

(Intro music)

Rosie: Welcome to episode three of Solace Stories. Solace is the leading domestic abuse and sexual violence charity in London, supporting nearly 30,000 survivors every year. I'm Rosie, from the Media and Communications team, and today I'm speaking to some of the North London Rape Crisis team to find out more about what they do. We're here today at the Solace head office, so if you hear any background noise, please bear with us.

Rosie: Hello team, thanks for joining me! Could you tell me who you are, and what you do?

Kate: My name is Kate, and I'm the Helpline Team Manager for North London Rape Crisis.

Rosie: Great, and what does that look like for you? Could you tell me a little bit about the project and what your day looks like?

Kate: Yes, absolutely. So, the North London Rape Crisis Helpline is kind of the front door to all of our services; it's often the first number that people call when they're looking to get support. I manage the volunteers who mainly staff the lines, so I'm often supporting them, and I'm also often on the helpline myself, because it's difficult to cover a helpline solely with volunteers. So, my day might look like covering the helpline, dealing with any issues that are urgent that come up, and also managing the referrals into all of our support services. We are part of Rape Crisis England and Wales which is a national organisation, and we run the service for survivors in North London. In the service as a whole, we offer a range of support for women and girls aged 13 and above, who have experienced sexual violence at any point in their lives; for some people coming to us it's very recent, and for some people it's in the past, and we will support anyone. We provide support like counselling one-on-one, and we provide group activities for survivors of sexual violence to start to recover from what they've experienced. We also provide practical support through our advocacy service, so that could be support for someone who is reporting sexual violence to the police and going through the criminal justice system, that's an advocate who is on their side, who is independent from the system, but whose role is to help them through it because we know that it can be an incredibly re-traumatising experience. Of course, there's lots of people that don't want to report to the police, which is completely fair enough, and we have a fairly new service which is a casework service, that can offer support to those people: practical support surrounding housing or benefits, education advocacy and anything that might be affected as a result of experiencing sexual violence. So, on the helpline, we offer referrals onto all of our ongoing support, and we also offer listening support, so people can access the helpline anonymously, or not if they prefer, and we can give up to an hour of emotional support per week per survivor on the helpline, and that can go on for as long as they want.

Raffy: Hi, my name's Raffy, and I'm between roles at the moment. I work partly for the helpline, which is the front door to all our other services, but soon I'm going to be starting work as a young women's ISVA, which Annabelle will tell you more about now.

Annabelle: Hi, I'm Annabelle and I'm a Multiple Disadvantages ISVA, which is an Independent Sexual Violence Advocate (a bit of a mouthful), and my role is to support women through the criminal justice system. Our advocacy services are open to women who are intending to report, or who have reported, a sexual offence, and an ISVA works as a guide throughout that process, so we are with them every step of the way, and if their case makes it to court then we'll go to court with them and support them at the trial. So, the role is very much about advocating on their behalf with external agencies, such as the police, the CPS, and obviously, providing emotional support throughout as well.

Rosie: And how did you come to be in this role?

Raffy: I started as a volunteer for the helpline, so, mainly working on the helpline. We just have lovely volunteers who give, I think, three shifts per month of their time, and I enjoyed it so much, and the Solace atmosphere, that I thought I'll just look and see what other jobs there are here, and my current role doing administration and processing referrals for the helpline was sort of a direct segue on from that. In this role, the conversations that we have on the helpline, it's often helping those survivors find whatever pathway or route of support they're looking for next.

Rosie: Brilliant. And Annabelle, how did you come to be in this role?

Annabelle: So I started off at Solace around 2 years ago, and I originally worked as an IDVA in Islington SASS, so a bit of a different role, and I did that for around a year and then I just felt like I needed a change. This role is a slightly different pace than an IDVA role, and you work with clients for a lot longer to build that real connection with them in ways that I found I wasn't able to in my IDVA role, so I much prefer this side of things.

