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PASSAGES, INC.

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## Prison Sexual Violence: An Overview

By: Tia Marie DeShong

Sexual violence in prisons has become such an unquestioned aspect of our culture that few pause to seriously consider the issue. Instead, they make jokes. "Don't drop the soap" comments are pervasive and "gay for the stay" has entered the popular lexicon. These reactions, in some respect, are natural. Humor can often help us cope with topics that make us feel uncomfortable. On the other hand, jokes about rape in *any* context normalize and legitimize sexual violence and PASSAGES believes that sexual assault is never normal or legitimate -- even while incarcerated.

But why should we care about what happens to criminals? These are the dregs of society, being punished for unspeakable crimes, right?

In fact, most people serving time in the United States are doing so for non-violent crimes. And there's a lot of people serving that time. The Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape (PCAR) estimates that more than 7 million Americans are currently confined in US correctional facilities or supervised in the community. Approximately 95% of those 7 million incarcerated individuals will eventually return to their communities after

serving their sentences. If our correctional system operates under the auspices of rehabilitation so that these individuals can become safe and productive members of our society, we can see that the sexual violence (and the resulting trauma) that many of them face while incarcerated undermines that rehabilitation.

Sexual violence is not a deterrent for violence in prisons; rather, it increases the overall levels of violence in prison by creating a culture where violence is tacitly permitted by being overlooked. Victims of sexual violence often have their reports ignored by prison officials. This creates a culture of violence in prisons that makes the space less safe — not only for inmates, but for prison staff as well.

Although most instances of sexual assault are not reported, sexual assault in correctional facilities is widespread. According to a 2012 study conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), 10% of former state prisoners reported 1 or more incident of sexual victimization while incarcerated. Of those reporting, 31% were victimized 3 or more times. Just as in free society, the most marginalized individuals tend to be the most at risk. This means, in correctional settings, inmates who are young, gay, transgender, mental-

ly ill, or incarcerated for the first time are at a higher risk for experiencing sexual violence.

Furthermore, just as in free society, sexual assault in prison is less about sexual desire and deprivation than it is about domination and control; often, inmates use sexual violence as a way to gather power and resources in a setting where they otherwise lack autonomy.

At PASSAGES, we are committed to being advocates for victims of sexual violence, whatever their circumstances. Within the pages of our Spring 2017 newsletter, you will be able to read just how our staff members are working with incarcerated individuals and alongside the criminal justice system. A society without rape is a society that does not tolerate sexual violence at any level or in any manner -- we are working hard to make that dream a reality.

All statistics taken from The Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape's website..

## Empowering Incarcerated Young Women

Pictured below is a #SurvivorLoveLetter made by Courtney. Our offices participated in the Twitter campaign on February 14, making affirmative valentines to post online to support sexual violence



By: Kylee Estudante

Courtney Bowser, a counselor with PASSAGES, works with the Abraxas Youth Center, a multiservice residential facility for juveniles in Pennsylvania that offers secure shelter and detention care services. There, she provides counseling to teens. Her group focuses on education and awareness about sexual and domestic violence, seeking to dispel the "myths" about these crimes. Courtney has also very recently been able to start providing ser-

vices at the Jefferson County Jail. She notes that having an objective presence in jails is a "step in the right direction."

Courtney described some of the benefits of her program at Abraxas: "They [youth] are getting the opportunity to disclose and to say what they have been through and whether they are working through it or if they need help." Courtney speaks of the "empowerment" that comes with "being able to disclose without feeling as though someone is going to judge you." Her favorite thing

about her experiences at Abraxas is "seeing that the girls are engaging and learning things, that the girls that come back and repeat the group are more engaged and show more empathy toward each other." She is providing skills that can be used after the youth return home to help them live a better life.

## Healing, Not Judgment

By Kylee Estudante

Deepam Mistry has been running a counseling group at the Clarion County Jail since his first week as a counselor with PASSAGES in October 2014. Deepam really enjoys this work, noting: "What I love the most is when I am able to help young children, women, men, with the is-

sues that they are having. To help them get through the trauma and heal."

