

**Thank you for supporting VAST & our 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Survivor Retreat from  
September 22 to September 24, 2017.**

We'd like to give you the gift of our reflections. As one attending board member, Nani Cuadrado, put it, "[The retreat] was an inspiring and powerful weekend with beautiful women I'm honored to know. Thank you, VAST for your heart to pour into women."

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**From: VAST Founder, Heather Evans**

**To: Partners & Friends of VAST**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Annual VAST Survivor Retreat at Common Ground Farm & Retreat**

Common Ground: something deeply touches my soul here. The simplicity, the rustic endearing accommodations, the sounds only of animals, the stars that take me back to countless hours of stargazing in my childhood, the farm animals, the country road that is rarely traveled, the perfect, warm crisp weather, the nature...it's as if I have come back to my roots. I feel grounded, I feel peace and I can breathe, deeply without obstacle.

But this only sets the tone for the real, precious, indescribable part of the weekend: being with the women. Survivors and allies of survivors coming together for a common purpose—coming to connect and coming for self-care. Among us is a diverse group of individuals with varying stories and experience. Together we are a beautiful blend of sisterhood.

We all agree the weekend was powerful. The perfect weather, the simple, peaceful venue set the tone, the activities seemed to resonate deeply and indirectly brought healing. The ladies expressed the value of being together with others like them and the appreciation for allies that "treated them like they are human beings." From their feedback, I was reminded of the importance of entering in for the long journey. The power in this work is in the relationships. The allies came this weekend to serve and to give—but we are the ones who received. It is a gift to witness the survivorship, the beauty, the strengths, the wisdom and the fullness of these ladies. It is a joy to play, to laugh, to dream, to envision, to share together.

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**From: Retreat Participant, Autumn Burris**

**To: Partners & Friends of VAST**

**"I am More Than My Story"**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Annual VAST Survivor Retreat**

**by Autumn Burris, *Founding Director*, "Survivors for Solutions"**

In late August, I recall working on a project at my desk and ignoring the usual dings of my email going mad. I thought to myself, "what now?" I noticed my

exhaustion, resistance and decided to check my email for a “break.” As I reviewed the email invite to the Valley Against Sex Trafficking (VAST), I thought a myriad of reasons why it wouldn’t be possible for me to attend. In my usual style, I forwarded the invite to other Survivor Leaders that I thought might need a retreat. I completed my work, listened to a very small voice inside me that said, “Hey, why don’t you just apply?” For a few years, in various presentations across the country, I stated the need for survivor leaders to have non-working retreats. I never dreamed anyone would listen much less put it into action. Dreams do come true.

After attending various retreats and convening spaces in the months before in various parts of the U.S., I pondered whether I had the time. On instinct, I filled out a simple application. I let go and forgot about whether I would be accepted and all the details that would be necessary for me to attend. I continued to work tirelessly everyday on one project or another. One day, the familiar ding of my business email sounded and I was accepted, yet another ding and I had a sponsor for travel. Tears of gratitude began to roll down my cheeks as I wondered if I deserved this incredible opportunity.

I had no idea what to expect, who would be there and my sense of adventure soared as I left the airport and was transported to the most beautifully rustic and authentic place on earth. Upon exiting the car, I grabbed my phone and began taking pictures of the Pennsylvania countryside. I remember thinking to myself: *places like this still exist in the U.S.?!* Shortly after, my first of many novice photo shoots, I lost cellular service and by then I was acclimated to this peaceful and extraordinary environment and decided to move past my city girl mentality and accept the stunning surroundings.



As I walked in to a real, old school barn, I felt slightly nervous as I would be meeting survivors I hadn’t met before and wasn’t sure what to expect. I told myself to be open, humble and realize I was a guest, not a presenter and there was nothing for

me to do. What an odd feeling--so unfamiliar. As I entered an oblong room off the barn, a survivor greeted me with open arms, a heartfelt hug and immediately, my anxiety dissipated and felt accepted by this fabulous group of women. A total of 6 survivors, who are so much more than their stories, and 4 VAST staff, Board Members, the incredible Founder, all who truly know how instinctually to be allies and our amazing hosts, made this retreat a welcome breath of fresh air from beginning to end.

