

A journey of hope: From victim to activist

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One night five years ago, Ron Blake settled down in his seventh story loft in downtown Phoenix. He decided to skip a holiday party downstairs because he was not feeling well. That night, three men entered his loft and drastically changed Blake's life forever.

That night, he was raped.

"You become a shadow of who you used to be. I became so angry with the world and it was so uncharacteristic of me," Blake said. "It was because I wasn't talking about the sexual assault."

After his assault on Dec. 21, 2011, Blake was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a disease commonly seen among war veterans. PTSD is not often associated with trauma other than war, but it is just as common among sexual assault victims.

"Am I happy I went through PTSD and was sexually assaulted? No, but can I learn something from it? Yes," Blake said.

Blake is now a mental illness and sexual assault activist from Phoenix, but grew up outside Chicago. He travels across the country to spread awareness about sexual assault and PTSD, as well as to pursue a dream: to be on *The Late Show* with Stephen Colbert for his cause.

In order for his dream to come true, Blake carries around poster boards titled "Blake Late Show" for people to sign and show their support. As people scribble down thoughts of encouragement, Blake vividly relates his story to open ears through his outgoing and strong personality. Blake is always sure to approach people with an inviting smile and cheerful persona.

"This has been a fun way for me to take back my life — I go out every day, I meet new people, and I ask them to sign the board to get behind my ambitious goal to get on *The Late Show* as the guest," Blake said. "I want to be able to tell my story of the trauma, and much more importantly I want to focus on the fun and the hope that's on the other side of PTSD."

Although Blake is now therapeutically sharing his story, it was not easy to come to terms with the past. Blake knew something terrible happened that night, but it took him some time to identify what happened as a sexual assault.

Around May 2014, "I was reading an article in *Time Magazine*, a cover story called 'sexual assault on campus,' and I had to re-read it a couple of times. I remember exactly where I was when I read it."

At the time, Blake had a cleaning business and he recalled that a large group of employees came together to eat lunch in the kitchen. Once everyone left, Blake stayed back to finish his meal and pulled out the article and started reading. After re-reading the article, he just knew.

"That day, I realized that I was sexually assaulted."

His mind flashed back to that night, remembering like it was yesterday. He was sick in bed, when his life partner at the time came into their loft with two other men after a holiday party. Before he knew what was happening, his covers and clothes were off as he was in a headlock, his face being pushed into the pillow.

"In some cases, people are raped by one person and that's horrible enough — in this case I was raped by one, but two others did nothing to help me," Blake said. "It was sheer hell."

A big part of Blake's activist outreach is to tell people that it is hard to get better if you cannot identify what happened.

Two months after Blake identified that he had been sexually assaulted, he reached out for help because he was having a difficult time working through everything. He started opening up to family,



Ron Blake stands with Roger Clyne and the Peacemakers before their concert April 2. Blake has spent many hours walking and meeting with people to raise awareness about the stigmas behind sexual assault and PTSD, in order to fulfill his dream of making an appearance on *The Late Show* with Stephen Colbert. (PHOTO COURTESY OF RON BLAKE)

friends and therapists in order to start processing. It had been two and a half years since the assault.

"Over time that's tough, because it's become so imprinted in who you are," Blake said. "There are days where it feels like it happened yesterday. But I'm still here. I'm still working on it."

Now Blake is on a journey to share his story and make an appearance on *The Late Show*. His empowering voice easily captures the attention of any bystander as he incorporates optimistic hope with a hint of humor, turning his dark tragedy into a hopeful future.

"I still remember the first person who signed my board — his name was Joshua and we were on Arizona State University's downtown campus," Blake said.

Over the course of visiting 38 cities, Blake has filled a total of 230 poster boards, covering around 2,000 square feet of inspirational signatures.

Each signature holds a message of hope for Blake to carry on his journey. One particular message stood out to Blake: "Dear Blake, it takes courage and a huge heart to do what you are doing. You are an amazing individual and you should never forget that. Human to human, brother to brother, I love you," wrote supporter Jalen Zambrano.

"It's hard enough for a guy to say that to his mother, sister, brother — but he said that to me. So that was very powerful, to see someone express themselves like that," Blake said.

Having already toured Flagstaff in May, Blake is planning on spreading his story to New York City in September, where he will put up his boards in Central Park to reach out to more listeners.

"Sometimes there's no medicine in life, but we always have people," Blake said. "That has been my therapy and medicine — going out and talking to people."

Since Blake started the project on Nov. 12, 2015, he has met over 16,300 people who support his project to get to *The Late Show*. On average, Blake meets around 60 new people every day, each who are receptive and open to hearing his story. Some even reciprocate by sharing their own traumas.

"Take away your work, your regular life — how many people do we truly meet in any given day that has nothing to do with work? Just to go off the beaten track to talk to somebody, that's the beauty of it and it's become a lost art," Blake said.

While visiting new people, someone asked Blake if he thought being on the show for only a short amount of time would be worth it after all this time and energy. Blake responded that "it's not about the destination, it's truly the journey."

"[The boards] are a good reminder to keep going — these are people who support you and who have stories that they want to share," Blake said.

Every night, Blake reads the messages he gets from the people he met that day. Full of support and inspirational thoughts, the messages to him are constant reminders of his place and purpose.

"You're on this earth once. I don't know how many times we'll each go around the sun, but I'm here so I might as well have a good time," Blake said. "And I've been having a great time meeting people — those are my happy thoughts that keep me going."