

## Veronica Swain Kunz CEO, South Carolina Victim Assistance Network

When you think “crime fighter,” more often than not, you probably imagine a big, burly, muscled cop. Petite and scrappy might not exactly come to mind. Perhaps that’s why there is so much awe in watching Veronica Swain Kunz work.

Some might say Kunz is the face of victim service in the state. In truth, she is its heart and soul. She is a crime fighter, all right, but from the point in victims’ or survivors’ lives where the crime has already been committed and someone has to help put the pieces back together again.

“Our state is designed well to respond to victims’ needs since we have victim advocates at every stage of the criminal justice process. In my role as the head of the ‘umbrella agency’ for all these victim service groups, it’s important that we support and help sustain the people doing the work on the front lines in the form of training and resources for them. Then we look for ways to fill gaps in services that others can’t provide, such as emergency funds, victims’ rights attorneys, legal assistance to foreign born crime victims, a statewide coordinator for Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners, help for people with disabilities and the elderly,” Kunz says.

Kunz’s journey working with victims is deeply



personal. “I know what it feels like when a criminal rips your life apart. I’m a crime victim. My father was a sex offender and a very violent man, and he terrorized and offended against our family, friends and neighbors, and many others. He was arrested – caught! – 15 times and yet never held in jail longer than a few months. I wanted to make a difference in the lives of people like me.”

Kunz had worked in law firms, then in criminal prosecution at different divisions of the Attorney General’s office when South Carolina passed a law providing for civil commitment for sex offenders.

“I wanted to make sure that this new method we had to protect the community was being fully implemented. After talking with a number of people in the victim services field and telling them my story, I was referred finally to the South Carolina Victim Assistance Network. As luck would have it, they were in need of someone to run the organization and I fit the bill. It’s easy for anyone to see that God had a specific plan for me.”

God’s plan included transplanting Kunz to South Carolina in the first place. “I married a Chapin boy and moved to Columbia over 25

years ago. My husband, David Kunz, is executive director of the Cooperative Ministry.” The couple has three children: Joshua, 30, Ashley Peyton, 28 and Mary Katherine, 18.

Since both wife and husband run non-profits, they rarely get enough downtime. “We share our triumphs and tragedies, and then try to leave the rest at work. Believe it or not, our annual Victims’ Rights Week Conference recharges my batteries. Talking to people whose children or other loved ones have been murdered, watching them meet others who have been through similar tragedies, and then begin healing together by attending the workshops and events at the conference gives me real perspective on any minute ‘problems’ I may have.”

As with any non-profit, fundraising is job one, and Kunz is a deft and accomplished campaigner. Recently, she was among 15 finalists selected for a national award from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation: Community Health Leaders. Ten will receive the award, and it could potentially mean \$125,000 for SCVAN. But Kunz isn’t thinking about the accolades. Her thoughts are always with victims. “Just imagine how many more people we can help with that kind of money.” ■