**A Lifetime of Combatting Domestic Violence: Charlotte Watson, 10/18/21**

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, news and insight from the New York Courts. I'm John Caher.

As we close out Domestic Violence Awareness Month, we're honored to welcome to the program Charlotte Watson, Executive Director the New York State Judicial Committee on Women in the Courts. Charlotte has been crusading to end violence against women for virtually her entire life. She previously served as Executive Director of the New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence. She was co-chair of the Downstate Coalition for Crime Victims, vice president and legislative committee chair for the New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, president of the Grayson County, Texas, Women's Crisis Center, and she's led numerous committees and coalitions to address violence against women. She is currently a member of the Crime Victims' Legal Network Advisory Committee, and recently posted an article in *the New York Crime Victims Blog* describing her personal and professional journey, which began as a child.

Charlotte, thank you for coming on the program. When did you first become aware of the incidents of domestic violence?

Charlotte Watson: John, thanks so much for having me. I was born in 1953, so I grew up in the mid '50s and the early '70s. I grew up in a small Texas town. We had about 7,000, 7,500 residents. My grandmother was our matriarch, and she had raised her children as a single mother at a time when that just didn't happen. I had a very different experience, I think, than the average person growing up. She was a hairdresser by day and a cattle woman by night. I would watch her all day in the beauty shop fixing women's hair, and then go with her to the farm at night to feed the cows and take care of the cows.

I grew up on the stories of how men would come to her beauty shop and try to basically cheat her on a deal, selling a cow or buying a cow, until finally, she would say to them, "I'll tell you what. Go outside, and I'm going to go put on my pants, and I'll meet you in the street. We'll settle this thing man to man." I grew up on stories like that from my grandmother, about how she handled difficult situations of, really, injustice and what today we call sexism.

And then I would see her change women's hairstyles and hair colors and give them a little money. She'd buy something from them, a trinket or something, so they'd have some cash to help them get out of town

unnoticed. She would always say, we would always hear, always think, that this woman had married “one of *those*.” That phrase, “one of *those*,” even today, is something that women can relate to, that people understand. She married someone who was abusive toward her, tried to control her, maybe physically violent with her. She had nowhere to go. Nothing she could do but to try to find a friend or relative to get to.

John Caher: When did it occur to you that there ought to be a better support system than a hairdresser running essentially an underground railroad for abused women?

Charlotte Watson: Growing up, I could see this happening, and I would think it didn't feel right. It just seemed wrong. But it also just seemed like the way life was. This was just a part of life. It's how life was.

Later on, I was working at Texas Instruments. Texas Instruments is a huge factory with mostly women working in it. Men are the supervisors and the managers, and the women were the workers. I would see women come to work with black eyes and missing teeth. The stories that they would tell us about why they didn't come to work didn't always make sense.

I worked on a machine that required two people to operate the machine. I worked with a woman named Yvonne. We worked from 7 at night until 7 in the morning on this machine. Yvonne was the kind of person who set the tone for everyone working in our group. She had a nice smile on her face, she was always uplifting and joyful and warm.

One night, she didn't come to work. Very unusual for her. She never missed work. She was always happy to come and tell us what happened with her kids that day. When she didn't show up to work, and she didn't call in sick or anything, we knew something was off. She didn't come to work for two weeks. After two weeks, her husband finally took the police to dry well where he had dumped her body after he had taken a frying pan and beat her to death with it in the kitchen, beat her head in, in front of the children.

John Caher: Oh my God!

Charlotte Watson: He took her limp body to the pickup truck, put it in the pickup, put the kids in the pickup with her, took her out to this field, and dumped her body in a dry well.

John Caher: How did that affect you? You were a young woman when you encountered this. How did that affect you?

Charlotte Watson: Well, it made me exceedingly sad. It was just a tragedy that this happened to this very extraordinary woman, and then to her children. And it made me furious, because how many women, just in that one facility where I was working, were experiencing violence, coming to work with black eyes and being harmed, and nobody asking questions, nothing happening about it? And we sat there.