Rosie: Great, could you explain what you mean by the pace?

Annabelle: Yeah, so with IDVA work, it can be very crisis-led because the women who are engaging with that service very often are experiencing abuse at that time, so the work is safeguarding them and making sure they stay safe. Whereas, with ISVA work, often the women who were working with will have their police case open for years at a time, these investigations can go on for a really long time, so it's more about working with them through that, and managing whatever comes up for them and supporting them through it. So, in terms of pace, it's not sort of help with the crisis and support there, it's a lot more ongoing stuff.

Rosie: Mm-hmm, great, thank you. And Kate?

Kate: So, I actually started my career in the women's sector as a volunteer on the North London Rape Crisis helpline, so that was where I started. And then, I did various admin roles in other women's charities, I came to work at Solace as a caseworker and then when this role as helpline team manager came up a couple of years ago, I kind of thought I have to do it because I love the helpline so much.

Rosie: Amazing. Kate, could you tell me what the highs and lows of the work you do are?

Kate: Yeah, I think the highs are obviously when you can have a real, positive impact for someone, and on the helpline that sometimes just looks like someone being able to carry on with their day after speaking to you, or feeling a bit calmer. So yeah, I would say the highs really are being able to speak with survivors on the helpline and feeling kind of honoured for them to share their stories with me. The lows I guess are the opposite of that, when it's very difficult to have a positive outcome for someone. Especially dealing with crisis situations, when somebody, for example, doesn't have access to housing, and it's often very challenging to advocate with local authorities to do what they should be doing and that can be really frustrating, so I would say that's maybe a low.

Rosie: Mm, I can imagine. And Raffy, what about you, highs and lows?

Raffy: I think highs are definitely the office environment and that our service exists, and reaches so many people, and that it helps, and the benefits are kind of incremental, just little by little you see people who call the helpline or people you're working with, they might feel really stuck, but nothing's stuck forever and things do get better. I think the lows can be when you find there's a bit of a gap in the service, and someone sort of falls between two stools, in terms of their needs, or there's just not a way to help them at present. That can feel really tough, turning people away or saying we're full or we're closed, and you

need to try and look for support elsewhere, or there's nothing we can do for you right now, that doesn't feel great. But, I think we're slowly closing gaps, and looking at things that we can do when we say to people "not right now, but in the meantime, we can do this", so hopefully it's getting better.

Rosie: Amazing. And Annabelle?

Annabelle: Uhm, I would say... I'll start with the lows, because I feel like all of the women who are engaging with our service are going through the criminal justice system, and I feel like that in itself is very traumatising. If we look at the conviction rate, it's less than 2% of rapes, so the majority of the women who are accessing our service, their case is going to get closed at some point, whether that's by the police, or whether that's by the CPS, or they're going to get to trial and then it's going to be a *not guilty* verdict. It is hard to hold that, and hold their expectations, and support them through that process, and I think that that washes over you as well and can give you a real feeling of hopelessness, and just difficulty staying motivated when you know how low the conviction rate is. That being said, I think the highs, then, are the small wins. I've worked with survivors who when their case is closed, they'll say, I'm really glad I reported anyway, because I felt validated and someone believed me, and so that's a win because even though they didn't get the justice they deserved they got something out of this process, and we were able to support them through it, so yeah, it's holding onto those small wins.

Rosie: I mean, it is incredible what you do, and a lot of the lows are things very much out of your control and amplify the ways in which you're really helping to change people's lives, so thank you. Kate, what is your most memorable working day?

Kate: This is quite a hard one, because there are lots of memorable things that happen, and because the days can be very different to each other. I was thinking about when I started in this role managing the helpline, it was just post-pandemic, which made it really difficult for people to volunteer for us, so, when I started we had two volunteers, and it was a real struggle to cover the helpline, as you can imagine, as we're open 22 hours a week, so it was a really difficult time and it took a lot of work to recruit and train, kind of, two new groups in quick succession. I really remember the end of running my first volunteer training, and on the final day we have a nice ending and everyone shares something with the group, and I remember looking around at the people that were there, Raffy was there, and thinking wow, like, what an amazing growth of the helpline, things are going to be so much better, and what an amazing group of people, and just feeling so encouraged. It's always so inspiring meeting all the volunteers, so yeah, that's one for me.