Deepam has received training to help him implement these groups and is also able to provide individual counseling for the inmates. He describes the purpose of the program as "looking at trauma through our senses. We practice grounding techniques and other ways to recognize our senses in regard to dealing with trauma." One of Deepam's personal goals is to "build, evolve and have a stronger rapport with the prison itself" through these programs.

Deepam sees a great deal of empowerment for individuals through this pro-

gram and says that one way PASSAGES helps is by eliminating the stigma surrounding incarceration: "People judge them [inmates] but I am, and we as an agency are not, there to judge them." This allows inmates to feel safe and regain a sense of normalcy in regard to what they are going through. Deepam's work with inmates helps to "equip them with skills to have in their tool box for the rest of their lives."

"People judge inmates but...we as an agency are not there to judge them."



## From the Justice System: A Note From a Legal Advocate

By Robin McMillen

In 2016, I joined the PASSAGES team as our first staffed legal advocate, a position made possible by a grant from the Victims of Crime Act. As our legal advocate, I accompany survivors through the criminal justice system, be it a preliminary hearing, a trial, sentencing, or any other legal proceeding. My knowledge of the criminal justice system makes me an indispensable ally for survivors, as the legal process can often be very overwhelming and confusing. Having an advocate there to explain things, stand by a victim's side, and offer support is crucial. It is incredibly rewarding for me when I am able to see a survivor vindicated by the legal process. When things don't go the way we want, it only makes

me work harder to ensure we live in a community in which survivors are believed and perpetrators face justice.

In addition to my direct work with survivors, I also work with law enforcement and emergency medical personnel to train them about the unique needs of victims of sexual violence. Here, my passion for educating the public comes into play. Again, I believe that it is so important to create an environment where our professional circles and the community at large are knowledgeable about sexual violence and assault, and the survivors of these crimes. I consider myself very fortunate to be able to help others during this difficult time in their lives and I want to help others do the same.



On February 10th, our Clearfield County office participated in the #ChalkAboutLove campaign for Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month.

## Alternative Programs Work

By Wendi Wenzel



Carl, the office fish, smiles for the camera.

PASSAGES, Inc has provided group counseling to inmates at the Quehanna Boot Camp for those who have been victims of sexual assault. Quehanna Boot Camp is an alternative detention facility designed to provide treatment, education, and work with a focus in self-discipline. I meet with the PASSAGES group at the Quehanna Boot Camp once a week. I have completed the requirements to become a Certified Trauma Practitioner through the TLC pro-

gram and utilize the Adults in Trauma program with the inmates. This program was designed by Mary Hayek (MEd, LMSW) and William Steele (PsyD, MSW) to help traumatized adults reduce their trauma reactions. Through the program, victims develop a strength-based, resilience-focused approach to their lives that were previously impacted by their traumatic experience. Many victims are able to make connections from the traumatic experience to their beginning to use illegal sub-

stances. PASSAGES is the first sexual assault agency to incorporate this program within the prison setting in Pennsylvania and has received positive attention and acclaim from the violence prevention community, including from The Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape and Just Detention International.

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## Meet Our Staff:

Here at PASSAGES, Inc., we have an amazing staff who, in addition to doing amazing work for our organization, also do amazing work for their communities. Read on to learn a little bit more about us:

*Marlene Austin* is the Executive Director for PASSAGES, Inc. She began her journey here as a Prevention Educator Coordinator in 1996 where she was in this position for 17 years. Before coming to PASSAGES, Inc., Marlene spent 7 years teaching at the elementary and middle school levels. Throughout her years here, Marlene has presented thousands of programs to children and adults of all ages on the issues surrounding sexual violence at the local levels, as well as invited to speak at countless state conferences. Even though she has spent the majority of her professional career here, Marlene feels that she grows and learns each and every day. She says that even though our society has made some forward steps in the education and prevention work of sexual violence, there is much more work to be done by all. Marlene commends her small staff of nine on their passion and commitment to helping those in need. Marlene likes to spend her free time with her husband, Scott, her son, Zach, and their pet sheltie, Max.

