

Not Just a Ride

By Reg P. Wydeven
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One of my favorite TV shows is ‘Law & Order: Special Victims’ Unit.’ A spinoff of the original ‘Law & Order’ and ‘Homicide: Life on the Street,’ SVU debuted in 1999 and dealt with sensitive subject matter based on real life events that were “ripped from the headlines.”

Surprisingly, SVU is still on the air and is in its 19th season. The show’s success is partly due to its relevance to today’s pressing criminal topics, but another huge draw is its cast, led by Mariska Hargitay, who plays Detective Olivia Benson. While the role began as a steady acting gig for Hargitay, daughter of Hollywood legend Jayne Mansfield and former Mr. Universe Mickey Hargitay, life imitated art as she began to promote awareness for sexual assault, domestic violence and child abuse.

After receiving thousands of letters from viewers about their own personal experiences with the issues depicted on the series, Hargitay founded Joyful Heart in 2004. The charity aims to help sexual assault survivors heal and reclaim a sense of joy in their lives. The organization also hopes to transform society’s response to sexual assault, domestic violence, and child abuse, and end this violence forever.

One of the things I learned about while watching SVU was rape kits, which is a collection of DNA evidence removed from a sexual-assault victim after an alleged sexual assault. The kits help identify, and hopefully convict, the perpetrators. However, it is estimated that hundreds of thousands of rape kits have gone untested for cases that don’t go forward for various reasons. Even though the case doesn’t proceed, though, the kits merit testing to hopefully identify offenders of other assaults, and especially serial rapists.

Hargitay is now determined to end this rape-kit backlog, which is the subject of her new HBO documentary, ‘I Am Evidence.’ “The movie has been [made] to provoke outrage, literally,” the Golden Globe-winning actress says. “Each untested kit represents a lost opportunity to bring justice to a survivor of sexual violence, as well as safety to a community.”

While the documentary aims to expose the problem of untested kits, it also spotlights success stories of working through the backlog. For example, Wayne County, Michigan, has tested 10,000 of Detroit’s 11,341 backlogged kits, resulting in the identification of 817 suspected serial rapists.

Hargitay’s goal is for all 50 states to require kits to be counted, tested and acted upon. “Testing rape kits sends a fundamental message to victims: What happened to you matters,” Hargitay asserts. “You matter.” Her dream is being helped by the federal government. The Bureau of Justice Assistance, a division of the U.S. Department of Justice, launched the National Sexual Assault Kit Initiative. SAKI provides grants to test kits in the backlog.

Wisconsin was the recipient of some of these funds. In September of 2015, the Wisconsin DOJ was awarded several grants from SAKI and the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office. In addition to testing kits, Wisconsin used the grants to create a task force to implement protocols for testing old kits, complete an inventory of all unsubmitted kits and a tracking system for kits, and expand training for law enforcement officers, prosecutors, sexual assault nurse examiners, and victim advocates. Like Michigan, Wisconsin has identified multiple suspects thanks to SAKI.

Last year, Wisconsin legislators introduced several bills affecting rape kits. The proposals would govern data collection for rape kits, their storage and testing. Hopefully these bills become law, resulting in more order.

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