Rosie: Amazing, a bit of light at the end of the tunnel.

Kate: Yeah, totally!

Rosie: And Raffy, what about you?

Raffy: I think maybe similarly, when I started this current role, and I saw how many counselling referrals we were holding on to, and when they were all from, and how long survivors had been waiting for, that really sticks in my mind and I remember thinking, okay, the problem is pretty big, a lot bigger than I thought. But equally, just working through it, throughout this role, and now the referrals we're getting are only from a few months ago, and so it's kind of like a little beacon. And soon, we're going to be able to completely open for counselling, which feels like an amazing thing to say to people, you should be able to call up and most of the time we should be able to take a referral, which is how it should be.

Rosie: Yeah, absolutely. Annabelle, your most memorable day?

Annabelle: Ooh, well, just like what Kate said, so many memorable days. I feel like every day is different in this job, and the team make it all feel worth it because you go through it with the amazing women that you work with. I would say, probably the first day I went to court, and I supported a survivor at trial. I remember just being so frightened walking in there, because it's such an intimidating environment. I remember being like, I'm a professional and I feel intimidated by this environment so how does this survivor feel? Supporting them through that was a really memorable experience, and I've been to court multiple times since then, and it gets easier, but it takes so much from you every time. Being there for someone on the day that they get cross-examined is a really daunting experience, but I'm always in awe of how incredible and brave the women that are cross examined in court are, and for sticking with this journey in the name of justice, it is really inspiring.

Rosie: And made that little bit easier by you being there with them.

Annabelle: Hopefully.

Rosie: And, if you could change the world, what would you do first?

Kate: I would ensure that everyone in the world had access to safe and secure housing, I think that would solve a lot of problems.

Raffy: Maybe a bit less world focused, I would make a 3-day working week, and make there be a compulsory day where you have to do something creative, it's not a working day, it's not a weekend day, you have to be doing some art or some music or something.

Kate: Mm, love that

Rosie: Love that.

Annabelle: Uhm, I would, I mean maybe not as nice of an idea, but I would just try and bring more justice about for survivors of sexual violence, I would just hope that we could get to a point where it doesn't feel as hopeless to report sexual offences, and for there to be justice for people who go through this.

Rosie: Mm, great. And, could you tell me something, somewhere, or someone that inspires you, and why?

Kate: Uhm, I think it's probably obvious but all of the survivors I work with inspire me with their incredible strength. They shouldn't have to be as strong as they are, it's not fair, but yeah, just them continuing, persisting, getting through what they're going through. Reaching out for support, actually, can be so difficult, so yeah, their continued, kind of, drive, is really inspiring.

Rosie: Amazing.

Raffy: I was going to say the survivors as well. I think I can also add to that, all my colleagues, because there are so many jobs, there are so many ways you could spend your time, and to choose to make your career this I think is really inspiring, just to the people around you, to be like it's not fixed now but you're just kind of helping the cogs to turn, so, everyone at Solace.

Annabelle: Well, you both stole both of my choices, because I equally was going to say the women that we work with, and my colleagues! I think that everyone is here for different reasons, but it really helps, it's really the antidote to the hopelessness, working with inspiring women who are pushing every day to just make little chinks in the armour of the system, and taking those small wins, and just in awe of the women that we support and their strength.

Rosie: Amazing, well I genuinely do feel inspired and uplifted just by speaking to you, thank you so much for talking to me and sharing about what you do, and your passion, it really comes through. Thank you very much!

All: Thanks Rosie!

(Outro music)