

Thank you for coming tonight. I'm here tonight in honor of my 22-year-old daughter, Claire Cucchiari-Loring, who was shot to death by her ex-boyfriend 22 ½ months ago, on Friday, December 8, 2006. He then shot and killed himself.

Claire was a senior music major at ODU, planning to graduate magna cum laude. She had broken up with her boyfriend Rob Williams two weeks earlier. On Wednesday night, December 6, he held her at gunpoint overnight and threatened to kill them both; she got away around Thursday noon by pretending she loved him and was going to come back to him. Then she went straight to the police, first the ODU police, then the Norfolk police. Because Rob had not left physical marks on her, there was no "physical evidence" of the assault, so the police would not press charges. SHE had to press charges, and she decided not to, partly because she was afraid of him, and partly because she "didn't want to ruin his life" by doing that, she just wanted him to leave her alone. So the next morning, Friday, I accompanied her to court so she could get a protection order. The judge authorized the protection order around noon, but before it could be served, on Friday night, Rob tracked her down when she was out with her friends Suzanne and Mike. When they walked out of the restaurant in

Chesapeake, he was waiting for them. He shot and killed her and then killed himself.

Before she broke up with him, Claire and Rob had gone together for almost five years. He was her first and pretty much her only boyfriend. Obviously, murder does not arise from love, or from a relationship that is healthy.

These days, the way I go on is by doing my best to honor Claire and sustain her memory, and by trying to help others in memory of her life and the circumstances of her death. That's why I'm here tonight, and why I now speak at programs about healthy relationships. I'll explain in a minute why this one is called "Even Superwomen Struggle."

Honoring and remembering Claire

Since you did not know Claire, I want to tell you a little about her. An ODU friend said that Claire was "kind and fierce and compassionate and fiery." As her Mom, I can say that 99% of the time Claire was the sunniest and sweetest person in the world, but if she made up her mind to say no, I knew I might as well just give in right away. These are two sides of Claire that stand out for many people: sweetness...and a determined independence and strength. Since her death I've learned how often she

combined those qualities to offer help to people in trouble or in pain. Just like a superhero.

In elementary school Claire loved to play with her She-Ra Princess of Power doll. Then she really got into Xena, the warrior princess. She actually looked something like Xena, with her beautiful face, long dark hair, and powerful body. Even at ODU, Claire still carried around a purple Xena backpack and traded Xena cards on e-Bay. When people teased her that maybe she was a little old for that, she just laughed. She was very confident being herself.

The title of this program, “Even Superwomen Struggle,” is fitting because not just in her Xena connections, but also in the metaphoric way that we talk about women who “do it all,” Claire WAS a superwoman:

- She had an amazing talent as a jazz singer—you’ve heard her voice.
- She studied self-defense, and led her ODU self-defense team at a clinic about 3 weeks before she died.
- She was competent at so many different things. She was the one who reminded her friends to register and helped them figure out graduation requirements. She helped me learn how to sell things on e-Bay. She was great at fixing

things and putting things together. Her jazz professor would call her when he needed someone to track down obscure jazz lyrics. She was just really strong and competent about a lot of things.

- She wasn't just smart, but a good student and an independent thinker. Some of her professors told me that when they would see her hand go up again in class, they would mentally hunker down, knowing Claire would have a really interesting question.
- She was very hard-working and responsible.
- I've heard from her friends what a thoughtful and fun friend she was. She was a thoughtful daughter, too: I have a note she left in my office early last fall saying, "Hey Mom--my first class got cancelled so I came down to surprise you and give you a hug. Since you weren't here...HUG!!! [heart] Claire." She was a fun daughter. She got me to go on a roller coaster for the first time in my life when I was 55, and after that we went on many other roller coasters together. So, I miss that now, and I miss her...and one of the things I try to do is:

Helping others in memory of her life and the circumstances of her death

From what I've told you about Claire's "superhero" elements, you probably wouldn't "expect" her to be a victim of relationship violence. But she was. Even superwomen struggle. I was concerned about her relationship with Rob but believed she would eventually grow out of it...as indeed she did. I understood that early love is exciting, that each of us has complicated needs, and that sexual intoxication sometimes blinds us.

There was no physical violence in Claire's relationship until the last two days of her life, but I believe that emotional abuse had developed. A relationship can seem healthy at the start and then gradually grow abusive, and you can gradually become used to behaviors that are not, in fact, acceptable or healthy. When you love someone, you may tend to give them the benefit of the doubt, but it's important to know danger signs of an abusive or unhealthy relationship, and if they occur, force yourself not to keep giving the benefit of the doubt, but seek help and intervention immediately. Likewise, if you find yourself acting abusively towards a partner, it's important to seek help in understanding and changing your behavior. As we learned in Claire's case, a somewhat abusive relationship can escalate with terrifying speed into tragedy. [Samaritan handouts]

I've been thinking about how my relationship with Claire was fundamentally healthy.

(1) We usually were pretty open with each other—often remarkably open. (2) I took care of Claire sometimes, and she took care of me sometimes—on the day she died, I sat beside her as she went to court to get a protection order, and she tried to shield me from hearing some upsetting things she had to relate in court. (3) For a mother and a young adult daughter, there are tricky issues of dependence and independence and boundaries, but I think we did pretty well. (4) Something I miss a lot now is that I felt I could just be myself with Claire—she was restful to be around that way—and I think she felt the same about me.Many of these same issues are key in intimate relationships as well: being able to talk openly and honestly, negotiating dependence and independence and boundaries, balancing your own needs with those of your partner, respecting yourself and respecting your partner, being able to be truly and fully yourself with the other. When Claire called me on Thanksgiving morning 22 months ago, to tell me she had broken up with her boyfriend, she said, "Mom, I just want to be myself again." I was so glad.

I also want to mention that our family has established a scholarship in Claire's memory at ODU, to help other music students. Some of Claire's

friends and I have begun holding a benefit event that raises funds for that scholarship, but also celebrates Claire by having fun. It's called "Her Melody Lingers On," and the first one we did last November raised almost \$6000 for the scholarship. The next one will be on Saturday, November 8, 2008 at a local musical café. Like last year, there will be performances of jazz and other music, and other entertainment; plus a silent auction, food and good coffee. And admission is free. I have some flyers about the event, and you are all welcome to come.

IF TIME: I'd like to close with another couple of songs from Claire. These are when she was six years old and was sending a tape to a friend of hers who lived far away.

I hope tonight's program helps all of you not only to learn about and from Claire, but also to think seriously about how to sustain healthy relationships in which you, too, can be yourself. Thank you so much for coming.