



From Shame to Grace

The healing power of emotional support groups outside the mandated treatment system

By Alexander Gittinger

Once a month, on a weekend morning, a group of women and men from all walks of life meets at a safe location near downtown Los Angeles. They are IT professionals, truck drivers, day laborers, janitors, physicians, telemarketers, and some are unemployed. As they set up the chairs in a circle in the meeting room, animated conversations and lots of laughter fill the air. After everyone has settled down, the facilitator opens the meeting with the following words: “Good morning and welcome to the meeting of our emotional support group for registrants and those who are affected by the stigma of living on the registry. We share our experiences, strengths and hopes with each other, so that we may find strength and hope in ourselves, and help others to find strength and hope in their lives”.

Many of the participants of this group are on the sex offender registry. Some have been on the registry for decades, while others just got sentenced, or are in the pre-trial or pre-sentencing stages. Some are on probation or parole, and some are wearing a GPS ankle monitor. But not everyone in the group is a registrant. Some are coming to this group because they are supporting a family member, spouse, or partner who is on the registry. Those on the registry identify themselves as registrants. The term “sex offender” is not used in this group. It is a stigmatizing label that is defining a person by the mistakes they have made in the past. It disregards the person’s humanity and it keeps them locked in the shackles of the past without a chance of redemption. It attempts to keep one in eternal shame. Yes, they have been convicted of a sexual offense, but they are no longer offenders. They are decent, good human beings who have learned from their experiences, and many have made fundamental changes in their lives.

Everybody in this group has a story, often filled with traumatic events. Shame is a common theme in the meetings. For many, toxic shame was what led to the offending behavior. Now on the registry, more shame is piled on, coming from almost everywhere. For everyone, having to endure the ramifications and stigma that comes from being directly or indirectly on the registry is traumatizing in of itself. These are the issues that are addressed in this group. There is little discussion about the details of legalities, or how the laws must change, or what needs to be done to change the criminal justice system.

That’s what our “big” ACSOL (Alliance for Constitutional Sex Offense Laws) meetings are for. Civil rights and criminal defense attorneys who are experts in legal matters regarding the sex offender registry provide valuable information about developments in the legislature, ongoing legal challenges such as residency restrictions, and the constitutional rights of registrants. In the emotional support group, the focus is on the emotional aspects that come with being on the registry. Shame and guilt, trauma and pain are openly discussed here. The participants feel safe, which allows them to be vulnerable.

While this may sound like group therapy, it is very clearly stated at the beginning of each meeting that this is not group therapy or meant in any way to be a form of treatment. Rather, it provides a safe space where people can share their experiences without being judged, much like in 12-step support groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). However, there is no affiliation with AA, nor are there any tenets of the 12 steps as in the *Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous*. The only commonality is the meeting format of uninterrupted timed shares and no crosstalk during shares. Being heard without interruption, or a “yes but”, is where the therapeutic value of this support group lies. After everyone who wished to share got their turn to speak, the forum opens up to feedback and discussion. One may think that these meetings turn into an endless “poor me” pity cycle, but that isn’t so at all; quite the opposite. While the topics are deep and sometimes depressing, there is a lot of hope and positive energy in the room. Knowing that others have similar experiences brings people together, and this is one of the main goals of this group. It gets people out of the vicious cycle of shame and isolation. This is in stark contrast to the mandated sex-offender treatment programs that most of the participants had, or still have to go through.

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From the Director's Desk

Wayne Bowers, CURE-SORT Director

Just an outrageous miscarriage of justice in Virginia where Galen Baughman was judged to be “sexually violent” in an October hearing. Part of the unbelievable results of that monkey trial is the fact Baughman had won a case for staying out of civil commitment in the past. That could not be presented to the jury, along with the plaintiff being able to present their “expert witness” who never interviewed Galen and he could not. Galen had been held extensively beyond the time served for a probation violation and the truth became real that that state wanted to commit him. The Commonwealth may be moving more toward a purple state politically, but its criminal justice system is as bad as it gets, I don't care who is in office!

