

## TCFV 2024 Mother's Day Honorees



**Sophia Strother-Lewis** is so much more than a survivor of domestic violence. She is also an entrepreneur, author, feature film writer, director and producer, inspirational speaker, and empowerment strategist. Oh, and a wonderful mother.

Flash back to Springfield, Massachusetts, where Sophia attended the American International College. She was borderline obsessed with excelling academically, not only because she loved to learn, but also because it was her primary way of escaping the violence-related trauma she had been exposed to at a young age. Throwing herself into her studies was a welcome distraction. In many ways, it opened doors to a successful career and a pathway out of the cycle of violence. She achieved a Bachelor of Science in Business Management and a Master of Business Administration and Marketing, while also securing several certifications from TD Iglehart School of Ministry and the Disney Institute.

Today, she continues to learn from those around her, but now she gets to pour out knowledge and encouragement instead of only receiving it. She counts herself incredibly blessed and privileged to make a difference in the lives of survivors as a motivational speaker, founder of the nonprofit Empowerment Driven by Knowledge – which gives voice and resources to those affected by

violence – and author of “I’m Back,” which details her own plight against domestic violence and her eventual triumph over it.

“My career choices have stemmed from a desire to help others because I vividly remember the times when I needed to be helped.

Being able to encourage and support others is a big part of my healing journey,” Sophia shares. “It reinforces that none of us are alone in the experience of violence and that my story can have

incredible impact when shared with others. It has a purpose. It matters.”

As a mother, she is humbled and overjoyed to be a part of her children’s, and grandchildren’s, lives. She remembers a time when she questioned if she could ever be healed “enough” to responsibly take care of children, which now makes motherhood that much sweeter.

“Every time I see my children laugh or even breathe; it adds to the legacy of motherhood. Seeing all three of my children cross into adulthood as healthy, respectful, purpose-driven individuals has been one of the greatest joys of my life,” she adds with a huge smile.

For Zavier (28), Dondre (24), and Leloni Simone (19), Sophia hopes they continue to learn what it means to be a warrior who is not afraid to show vulnerability. That’s what she modelled for them as a survivor herself. She also trumpets the importance of therapy, encouraging her children to explore it as a tool to cope with many of life’s twists and turns.

“I’ve never made excuses for my decisions early in life, though now I realize I made them when I was in a very hurtful place. But now, as an adult and a mother, I want to be accountable for not allowing my past to dictate my future,” she explains as she talks about the significance therapy has had on her journey.

Sophia will sometimes say that she’s trying to be the healthy model she never had in her own life. Thankfully, her children will never have to say the same thing.

Thank you, Sophia, for bravely trekking the long and arduous path toward recovery from violence, and for encouraging survivors around the world – as well as your own children – to be overcomers in their own right. TCFV honors you this Mother’s Day.



**Kelsey McKay** grew up almost entirely overseas, primarily in Southeast Asia, where she was privy to the struggles of people in developing countries. She moved to the states to pursue her undergraduate and law degree in Austin, but her childhood experiences continued to shape her, attracting her to a career dedicated to helping others through their darkest moments.

“I’ve always been drawn to the humanity of hope and healing. And I genuinely didn’t think it was possible to do anything that wasn’t humanitarian centered for a career. It was just programmed into me,” she recalls of her early college and career path.

After graduating college, she became a prosecutor in Austin for 13 years, focused on gender-based violence and child abuse, and she specialized in strangulation-related crimes. If you operate in the domestic violence field, you can thank Kelsey for her pivotal role in developing a widely used strangulation supplement for law

enforcement, medical professionals, and other first responders to help identify and evaluate the severity of strangulation assault immediately from the scene.

After leaving the District Attorney’s Office in 2017, Kelsey started McKay Training & Consulting, where she provides training and consulting to agencies and organizations across the world fighting the scourge of family violence. She has presented to a wide range of audiences, from the United States Army and the Texas Pardon and Parole Board to the attendees of South by Southwest (SXSW).

