Sonja White's passion for defending domestic violence victims stems from the childhood experience of watching a lady in her South Memphis neighborhood get brutally beaten by her husband on a regular basis.

"It seemed like every Friday night he'd be outside beating her brains out," said White, managing attorney for the Domestic Violence/Family Law Unit of Memphis Area Legal Services Inc. "As a kid, you become desensitized. It became almost like entertainment. Violence in people's home was something no one got involved with."

The thing that stood out in her mind most, White said, was how the humiliation of the beatings seemed to have crushed the victim's spirit and diminished her presence and participation in the community — she was rarely seen outside her home.

**What made you want to become an attorney?**

When I thought about going to law school, I thought about doing work that would help the neighborhood I came from. I worked in New York as a defense attorney with the legal aid society for about 10 years, and in the course of that work, I represented a lot of abusers who assaulted their wives and girlfriends. I didn't have to worry about those cases because I knew the victims would never show up, and if she did, I could talk her out of it because his presence in jail meant she would be without financial resources and help to take care of her children.

In one case, I met with a victim who said to me, 'I don't want anything bad to happen to him. I just want the violence to stop. I don't want to raise my children in a violent environment.' That struck my heart. And I thought about how hard it must be to live with someone like that and from day to day not know if that day is going to be the end of your life. You won't be around to raise your children or help them escape the violence. I knew then that I couldn't do this anymore. There was too much at stake, too many lives in jeopardy to just dismiss those cases the way that I had.

**What brought you back to Memphis from New York?**

I quit my job after that case. I said I would never practice law again. My husband and I decided to move back to Memphis. We had always wanted to do that. When we made that transition, I became coordinator for the YWCA Court Advocacy Program. After my
experience in New York with domestic violence cases, I knew those cases needed to be treated as special and unique. Domestic violence is not just between a man and a woman; it's a community issue. It takes the community down. It keeps families from being productive. Every institution in the neighborhood is impacted — churches, schools, law enforcement and the justice system. We all play a role — positive as far as helping to eliminate it, or a negative role, as I did early in my career. I was determined not to play that role again.

What led you back to practicing law?

As an advocate with the YWCA, we were in court 100 percent of the time trying to help victims navigate the system, get resources needed, get orders of protection, and follow through on criminal cases. That lasted about four years, until I could no longer keep my mouth shut and watch some of things that were happening and do nothing. A lawyer can do a lot more than an advocate in terms of the legal aspects of domestic violence. In 2001, I was offered the role of managing attorney of the domestic violence unit at MALs, and I've been there since.

What is the most significant thing you've done regarding domestic violence in Memphis?

I did not do it alone; I've had a lot of assistance from other attorneys, other agencies. For individuals, we have helped thousands of families escape violence. On a broader scale, it's more difficult to have an impact because it requires systemic change, which is not easy. We've made progress on orders of protection, making them easier to get, along with the remedies victims need to break free from violence. We have not been as successful as I would like to be on a broader scale, particularly for women who come to court without legal representation, getting all the things the law says she can have to break free from an abusive relationship. There are about 400 petitions a month, and there is no way for us to cover that, but I want to get to a place where Jane Doe can walk in without a lawyer and get the same things my clients get.

What would you do if you knew you couldn't fail?

Play the lottery! That's the first thing. Then I would fix everything wrong with the court system from top to bottom so that it would be a more meaningful experience, whether civil or criminal. If you have an opportunity to interface with the public, when people are before you during their most trying time, it is incumbent upon you to make it better. When you don't, you could lose that person, and we can't afford to lose their worth, especially our children.

If you had not become a lawyer, what would you be doing?

I would be doing missionary work in another country, advocating for the poorest of the poor, the ones who get acid thrown in their face, or abused for not giving birth to a male child.

Are there other community or social issues you are passionate about?

Sexual assault is becoming prevalent, and Memphis is not alone in that. There are just too many barriers for victims to overcome to be found credible enough to prosecute
offenders. And there are a lot of same-sex cases that we are uncomfortable with as a community that we need to take more seriously.

**What impresses you most about yourself?**

I still have the passion to do what I do after so long. I see a lot of people get burned out, but I still feel strongly that it's an important issue for us to address in a unified and coordinated manner so that we can have an impact.

**What would your children say makes you a good Mom?**

I hope they would say that my dedication to them and their future is what motivates me. I hope that they appreciate that what I do is because I want them and other kids to live in a healthy environment, and that when I'm working late and miss time with them, it's not in vain. It's for them and the entire community.

**Sonja White**

**Age:** 49.

**Family:** David Simpson, husband; children David Jr., 19; Saige, 12; Chelsea, 10.

**Residence:** Raleigh.

**People would be surprised to learn:** I enjoy country music.

**Best piece of advice received:** Do what you love, and the money will follow. Don't focus on making money. Just do what God placed you here for. When you don't fulfill your purpose, you feel lost.

**Don't ever want to live without:** Family and friends.

**Favorite thing about Memphis:** The food and the people. When I lived in New York, I couldn’t get a chopped barbecue sandwich. The people here are a unique brand of people, like nowhere else. We have problems, but when it comes down to it, we come together.

**What others say:** "I've worked with Sonja for 13 years and have always found her to be strongly driven by the needs of clients. Whether in court or behind the scenes, she is always working for ways to help victims. She has participated in and works toward getting laws in place that increase victim safety and defender accountability. I think without Sonja, victims would have fewer rights and less say in what happens to them. I'm very glad she is here." — Anna Whalley, administrator of Crime Victim Services