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Washington, D.C. - Today, Rep. Doris Matsui (CA-05) announced that Laurie Dishman, a Sacramento resident, is being awarded the "Unsung Hero" award by the Congressional Victims Rights Caucus. The award will be presented at a ceremony in Washington, D.C., on April 9, 2008. Rep. Matsui nominated Ms. Dishman for the award, having become familiar with her story when Ms. Dishman wrote to Rep. Matsui for assistance.

"Laurie has taken leadership and shown strong determination throughout this terrible personal experience. Our office has been very proud to be by her side in this effort to ensure safety on cruise ships by informing the public of their risks," said Rep. Matsui.

The "Unsung Hero Award" is presented to a crime victim or survivor, who has experienced a personal tragedy and triumphed over adversity. The honoree is a person who has utilized his or her experiences as a crime victim or survivor to promote public education and awareness, public policy development, and/or greater awareness about crime victims' rights and needs. Their efforts result in increased help and hope for other crime victims and survivors.

"Laurie Dishman is truly a hero. She underwent a tragic event and continues to relive her experience as a way to ensure that others will not endure the pain and suffering that she has experienced. From the moment she realized what had happened to her, she has fought with integrity to ensure justice for others," said Rep. Matsui.

Ms. Dishman wrote to Rep. Matsui in April 2006 regarding an incident that happened to her on Feb. 21, 2006. Ms. Dishman was raped by a crew member while traveling as a passenger aboard a Royal Caribbean cruise ship. After she reported the incident to the crew authorities, she was handed a trash bag and told to collect her own evidence.

Ms. Dishman's case was horribly mishandled by the cruise line, and she was provided with no course of action. Upon further investigation, Rep. Matsui discovered that there have been no convictions for rape cases on cruise lines in four decades, prompting her to pursue action in Congress. She started by sending a Congressional inquiry to the FBI regarding the case, and wrote to Royal Caribbean to obtain the information that Ms. Dishman had previously requested.

Laurie declined a settlement offer from Royal Caribbean, because it required that she sign a confidentiality agreement. Instead Laurie has worked with Rep. Matsui and others to hold hearings in Congress and bring new accountability and safety measures to the cruise industry.

She was brave enough to testify at a Transportation and Infrastructure, Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation Subcommittee hearing on Crimes on Cruise Ships. During the hearing in March, 2007, an email was obtained between Royal Caribbean communications office and a cruise newspaper called Cruise News Daily, in which the reporter said, "I really want to nail this woman and the ICV (International Cruise Victims.)" To which the Royal Caribbean employee replied, "Let's see what we can do tomorrow!!!!!!!!!" Through all of this, however, she has continued to look ahead to improve prevention methods, including peep holes and security latches on stateroom doors, as well as instituting sensitivity training for crew members and ensuring more CCTV cameras in hallways.

Rep. Matsui has introduced the Protect Americans from Crimes on Cruise Ships Resolution on September 17, 2007 with Reps. Christopher Shays and Carolyn Maloney. The resolution now has over thirty cosponsors. Rep. Matsui is also working on introducing a bicameral, comprehensive cruise safety reform bill that is informed by two years of research and two Congressional testimonies, but at its heart, addresses the concerns brought to our office two years ago by Ms. Dishman.

"Because of Laurie's visibility and strength, other victims have been able to tell their stories as well. Laurie Dishman is more than deserving of this award, and I am so pleased that the Caucus has recognized her tireless advocacy with the 'Unsung Hero Award,'" said Rep. Matsui.

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