

## Angelou inspires survivors to use voices- 6/5/14

It is jarring how the death of someone I never personally knew could affect me so deeply. But that is exactly how I felt the morning I read that Maya Angelou had died. As I continued to read articles and stories online, I was comforted to know I was not the only person impacted. Whenever I speak about advocacy and empowerment, I am thinking of Maya Angelou and her path to healing.



Having heard her speak about her own childhood sexual abuse has largely inspired my approach to advocacy and my interactions with survivors. When I tell survivors that “there is no right or wrong decision, there is only right for you,” I am thinking of her childhood silence — a silence that was the result of well-intentioned community members responding to her disclosure of abuse without considering how their actions would affect her.

As a result, I am transparent with each survivor I support. I am deliberate in my actions, knowing that as we work to change our community’s response to sexual assault, we cannot lose sight of the individual survivors who will be directly impacted by our actions. That, I think, is the greatest lesson I have from her life.

One month after S.A.A.M. (Sexual Assault Awareness Month), I am reminded of the impact one person’s voice can have on the lives of so many. From civil rights to victim’s rights, Maya Angelou’s words have spurred the minds of generations of advocates.

Reflecting on her life, I am inspired and motivated by the knowledge that we can effect great change simply by using our voices. We can touch individual survivors, as well as change a culture that condones sexual assault and blames victims.

At the Sexual Assault Center, the healing starts here because the silence ends here.

I am so grateful to be able to work among so many amazing voices. Visit Nashville Sexual Assault Center on Facebook and share your favorite Maya Angelou quote, poem or novel. Join the discussion and learn the action steps we can all take to end sexual violence in our communities.

I think the best way to honor Maya Angelou — and all survivors — is to remember to never be afraid to use our voices. Jessica Labenberg is advocacy coordinator for the Sexual Assault Center in Nashville.