had a D.A. who was really progressive and sought out the rape as the crime that it is pushed for it be prosecuted as a felony and not as a sexual assault," she said.

A successful life

McConville said she's glad CARDV exists, but in a way, she wishes it didn't have to. Domestic violence has been a part of her life, but the shelter provided safety at a time she needed it.

Today, McConville runs a communication consultancy where she works with anti-poverty and economic justice organizations. She works on crafting different policies and content for the organizations, specifically focusing on the intersection of economic, racial and gender justice.

Before that, she worked in advocacy for immigrant rights and as a journalist. She currently lives in New York.

Had CARDV not existed, McConville can't fathom what would've happened to her and her mother.

"I think that's the shame of it — (the shelter is) doing this hugely important work, and it's just so sad that they don't ever get to see how they helped people and how important that is," she said.

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By Maddie Pfeifer

Reporter