

San Jose nonprofit gives dignity back to sexual assault victims



by [Lorraine Gabbert](#) November 6, 2024



The Grateful Garment Project started as a capstone project for Lisa Blanchard's undergraduate degree. Photo by Lorraine Gabbert.

Chanel Miller awoke at Valley Medical Center disoriented and alone after she was sexually assaulted on the Stanford University campus. Her clothes were confiscated for DNA evidence and she was left with nothing to wear but a hospital gown and boots.

“If I had had to leave the hospital in that state, I imagine I would have felt completely exposed and vulnerable and humiliated,” she said in a video. “Instead, I was taken to this closet, and inside it was stuffed full of clean sweatshirts and sweatpants. I hope

that nobody underestimates the power of something as simple as a sweater, because it means the world to me.”

The Grateful Garment Project in San Jose provides support and dignity to survivors of [sexual violence](#), providing them with clothing, toiletries, snacks and comfort during a vulnerable time. By supplying these essentials, the organization helps ease the emotional and physical discomfort of survivors, promoting their healing process, said former board member Javiera Condell.

Miller said the clothes gave her a sense of protection. She still has the sweatshirt to remind her “there is good in the world.”

“Even in your darkest, worst moments, there are people who are looking out for you,” she said.



Lisa Blanchard, executive director and founder of the Grateful Garment Project, said the nonprofit strives to return dignity to those who've had it stripped away through sexual violence. Photo by Lorraine Gabbert.

The Grateful Garment Project provides a range of services, from incentives encouraging sexually abused youth to attend counseling to clothing for victims testifying in court. It gives stuffed animals, coloring books and crayons to children, and backpacks filled with clothing, footwear, a pillow or blanket and food and water to victims of [human trafficking](#).

The nonprofit works with 115 partner agencies, including hospitals, shelters, community-based organizations and law enforcement, to meet survivors' needs. According to its 2021-22 impact report, it provides resources statewide to 35-45 victims daily in partnership with client agencies.

Lisa Blanchard, executive director and founder of the Grateful Garment Project, said it strives to return dignity to those who've had it stripped away through sexual violence.

"I never realized how many people's lives were truly affected by sexual violence, either the victim themselves or somebody that loved them," she told San José Spotlight. "I, like so many other people, thought sexual violence was about women making bad choices, or drinking too much, or hanging out with dangerous men or... walking down a dark street by yourself. Sexual violence is nothing like that."

Blanchard created the Grateful Garment Project as the capstone project for her undergraduate degree in human services at Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont, targeting agencies where it could have the greatest impact. She received a master's degree in nonprofit administration from the University of San Francisco.

During a woman's retreat in 2010, she was horrified to learn victims of sexual assault are asked to surrender their clothing as evidence.

"It was like the universe was knocking at my door," she said. "I knew beyond the class project I was going to continue to do this because the work is so important."

A shoestring operation

The organization still hasn't recovered from the [pandemic](#). In 2019-20, the nonprofit received more than 60,000 in-kind donations compared with less than 30,000 in 2023-24. It's working with less staff and volunteers, while costs and the number of requests continue to increase.

"The issue is that purchasing costs were growing too fast to keep up with slowing donations levels," Blanchard said. "If our inventory is not sufficient, then we cannot answer the need."

With an annual budget of less than \$500,000, the Grateful Garment Project's six programs served more than 41,000 victims of sexual violence last year, Blanchard said. Prior to the pandemic, the nonprofit's yearly budget was \$675,000. The projected 2023-24 budget was \$552,000 but a shortfall led to it only receiving \$480,000 of cash and in-kind donations. The proposed budget for 2024-25 is \$630,000.

An additional \$100,000 is needed for computers, technology and staffing, plus \$70,000 to replenish inventory and \$200,000 for reserves and operational costs. Blanchard said a total of \$700,000 is needed for the upcoming year.

Working as program resource coordinator for the Grateful Garment Project helps Dakini Perkins feel like part of the solution. As a child victim of sexual abuse, Perkins has a spot in her heart for restoring people's dignity, especially children.

"When I'm working with the volunteers especially, and we're packing a box to send out to an agency, I say, 'Rub a little love in it when you're folding those clothes... and they're going to feel it,'" she told San José Spotlight.

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Perkins said talking about sexual violence is crucial for society and helping people heal.

"Far too often it's swept under the rug," she said "People don't want to talk about their own experiences because it's so painful, but painful doesn't have to be shameful. It's shame that keeps people silent and perpetuates the problem. Together, we can heal and make society better."

Operations Coordinator Jason Hernandez said people who have received clothing and resources from the Grateful Garment Project said it made a difference in their lives.

"The tags on our clothing say, 'To you from somebody who cares.' We do care," he told San José Spotlight. "We all want to make a difference and help someone out in their time of need."

To learn more about the nonprofit [click here](#) or email info@gratefulgarment.org.

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