At this location, *Common Ground*, all participants met on common ground, not on any other basis than women who connected, bonded, experienced new things, ate great food, took country walks, visited animals and some of us attempted to capture every moment with a camera. One of most important teachings for me was that we were survivors and allies alike and frankly, it took me a while to get to know who was who--now, that is common ground!

What struck me most over the course of the weekend is the interactions with each other were incredibly loving, accepting and caring with a huge splash of respect and lack of any type of negativity. Imagine, being invited to a gorgeous space with remarkable women and being required to do nothing but be you--***the authentic you!*** There was no pressure to attend events there was simply an old, rustic, loud bell, which I loved ringing, to let people know a new activity was beginning. It could be a meal, yoga, a drama and self-expression workshop, self-defense class, aromatherapy and making essential oils, art expression, a final session on "I am more than my story" or a bonfire with s'mores. Now, that is freedom! No judgment if you didn't feel like attending, solidifying my favorite statement, "only if you want to." In addition, there was plenty of space between activities to explore the grounds. That's a retreat, Friends! My sincere gratitude goes out to the organizers, our gracious host and my sponsors for putting this gift into action in the most thoughtful and life-affirming way. I am changed in a positive way that only a retreat, which is just as important as "the work," can accomplish!

The first night when I retired in "The Pond Cottage", I learned a very important lesson about myself and my own life. I put the pen to the paper in a provided journal and in the most natural way, my writing exploded onto the paper in a free-flowing way that I hadn't experienced in over a decade. I quickly revised my "More Than A Story" presentation to get my thoughts down. Then, I let my writing go onto the paper with effortless ease. As the light bulb was going off in the cottage and I was falling asleep, a metaphoric light bulb went off in me. I don't have writers' block as I'd believed for so many years. I have too many distractions in daily life. When we are offered a safe space to unplug, self-realization and dispelling old belief systems is possible. That was an incredible and priceless gift to me. The second night, I did the same, writing even more and loving the free-flowing words that ended up on paper without edits, judgment or anything other than this precious time with my thoughts and me.



The gifts were many, the learning huge, and to spend this time with the most inspiring survivors and allies on common ground was by far one of the greatest, most soul-honoring gifts I ever received.

In gratitude –

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**From: VAST Executive Director, Christi Dominguez**

**To: Partners & Friends of VAST**

**More than a “common” Thank you!  
2<sup>nd</sup> Annual VAST Survivor Retreat**

Thank you! The **2017 Annual Survivor Retreat** was a HUGE success! Each year we strive to create a space where survivors can foster community with each other across city, county, and state borders. We had two out-of-state survivors, two out-of-county survivors, and two Lehigh Valley survivors attend this year’s retreat. The secondary goal of the retreat is to provide a special space for survivor self-care and relaxation in a way that they have never experienced. Based on Autumn’s reflections, I think we accomplished our goals!

With the generous donations of meals from board members, Mission BBQ, and Chef’Z along with the huge hearts of Mike & Lindy Sheridan at Common Ground Retreat and Farms, this year’s retreat exceeded our goals in generating community and exceptional self-care practice. This year, we were able to provide pre-retreat leadership

development workshops and engage a new survivor leader for participation in our Survivor Leader Program launching this fall.

Lastly, with the incredible talent and skills of our workshop leaders, the survivors reported to us feeling nurtured in the most holistic way possible – mind, body, spirit. We are looking forward to continued partnership with our workshop leaders throughout the year to offer holistic opportunities in our Survivor Empowerment Program, also launching this fall.

Again, THANK YOU! We have directly achieved “collaboration, education and advocacy with survivors as leaders” in bringing this event to life! You have been an integral part to accomplishing this mission and we are forever grateful on behalf of the VAST community and survivor community.