Many advocates and professionals continue to feed into the poor job of messaging that our folks have failed to change. I make it a point to bring this to attention anytime I hear the term “sex offender” used either on one prisoner or registrant or as a term in general. That term as a noun in present tense folks. Someone who used to sexually offend, if in control or in treatment, or even in prison, is no longer offending. Media and lawmakers and many in public continue to use that term and it only inflames the hysteria. So, I implore people to work to change your phrasing and use former offender or recovering offender or one who formerly sexually abused or registrant. But we can help our advocacy by not feeding the flame of hysteria and be accurate in definition.

An encouraging development may be occurring in Oklahoma in regard to its 2000 ft. residency law. A legislative interim study on the topic and the registry had plenty of support from all aspects to at least take a look at reducing the footage considerably, if not all together. Many weren't positive toward registrants as much as realizing the difficulty brought on for law enforcement. Whatever the reason, it is good to see the potential of another good move, just as there have been in several states on the registry and residency laws. And this one doesn't even involve the courts. Several advocacy groups are joining together with the look by lawmakers.

Report from The 11th Annual International Prisoner Family Conference

Jim Prager, CURE-SORT Board Member

I was privileged to attend the International Prisoner Family Conference in Dallas, TX. There were 3 important take-aways which are critical to increasing empathy which is often lacking in our society.

1. Using People First Language Humanizes

All people are so much more than the worst deed they did in life. There is always more to say about a person than the fact that they are a criminal justice involved individual! Focusing on the individual, rather than the offense behavior, allows us to re-humanize and refocus the discussion on rehabilitation.

2. Restorative vs. Retributive Justice

Retired Michigan Circuit Judge Buhl spoke of the importance of pursuing Restorative Justice vs. Retributive Justice. Retribution advocates the typical “Trail Them, Nail Them, and Jail Them.” Restorative Justice asks Has someone been harmed, who is responsible for that, and what does that person need to do to lessen that harm. It is important for CURE-SORT to encourage the concepts of Restorative Justice and treatment programs which foster restoration.

3. Empathy is a two-way street

The us vs. them thinking does not allow for any empathy on either side of the debate. Those of us who have engaged in criminal sexual behavior can be ambassadors of accepting responsibility, humanizing both victims and perpetrators, and creating alliances to restore the sense of humanity we all need to experience. At the end of the day, we are all people, and have an obligation to each other to see the humanity in both sides.

It was very refreshing to be with people who understand the pain of being a prison survivor.

Dispelling the Myths of Sex Offense

MYTH - All sex offenders are bad people and want to harm others.

FACT -- Criminal justice experts agree a person leaving prison has a much higher success rate if there is family and a good support group. Persons with sex offense compulsions act out due to shame in many instances, as the addictive cycle reaches the shame level. The tracking mechanisms put a person in crisis on housing, job seeking and retaining, possibly preventing the family unit to stay together, and a general sense of self-worth. These are characteristics that can lead to re-offending. Rather than protecting, the laws are putting the public at risk by minimizing the person's ability to gain a creditable life.

MYTH - All sex offenders will kill and commit heinous crimes.

FACT -- The majority of past legislation has been generated by the emotion over the result of a murdered and abused child. These people are psychopaths. They make up less than 2% of all sex offenses (*U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Sex Offenses and Offenders, An Analysis of Data on Rape and Sexual Assault, February 1997, NCJ 163392, Updated 2002*). Combining their cases with the numerous persons who are amenable to counseling and with teens charged for consensual sex compromises these peoples' lives. It lowers their quality of life, which can lead to frustration, upheaval and to potential danger.

MYTH - All sex offenders are child molesters and all child molesters are predators.

FACT - The FBI-UCR, National Crime Victimization Survey reveals that only 23% of sex crimes are against someone under 18; and the Bureau of Justice Statistics shows that predators represent around three percent of all sex offenders and child killers are less than one percent of all offenders.

MYTH - Sex offenses are increasing in the United States.

FACT – Sexual crimes have decreased over time. The report of adult rape has declined 69% from 1993 through 2005. Substantiated sex crimes against children fell 40% between 1992 and 2000 (Human Rights Watch, 2007).