Now, Yvonne never indicated anything was wrong at home. Like I said, she loved her kids, she focused on the positive, she talked about her children. It was a shock to us when this all came about. But nobody asked questions. Nobody did anything. And someone I cared very much about was murdered. I became very furious about that. When the opportunity came up not that long later to do something, then I was ready to do something, whatever it took, to change the conditions that we lived in so that this didn't happen again.

John Caher: I get the sense that maybe if someone had spoken up, if someone had asked, if someone had inquired, maybe this would've been avoided?

Charlotte Watson: I think it's possible it could've been avoided if we'd had a different environment, but what we're talking about is if we'd had a different society. We tend to focus on individuals and individual problems and solutions to those. The fabric of our society was such that it didn't have the same kind of meaning. We always look for, "What did she do to make this happen? Why did that woman have the black eye? Well, did she mouth off at her husband or boyfriend and he popped her for it?" That's how people would think of it, right? What did *she* do to make him do this to her?

That points to a society that has a set of values that really needs to be changed, and we've been working for decades through what we call the "women's movement" to do that. We can go all the way back to when we didn't even have the right to vote. We finally achieved that, and then all this subtext of women's lives came out, that women were not safe at home, that women couldn't get credit cards. You can go on down the list of how sexism played a role. Until we could really learn and talk about the role of sexism in our society and begin to address at that level, I'm not sure how much difference it would've really made if someone could've spoken, because there were no resources. We didn't have shelters, we didn't have hotlines. What would we offer to someone other than what my grandmother did and so many other women did? "Here, let

me help you get from here to a friend's house or a relative's house, where maybe you can start over again."

John Caher: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Now, you mentioned the women's movement. How did you discover that you were a "feminist"?

Charlotte Watson: My grandmother had a saying, and her saying was, "Right's right, wrong's wrong. Ain't that right?" That was one of my guides. I thought what was happening with women was just wrong. That's just the framework I had for it.

When I was working at Texas Instruments—I was now in a different job, writing specifications— I thought, "Well, I could probably do a better job if I took a course on this." I went to the local junior college, and the professor I had there actually was a feminist. I didn't know what a feminist was. But she said to me, she said, "Charlotte, you're a feminist." I said, "Oh, thanks." I had no idea what the word even meant. I went home and tried to look it up and understand what did that mean, and I thought, "Oh, well, that's right. I am. I'm a feminist." That definition, a woman who thinks that women are equal, or ought to be equal, is a feminist. I thought, "Well, that's so true. Who wouldn't be a feminist?" That's how I found out that I was a feminist.

Charlotte Watson: And then the same person invited me to the National Organization of Women chapter. In our county, they formed this NOW chapter, and she asked me if I would get involved with that, because they were working together, all volunteers, to open a women's crisis line, a hotline. It was the first time I saw a group of women coming together, willing to take on society, take on our community, and form some helpful responses for women who were being either raped, sexually abused or assaulted, or beaten by an intimate partner.

John Caher: When you bucked this culture, when you tried to push water up a hill, were you greeted with open arms by the community, the small community that you were living in?

Charlotte Watson: No. We were so naïve! First, we thought we were seeing something that nobody else was seeing, right? We didn't think that the religious leaders in our community were aware of what was happening in their congregations. We didn't think that the police knew what was happening, or they would be making arrests. We tried to go and talk to the police and get them to make arrests in these cases, and we discovered that they were very well aware of domestic violence, and they weren't on the same page with us. The same thing for the clergy. And before we knew it, this

was going on across the country. It wasn't only in our small community. Feminists and women who wanted to stop men's violence against women were called “man-hating, castrating, ball-busting, lesbian bitches” who were determined to destroy both the church and the family. We were like, "Wow. All we really want to do is have home be a safe place for women, and we want to say that men need to stop raping women. Just stop."

John Caher: “Man-hating, ball-busting, castrating, lesbian bitches?”

Charlotte Watson: That's who we were. Sometimes, we were called lesbians, and some of us were. Most of us weren't. That's just the times.

John Caher: Now, in 1984, I believe, you got into law enforcement. How did that happen?