*Chrystal Thompson* is the Financial Administrative Supervisor for PASSAGES. She has a BA in accounting, personal finance, business management, and real estate, and an Associate's Degree in legal studies. Chrystal loves being a part of PASSAGES' mission by being responsible for the budget that keeps PASSAGES funded so that we can continue to do great work for survivors of sexual violence. In addition to her work with PASSAGES, Chrystal is very active in local non-profits including *Our Puzzled Life Support Group*, which is a group for autistic children that also accepts all children with any mental or physical disabilities and their siblings to experience fun community activities in a safe and accepting environment. Otherwise, she enjoys spending time with her children and family, doing activities that support the theory that a close-knit family promotes a healthy body and mind.

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*Wendi Wenzel* is the Direct Services Supervisor and a counselor in Clearfield county. She provides counseling to victims of sexual assault in schools and in the community. She also provides a trauma program to a group of inmates who are victims of sexual assault at Quehanna Boot camp in Clearfield county. She has a BS in Administration of Justice, a Master's of Science in Human Services, and is working on her certification to be a Certified Trauma Practitioner. She has previously worked as a counselor in a prison, a probation officer, and an English as a Second Language teacher. As a counselor in the prison system Wendi worked providing educational programming to sex offenders. She became passionate about victims as a result of hearing about the trauma victims experienced. In her free time she likes to crochet and spend time with her husband Mike or snuggle with her two cats, Ramsey and Millie.

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*Deepam Mistry* is the Counselor Advocate for PASSAGES in Clarion County. He has been with the agency since October of 2014 and before working for PASSAGES he worked with troubled youth at local detention centers. He believes in helping those who have been impacted by sexual violence by empowering them with the skills and support to persevere while healing and moving forward in the face of such adversity. Everyone has a voice and everyone should be heard and Deepam feels it is his responsibility as a human being to help guide them to the light. Besides working as counselor advocate, Deepam enjoys spending time with his family and friends whenever he has the opportunity to do so. He also likes to go on adventures and try new restaurants as well as try new recipes in the kitchen.

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*Ben Thompson* is the Prevention Educator for Clarion and Jefferson counties. He sees almost every elementary school in those counties and is widely recognized for the work he does in local schools as well as at Clarion University. His work focused on teaching children and members of the community about issues ranging from bullying, the dangers of the internet, and sexting. Ben also works with other agencies and sits on the Clarion County Youth Council and Drug Free Clarion.

*Courtney Bowser* is the Jefferson County Counselor/Advocate for PASSAGES, Inc. She came to PASSAGES, Inc. after graduating from Clarion University with a bachelor's degree in Psychology/Sociology. Prior to joining the PASSAGES, Inc. team, she had experience working with troubled youth and with family/individual counseling. Courtney's work at PASSAGES, Inc. is driven by the idea that all survivors of sexual assault deserve support and encouragement to help reclaim their lives. She believes in the strength of the human mind to overcome any trauma and become empowered. On her off hours as a counselor, Courtney enjoys playing with her silver lab puppy Grizz and spending time with her husband, Zach. She is currently preparing for their newest addition, a baby boy, to arrive.

*Robin McMillen* was a volunteer for PASSAGES, Inc for 7 years before becoming our Legal Advocate. She absolutely loves the work she does. Robin accompanies survivors of sexual violence as their cases navigate the criminal justice system. Often on the road, she serves Jefferson, Clearfield and Clarion counties. Robin is currently continuing her education at Penn State University pursuing a degree in Human Development and Family Studies with a focus in counseling. When not working, she enjoys time with her husband, daughters, and friends. She travels extensively to Guatemala and will be returning for her 16th trip this July. Robin is also the administrator of a child sponsorship program in Guatemala which helps children living in extreme poverty receive an education.

*Kylee Estudante* is the Prevention Educator for PASSAGES, Inc. who provides programs to schools, churches, and other community organizations in Clearfield and Jefferson counties. She began working at PASSAGES at the beginning of 2017 and holds an active Pennsylvania Teacher Certification. Kylee is very passionate about sexual assault awareness and prevention within our community and enjoys focusing on personal safety topics when educating younger children. In her down time Kylee is a mother of one goofy toddler and she enjoys crafting chemical-free home and health products.