As a private attorney, Kelsey has represented victims and their families through various legal systems. As CEO of her new nonprofit, RESPOND Against Violence, she combines her experiences to build practical tools that improve how the system responds to victims.

Anyone who knows Kelsey will tell you her strongest qualities are determination and resiliency. Perhaps that’s why she’s so comfortable stepping alongside others in dire, often life-threatening situations. She has an abundance of strength she’s willing to share.

As impressive as her resume is, it’s not to be compared with her ultimate accomplishment: her family. Kelsey cites the birth of her daughter 13 years ago and the birth of her son 11 years ago as her most memorable moments as a mother. Her introduction to both tiny lives was an incredible realization of the simplicity and complexity of the cycle of life and an affirmation of her dedication to creating a world free of violence – for them.

After a career spent battling destructive cultural norms and dangerous viewpoints against women, Kelsey finds her inspiration for a better future in her own children.

“My work has always provided a way for me to start conversations with my children that I hope they will continue throughout their

Texas Council on Family Violence

PO Box 163865, Austin, TX 78716 | 888.450.TCFV(8238) | tcfv.org

lives. It makes me hopeful they'll be part of a generation that sees women as obvious equivalents to men. It makes me hopeful for the future safety of homes across our world," Kelsey said.

Thank you, Kelsey, for being a mother who exemplifies servant leadership. TCFV honors you this Mother's Day for your transformative work in the domestic violence field and how you model determination, resiliency, and healthy relationships in your personal life.



When one of **Melinda Cantu's** sons was in 3rd grade, he brought home a class activity for Mother's Day. On the worksheet, one of the questions asked, "What does your mother do?" His response: "My mom is a superhero because she saves people." Melinda's heart beamed. She had no idea he understood the type of work she was involved in, but she was elated he knew she was one of the good guys.

Over the last three decades of service, Melinda has been a superhero to many more than just her sons. She likes to say she started this type of advocacy when she was just two years old – she was feisty even

as a toddler. But really, her career began at 19 when she volunteered for the Austin Rape Crisis Center. As she finished her undergraduate in social work, she interned at the Center for Battered Women, did a stint with LifeWorks, and returned to the shelter as a children's activity specialist.

While she loved that she was able to serve and advocate for children in this capacity, she never had the desire to have children of her own.

"I didn't think I could care any more deeply about young people than I did when I was working with them day in and day out, advocating for the return of justice and safety to their lives and their families. My heart felt maxed out with that work alone," Melinda recalls.

But in 1994, she got married and the rest, as they say, is history. With the birth of Joaquin Antonio Lozano (22) and Javier Andres Lozano (19), Melinda says her heart grew 10 times its normal size.

Melinda always knew she was fighting for a safer, more equitable, caring, respectful world for people of all ages, particularly youth affected by violence. The fact that two of her own now get to inhabit it and help shape it is a gift she struggles to put into words.

Texas Council on Family Violence

PO Box 163865, Austin, TX 78716 | 888.450.TCFV(8238) | [tcfv.org](http://tcfv.org)

Her dearest hope for these treasured young men in her life is that they, too, believe they have the power to create the change they want to see. Whether they follow in her footsteps to become advocates in the field, or they simply continue to spread love and acceptance to those around them in their everyday lives, Melinda is positive they will make an impact.

After all, they've had an incredible example.

"I am humbled and honored to do this work with some of the most amazing humans on earth. I'm lucky to have learned from incredible leaders and mentors – some of them professionals in the field, and many of them the survivors that I served over the years. I hope I

continue to be that caliber of model for my children and more," she shares.

Today, Melinda serves as co-chief program officer for The SAFE Alliance in Austin. Her philosophy on serving: "I have always believed if you can do this work, you should. Because not everyone can."

Thank you, Melinda, for being an advocate who shapes a safer Texas, not only for your children, but for children across the state. TCFV honors you this Mother's Day for your 30 years of dedicated professional service and how you promote healthy relationships in your personal life.

Texas Council on Family Violence

PO Box 163865, Austin, TX 78716 | 888.450.TCFV(8238) | [tcfv.org](http://tcfv.org)