Charlotte Watson: At Texas Instruments, I was working in the safety department, and my boss was a Vietnam vet. He'd started a fire brigade, so I volunteered. Me and maybe one or two other women volunteered and learned how to fight industrial fires. That was an interesting experience. And then he started a reserve police unit within the city's police department. Now, the reserve unit was basically a place where you could be a volunteer police officer. You went through the same police academy, the same rookie school, you got the same training as a regular uniformed officer. Everything was the same, except you had no insurance while you were on duty and you had to buy your own service weapon to meet the specs of the department.

Anyway, he said, "Charlotte, why don't you join the police reserves?" And I said, "Oh, Frank. You don't want me. I'm a complete pacifist. You wouldn't want me to be your partner. I'd get you killed." He said, "Well, why don't you go to the rookie school and complete the rookie school?" He said, "I know from being a Vietnam vet, if it's your life or my life, I'm going to prevail with my life. I'll do whatever it takes to stay alive. That's human nature." I said, "I thought about it a lot. Not me. But I'll go to the rookie school. Maybe it'll be a way to build some bridges between the women's crisis line and the law enforcement." I said, "Okay." He said, "You just go see. At the end of it, if you still don't think it's for you, then I'll respect that." I said, "Okay, great."

I went, and I learned a lot about power. I learned a lot about law enforcement. It did build bridges between our hotline and our women's organization and law enforcement. The sheriff came. In our community, he was a famous guy. He was a character as a sheriff, Jack Driscoll. He

came to teach a class. He looked out and he said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "Well, I'm here to learn to be a cop." He said, "Do you really mean that?" I said, "Yes, I really mean that." He said, "Okay. Now, I know who I'm going to call when I have a rape." It began to chip away at that divide, us and them, and build a bridge. Did it change the world overnight? Of course, it didn't. But it made a difference.

Then I became a cop. At night, weekends, I would report to duty, get my patrol car and drive around. One night, there was a fight at the bowling alley, and I was in my car by myself, my patrol car. I get the call, "Fight in the parking lot at the bowling alley," so I go. It's a man and woman. They're both intoxicated, and they're outside, and it's loud, and he's berating her or whatever. I decide I'm going to arrest him for public intoxication.

I'm driving him into the station, and he starts talking to me about his wife. I said, "Well, let me get this straight." I said, "You married her because you thought she was a pretty good-looking old broad, right?" That's the way he talked, right? He said, "Well, yeah." And I said, "Now, you go to the bowling alley. One of your friends is smiling at her. She's smiling back. They're laughing. They're just in a social setting. You married a good-looking woman, your friend is laughing and smiling at her, she's smiling back. For that, you're going to attack her?" He said, "I guess it's my problem, isn't it?"

Did I turn that man around? I don't think I did, but I think I gave him something to think about.

John Caher: Did you ever arrest him again?

Charlotte Watson: Never arrested him again, but I never arrested anybody more than once. You just didn't have the occasion to. *Hopefully*, he was not arrested again. *Hopefully*, they worked out everything, including their propensity to celebrate too much.

John Caher: Now, how did you get to New York?

Charlotte Watson: I was sitting at Texas Instruments, I was doing this work in law enforcement, which I loved. The thing I don't think people realize is, at the time when we started working to help women be free of “sexual violence” and “domestic violence,” we didn't have those words. We didn't have anything like that. There was no funding, just nothing. There was just nothing out there. We created this as a response to try to help women, and at the same time, to try to address the societal structure

around sexism and bring that to the forefront and create equality for women.

All of that was going on, and I was spending all of my lunch breaks, all of my nights, all of my weekends, working on domestic violence and sexual assault. If a woman or a child was in the emergency room at the hospital, the hospital would call our number. We would show up and try to provide support. If a woman was being battered, she would call our number, and we would talk to her over the phone.

I decided that that was really more my work than what I was doing at Texas Instruments. I'd worked for over 13 years. I thought either becoming a law enforcement officer or someone working on domestic violence would be better for me. The reason I didn't become a law enforcement officer in Texas was because I could score highly on the test, but I could never jump up over a six-foot wall. I could do everything but that. I could do all the agility stuff, everything, but I couldn't get over that six-foot wall.

