

Excerpt from Ellen Gavin memoir

You can ring my bell, ring my bell
Ring my bell, ding-dong-ding
You can ring my bell, ring my bell
Ring my bell, ring-a-ring-a-ring

“You can ring my bell, anytime, anyway, ring it, ring it ring it.” Anita Ward’s ’78 disco hit played over a tinny speaker on repeat as I waited with Rita before the police investigator’s desk at the Springfield Police Station. **At 2am the trilling of the hotline woke me from a lousy sleep on a donated couch at HERA’s shelter on Howard Street.** Now we sat just a few blocks from City Hall, where Rita had been raped just an hour before. It was good news that the cops had actually called us; their resistance to our domestic violence and rape hotline was legendary. So maybe it was the sheer drama of it—a woman being raped on the steps on City Hall, that got them to call the HERA hotline that night. I rushed over to sit with Rita, her face blanched by shock and outrage, as she waited to fill out her report. A thin woman with a black bob and smeared eye make-up, she trembled as I took her hand to wait. “Have you been to the hospital yet?” She nodded no. “What--?” A male officer entered to respond, “We need to get the details concerning her assailant first. After that I’ll bring you both to the emergency room.” **Rape kits were a new phenomenon, it wouldn’t be until 1983 that DNA tests would convict a rapist.** I went through the arduous process with her, first the exhaustive report, then the medical exam.

Rita ‘s shiny Twiggy bangs framed saucer eyes reminiscent of the ubiquitous big-eye paintings of the sixties designed elicited universal empathy. (Of course, it had to be that artist Margaret Keane who created them, had a husband who stole the credit and the profit while heaping violent misery on her.) **I wasn’t sure what Rita’s full story was, if she was hooking or using or both, of course the police and the doctor made assumptions.** I only know that night I was there for her, and that her horrific predicament, being raped on the steps of city hall in a small New England city wracked by poverty and injustice, it was emblematic of what I was to face for the next three years.