On February 15, PASSAGES participated in the Red Sand Project. This movement, created by New York artist Molly Gochman, aims to raise awareness about human trafficking by inviting participants to find and fill cracks in their sidewalk to use as a symbolic expression of the many overlooked and marginalized victims of human trafficking. Everyone who came through our Clarion office door had to cross that red line.

*Tia Marie DeShong* is the Volunteer Coordinator and Community Outreach Advocate for PASSAGES, Inc. She came to PASSAGES after spending several years as a graduate student and instructor in English and women's studies at various universities. Her work with PASSAGES is guided by the belief that victims' rights matter, that people want to make a difference and just need help realizing that they can, and that community effort can achieve great things. She is also the editor for the PASSAGES, Inc newsletter. In addition to her work as a sexual violence victim's advocate, Tia is also passionate about reading, writing, animals, and the environment. She spends her free time hiking with her husband, Andy, or cuddling with her two cats, Ruby and Lola.

As always, we are also indebted to our volunteers, our board members, and all the members of the community that help support our organization and help survivors of sexual violence. We could not do what we do without you.



## April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month! #SAAM

Here at PASSAGES, Inc., we have a lot of amazing events planned for Sexual Assault Awareness Month in April! These plans include:

- Film screenings of the Netflix original documentary *Audrie and Daisy* in select communities.
- A *Walk a Mile in Her Shoes* march at Clarion University with VDay.
- Ribbon trees in several prominent locations.
- And more!

If you are interested in attending any of these events, please feel free to call our offices, stop by, or email us at [passages\\_outreachadvocate@verizon.net](mailto:passages_outreachadvocate@verizon.net).



### Support Passages Inc.

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[Go to smile.amazon.com](http://smile.amazon.com)



PASSAGES, Inc Wish List  
Link: <http://a.co/1z14TOR>

There are currently two ways you can support PASSAGES, Inc on Amazon. The first way is by shopping with Amazon Smile. Simply go to [smile.amazon.com](http://smile.amazon.com), select PASSAGES, Inc as your charitable recipient, and then shop! 0.5% of your purchase will be donated directly to our organization.

You can also shop our Amazon wish list. This list includes office supplies to help us run our organization, craft supplies to help create outreach items, and personal items that go into the care kits we offer survivors. The list is updated frequently, so be sure to check regularly!

## Where Do We Go From Here?

By: Tia Marie DeShong

When the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) was signed into law in 2003, it was passed with bipartisan support. This bill, designed to study and address prison sexual violence and assault, called for national standards to prevent incidents of sexual assault. PREA covers all correctional facilities, including those for adults and juveniles and was designed to address sexual violence in all forms, including sexual harassment.

While PREA has been an important step forward in the fight against prison sexual violence, there is more work to be done. We must remember that prison rape is not inevitable and that there are steps we can take to help end the violence. Some are pragmatic: We recommend against policies designed to help sexual assault victims that unintentionally penalize them. For instance, inmates who report sexual violence are often isolated in solitary confinement "for their

own protection." This makes victims of sexual violence reluctant to report crimes, fearing that they will be forced to spend time "in the hole." Spending time in solitary confinement can be incredibly mentally taxing, especially for those already coping with extreme trauma. We also support facilities that prioritize believing survivors and reporting instances of abuse; we believe that preventing prison sexual assault is, in many ways, a matter of proper prison management, with leaders being willing to adopt a zero-tolerance policy for staff who attempt to conceal prison sexual abuse.

On a more ideological level, we believe that we must make it easier for community sexual violence centers, like PASSAGES, to help those abused in detention. There is a simple reason for this: prison rape thrives on a culture of silence and secrecy. Prisons, by design, are isolated and insular places. This means that, often, inmates fear reporting

victimization to prison staff for various reasons. Having an outside, objective advocate for sexual violence victims increases the likelihood that a victim will feel comfortable reporting. Facilities must be open and accommodating to help and our local, state, and federal communities must continue to support legislation that funds local sexual violence centers. While investing in our criminal justice system is undeniably necessary, it is equally necessary to invest in education and community outreach organizations like PASSAGES that not only help survivors, but try to stop sexual violence from happening in the first place.

All statistics taken from The Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape's website.

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