I would go to Dallas every Sunday and get *The New York Times*, because I had friends who were from New York that I'd met along the way, and my personality seemed to fit better with them. They understood my humor. It just seemed like a good fit. I found an ad in the want ads for an executive director of the Yonkers Women's Task Force shelter. They called it The Shelter. They had asked for an MSW social worker to be their director. I thought, "Well, it's going to cost me a quarter to send them my resume, and we'll see what happens." I sent it to them, and they called me for an interview. They said, "Be on South Broadway in Yonkers this date and this time," and I said, "Okay." Had no idea where Yonkers was anywhere in the world, but I made it. I showed up on time.

I interviewed with a committee of people who, as it turned out, their story kind of paralleled my progression. In 1977, they had gone to the International Year of the Woman Conference in Houston. It just set them on fire to come back to Yonkers and do something for women in the community, and they had opened a women's center using what was at that time called CETA funds, federal funds. They no longer exist. When that funding was running out, during that time, they had opened a shelter, so they needed someone to come and run their shelter. They were NOW members. They were really feminists, and they wanted a feminist, is really what they wanted, who had the ability to run a nonprofit organization, which I had started and had grown tremendously back in my small town. I talked about who I was and what I could do, and

I got a call back in a couple weeks, and they offered me the job. I drove up here with my couple of cats.

I was so green when it came to understanding big-city life. First, I couldn't find Yonkers. Then, I needed to find a hotel to stay in and the Holiday Inn wanted $86 a night. I was like, "Wow. I don't know how long I'm going to need to stay in a hotel. I don't have that much money." I saw a place down the road, the Yonkers Motor Inn, I go in, I say to the guy behind the desk, "What are your rates?" He says, "20 bucks an hour." I said, "20 bucks an hour? Can you stay all night?" He said, "Sure." I said, "Well, how much is that?" He said, "40 bucks." I said, "Oh, let's see. 20 bucks an hour, 40 bucks a night. I'm going to stay all night." "Okay." He gives me a room.

The next day, I called the board president, and she said, "Where are you?" "I'm at the Yonkers Motor Inn." I hear a gasp, and she says, "Oh, I've got to find you another place."

John Caher: Now, how did you end up with the Committee on Women in the Courts?

Charlotte Watson: The Yonkers Women's Task Force called their program the shelter, and over time, we changed that. They had been doing a lot of different kinds of women's educational programs in the community, and they realized that their main responsibility was the shelter, and that's what they were focused on. I ran that for 13 years, and we changed the name to My Sisters' Place and focused on domestic violence. From there, I did a lot of work with the State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, and I was the chair of their legislative committee, and eventually vice president of the board. I was just fortunate to work with a lot of great women across the state, and we worked together to make these changes.

And then I went to work for Governor Pataki as the Executive Director of the Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence. I worked for him until the end of his term, and then a new governor came in, and they bring in their own people, clean house.

I had done a lot of work with the court system. When I was leaving My Sisters' Place, we were starting the domestic violence courts, so I made a relationship with the court system. I ended up coming to work at the Judicial Institute for the courts, and worked there for a long time until the budget crisis, and then I ended up working in the Office of Policy and Planning on domestic violence and human trafficking. That's what I was doing.

Jill Goodman was the Executive Director of the New York State Judicial Committee on Women in the Courts, and Jill decided to retire. I was a member of the Committee and Judge Ellerin asked me if I would consider working with her when Jill left.

John Caher: That would be Judge Betty Ellerin?

Charlotte Watson: Judge Betty Weinberg Ellerin. I said, "Of course, Judge. Let me check with Judge Kluger, though. She was my policy and planning judge, Judy Kluger. She said, "I've already talked to her. You'll do both jobs." I said, "Okay, great, be so honored to do that." That's how I got into the position.

The Committee on Women in the Courts is not designed to intervene in individual cases. Sometimes, we get letters from a party that says, "This judge didn't do the right thing by me," essentially, and they'll give details about a custody decision or something along those lines. We are not allowed to intervene in those cases. We have to say, "I'm sorry, we can't do that. You have to file an appeal. There's a legal process. You have to work with your lawyer on that."