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CURE-SORT NEWS

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CURE-SORT
P.O. Box 1022
Norman, OK 73070-1022
(405) 639-7262
e-mail: info@cure-sort.org
web: www.cure-sort.org

Editor and Publisher: Wayne Bowers
Production Assistant: David Prephan
Ila Davis, Consultant

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From Shame to Grace, cont.

Based on participants' shares it appears that mandated sex offender treatment has little to no therapeutic value. It has become even less therapeutic and more shaming after the implementation of the Containment Model in California. In almost every meeting there are several participants who share their latest horror stories about what responses they got from their mandated treatment providers. It becomes obvious that there seems to be a general belief in the mandated treatment provider community that anyone in their treatment program is either minimizing the impact of their offense on the victim, not taking full responsibility, or is flat-out lying. There is the strongly held conviction that a sex offender cannot change and will eventually reoffend. The myth of the "frightening and high" recidivism rate is alive and well in these types of treatment facilities. Furthermore, many of these "treatment" programs appear to be moneymaking endeavors, with some of them on - or beyond - the edge of ethical conduct. However, not all mandated treatment programs are horrible. Some are actually quite good and provide genuine care and good therapy. Yet, the question remains; how can there be a trusting therapeutic relationship when the client in the room is not the client at all, but the larger community is, and if the clients have to waive their right to confidentiality? These are questions and concerns that keep coming up.

Over the course of a year and a half of regular monthly meetings, the emotional support group has become a source of comfort and healing. Many attend regularly and are looking forward to these 2-3 hours a month where they can openly talk about what is going on in their lives as it relates to being on the registry. Moreover, a camaraderie has developed between many of the group members, and new group members often respond with the same sentiment. "This group has done more for my healing process in three months, than the years of mandated therapy I had to attend". There have been significant positive changes in the lives of participants, and new friendships have been forged. People who in the beginning were struggling with depression are no longer isolating themselves, but are connecting with others. Some even became strong advocates, and have gone to the state capitol in Sacramento to show up, stand up and speak up for the constitutional rights of registrants. And they have done so proudly, without the dark cloud of shame over their head.

Unfortunately, many are not able to attend this group, either because of probation/parole restrictions, or they live too far away, or – and that's a sad reason – their mandated therapy program forbids them to attend this group, because it negatively interferes with their treatment process. For that reason, an additional group has been established that "meets" over the phone.

For the safety of everyone in the group, new members are carefully vetted before they are given the time and access number to the meeting. After about two hours, the meeting ends, and some are going to fellowship, the "meeting after the meeting" where they talk about other, more joyful things in their lives. They have come to see that while being on the registry has a big impact on one's life, it doesn't need to define one's life. People in this group are learning that they have a choice, and they walk away with a sense of empowerment. Everyone is looking forward to the next month's meeting, and many stay connected with each other in the time between meetings. After all, getting out of isolation is the antidote to shame and will eventually lead to grace.

Alexander Gittinger is a licensed social worker leads emotional support groups on behalf of All for Constitutional Sex Offender Laws (ACSOL) in Los Angeles. He can be contacted at alexg.msw@gmail.com.

Special recognition to our friend Dr. Jill Levenson, Professor of Social Work at Barry University, for being awarded the ATSA Lifetime achievement award. It recognizes individuals who have contributed to knowledge in the field of sexual abuse and the development of initiatives or programs to assist abusers or victim/survivors. Her work in this area spans more than 25 years and is documented in more than 100 publications. Well deserved!

We are pleased to offer the following resources. Donations accepted to cover cost of postage and printing. Mail donations to the CURE-SORT, address on Page 3.

One Breath At A Time by Ila Davis (\$17.50)

Understanding Offending Behavior by Stephen Price. (A collection of 9 of Stephens articles from previous newsletters) (\$4.00 for the set of 9 articles)

When Someone on the Registry Moves into My Neighborhood (Member Price \$5; Non-Member \$10)

SUPPORT GROUP: Families & friends for those in civil confinement, contact Andrew Extein, MSW. Interested persons please e-mail: CCN@curenational.org. Contact SORT if no email and we'll contact him.

No More Victims – One Man's Journey Into Sexual Offending and Recovery, By S. Sands (Ed G), \$13.95 (does not include shipping). Request to: PO Box 1022, Broadalbin, NY 12025, or gunder788@verizon.net or