But what we do is look more globally—domestic violence courts, integrated domestic violence courts, human trafficking courts. Those are systemic responses that help to build expertise in a particular area of the law in terms of the judicial response.

This committee focuses on equal justice and fairness for women, and leveling the playing field. But they also work to increase the number of women judges. There were not very many women judges back in the early to mid-1980s, and now, there are. Everything you think of that has something to do with women, the Women in the Courts Committee's probably had a hand in it somewhere. We were very involved in language access and improving the language access programming inside the court system.

Children's centers. Judge Ellerin had gone to someone who was working in a committee with [Chief Judge Judith S. Kaye] and asked her for ideas, and she said, "Well, children need nurseries" —she calls them nurseries— "inside the courthouse, because a woman comes in with her kids to court, and maybe it's family court, and she doesn't want to tell the whole story of what's happening at home in front of the children." She said, "There needs to be a safe, nurturing place where kids can be," and children's centers were started.

You look out across the landscape of the courts. Now, we're working on getting lactation space, as an example. Breastfeeding is much more common these days than it used to be. Women working in the courts, women coming to court, need to have a place where they can be comfortable.

We're looking at diaper-changing stations in bathrooms. You've got a baby, and right now, maybe you have to put the baby on the bench out in the hallway and change the diaper. Just seems like there should be something better than that. From little things to big things in terms of how people might think of it, the Committee on Women in the Courts is looking at that.

If you go on our website, you'll find a lot of information. We have pamphlets. We have a pamphlet that is very popular called *Fair Speech*. It talks about the need for being gender-neutral in your speech and how to do that. One called *On the Bench*, which gives some scenarios for judges to think about how to handle. We have books, we have the *Lawyer's Manual on Domestic Violence*, which is very popular among lawyers, and we have the *Lawyer's Manual on Human Trafficking*. These are edited volumes where practicing lawyers in the community have written chapters. We do a number of things, and if you go on our website, you'll see those things.

We led the effort for a National Summit on Human Trafficking for chief judges. We had 46 chief judges show up at this conference, and it really made a big change, I think, in how the courts look at human trafficking. And then I think one of the key things that we have are local committees. You know because you're a co-chair of a local committee, the Third Judicial District .

John Caher: Yes, I am.

Charlotte Watson: The State Committee really relies on the local committees. Every Judicial District in the State of New York, in the City of New York, they all have a local gender-fairness committee. Those committees are the lifeblood of learning about what's happening in the communities across the state and providing information and education to the courts and people who work in the court system. The local committees are critical. I can't tell you how many programs a year to educate people across the state.

John Caher: That's quite a portfolio. In your article in the *Crime Victims Blog*, reflecting on your nearly 50 years as an advocate, you said the

"movement has lost its connection to its roots." What do you mean by that?

Charlotte Watson: I mentioned earlier about how we came to understand that we couldn't really have an impact just by responding to individuals alone. It's important to do that, but we had to peel the layers back and see what was at the root of this, and at the root of this was sexism. We really needed to address the oppression of women and we needed to create equality for women if we were ever going to be able to do anything about the harms that were being perpetrated against individual women.

I think that that's what we worked to do, and we worked together with so many different other issues at that time. We worked on racism, we worked on ending the Vietnam war, we worked on the war in Central America. We worked with lots of different groups of people. We all worked together, because we wanted to create a place where all people were human beings, all people were treated equally.

And then along came the HIV crisis, and a lot of the momentum we had just stopped, because we had to help our gay brothers when they were abandoned by their parents, by their families, and they were dying from HIV/AIDS. It was women in the women's movement who wrote the first brochure and went to the government and said, "You have to do something." Wrote a brochure about what HIV is to try to educate the men in the gay community. That's what a movement does. A movement responds at a very granular, grassroots level, and from an ethos. Our ethos was about equality, for us women, it was about equality for women.

Now, out of that group, came a response to domestic violence and a response to sexual violence. And out of that group, it developed into what I see more as an industry. We were creating a response to something that was wrong that needed to be corrected. We were successful, and now, people come out, they go to school, they come out of school and they want to go to work at the domestic violence agency or the sexual assault agency. They have a job in this agency that is addressing people who were harmed by domestic violence or people who were harmed by sexual assault. They think of it as a nine-to-five job, more or less. They're going to work, but they're going to work in terms of what people do when they think of work as a job, not what people think of in a movement, where it's about changing the world, changing society. It's a part of every single thing you do. It's your fiber. I think that this work now has lost its connection to the underpinnings that led to its creation.

When we first started out working on domestic violence, we really thought that people just didn't understand. A man and a woman in a relationship where there was abuse just didn't know how to communicate, how to fight fairly. If we could send them to family therapy or couple's counseling or something like that, again, we're focused on those individuals, that they could learn these skills, and that this would take care of that problem. We learned that, in fact, it put the victim in much more risk, because she couldn't go into the family session with her abusive partner and really tell everything that was happening, because she was worried about paying a price for that later. If family therapy had worked, if mediation had worked, those kinds of tools, we would have been the greatest proponents of it. Our goal was to end men's violence against women. If therapy would do it, we were 100% for it.

We tried batterer education programs. We thought, "Well, these are men who were socialized in a certain way. We'll teach them about that, teach them a new way to think, a new way to be, and offer them the chance to make this change." But we couldn't change men's behavior. The men had to change their own behavior. Because our society hasn't taken this on as a whole, those programs are ahead of their time.

Once upon a time, I was invited to train all the probation officers in Westchester County Probation Department. Domestic Violence 101 is what I would do. And I would talk about the same sort of thing. We need men to set standards so that men would feel ostracized if they acted out. We need to change the norm of what it means to be a man. I remember one man came up to me afterward. He said, "Charlotte, I'm a professional boxer, a semi-professional boxer, me and my brother. This is just not going to work." What I ask everybody to do is go out in the world and try this on, see if it fits. If it doesn't, throw it out. If it does, keep it.

So, I ran into this guy one day on the street, on the sidewalk in White Plains. He said, "I got to talk to you, I got to talk to you."

I said, "Okay. What's up?"

He said, "You know what you said about how we need to set limits, and if a guy comes in and he's bragging about how he treats his wife or the woman in his life, that we tell him he can't do that? If he does, we're not going to be friends with him anymore? Well, I thought that was just a bunch of crap. But I got to tell you, at my gym where I work out, I'm a semi-professional boxer and it's a real macho world, my best friend came to me and he was talking about what he was doing at home. I said, 'You can't do that. If you do, we're not going to be friends.' He came back the

next week and he started telling me again what he'd done that week. And I said, 'Well, I'm not going to talk to you anymore. I told you, you can't do that. I'm not going to talk to you anymore.'"

He said it took about two weeks and his friend came back and he said, "I'll do whatever it takes. You're my best friend. I'll do whatever it takes to restore our relationship." And he began to think about how he treated his wife.

It's about men changing those standards; that's what's really going to make a difference. That's the level of change we have to have in society. It's not really happening, but what I see is that there's a rediscovery now of old things that we tried and failed, those old things like family systems therapy. Intervening in that way sounds a lot like what we're calling restorative justice. I worry about that. Maybe I'm wrong. I hope to be wrong.

John Caher: It's an effort to change the culture, and that's what you've been doing for all of your life.

Charlotte Watson: What I see happening right now is the movement versus the industry. The industry's focused on changing individual men. "Let me help this man." It's not necessarily focused on looking at sexism. To me, sexism and racism are of the same seed. Most of our forms of oppression are of the same seed. We're not going to end racism by helping the person of color who's attacked alone. We need to help that person, but challenging all of us to think about the privileges that we carry because we have this color of skin or because we have this particular gender versus that gender, those are the challenges that we have to face as a whole, as a society. Then, those individual interventions will make sense in the life of that person who's acting out.

John Caher: Well, that's a powerful message and a wonderful place to stop. Charlotte, I want to thank you for all you do and all you've done, and I'm looking forward to all you're going to do in the future for the court system and the people of the state of New York. Thank you.

Charlotte Watson: Thank you, John.