

Philly's Pissed & Philly Stands Up

Trigger Warning

This interview deals with the subject of sexual assault, which may have intense connotations or bring up difficult feelings and memories. Please consider reading this when you are in a safe place or have someone available to talk to.

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front sexual assault. Philly Stands Up works directly with perpetrators, and Philly's Pissed works with survivors. Both groups are actively engaged in education, prevention, and outreach.

Though there were nine people present at the time of the interview, for the sake of confidentiality, no names are used. Line breaks occasionally indicate that a different person is speaking. A variety of opinions may be expressed under the same group name.

Thank you Leeza Luncheon, John Seager, Katy Otto, and Mikey T for your support and major contributions.

Tell me about how the groups began.

Philly's Pissed: We started in August 2004 in response to a specific incident. At first we were rather ad hoc and not very organized or with any clear sense of purpose. Some people, who would later join the group, called us out on not getting the bigger picture, and put challenges to us about that — to confront sexual assault

you need more than just a reaction to situation after situation, there's something bigger that needs to be addressed, and also to break down these ideas that sexual assault is just hetero, it's just women as survivors, men as perpetrators, etc. No. Anyone can be assaulted, anyone can be a potential perpetrator.

Out of that the group we grew into something a lot more structured. The split that occurred was that a lot of people felt that they couldn't deal with working with perpetrators for various reasons. Philly Stands Up [PSU] emerged as a group that felt comfortable—not to say that it's easy, it's not easy work at all, I've actually recently been working with a perpetrator and it is so hard—being able to deal with that side of how this process works.

So PSU mainly deals with perpetrators and PP mainly deals with supporting survivors.

One common misconception about Philly's Pissed and Philly Stands Up is that membership is based on gender identity.

PP: Our groups aren't based on gender; our

How do I explain my personal stake in the work that Philly's Pissed and Philly Stands Up do? It is important to me because I am sick of feeling hopeless every time I hear about another rape or assault. I am sick of people not knowing how to support each other and feeling betrayed by their communities. I am sick of seeing perpetrators ostracized, as if that somehow won't just export abuse. I am sick of how people who are so radical in some ways completely miss that sexual assault is not just a personal matter, that it is political and relates to the politics of power.

I conducted this interview in the midst of that frustration and it gave me hope—not solely from the wealth of experience the group shared, but because when I watched them interact I saw a diverse group of strong people who did not hesitate to show their vulnerabilities and take care of each other.

Both groups are committed to developing coordinated, radical, grassroots mechanisms to con-

Vocab List

The following terms should not be taken as some kind of psychobabble—vocabulary is one of the tools that can help us reclaim our lives.

- **Sexual assault** is a boundary violation involving someone's body, their space, the way they are being talked to. Sexual assault can be a range of things, including rape, which to us is a more specific term.
- In general, we use the word **rape** to refer to a penetrative sexual assault.
- For an in-depth definition of **consent**, look ahead a few pages.
- We use the word **survivor**, instead of "victim," because "victim" defines someone by what someone else has done to them. "Survivor" defines a person more by how they responded to an experience, how they survived or coped. Sexual assault is a profoundly disempowering experience. We use "survivor" because of the idea of actively attempting to restore power.
- We use the term **perpetrator** because defining someone as an assaulter holds assumptions about what patterns of behavior will characterize their future, and our work at Philly Stands Up is based on that person changing.
- We don't use the word **accusation** because we always believe the survivor. An assault situation is always surrounded by rumor and doubt—in the justice system, among friends, everywhere. Part of our work, by building up institutions and groups like these, is to eventually create a cultural shift, but more immediately, to create in our groups one absolute space where there will be no question. This foundation of our work comes from both working very closely with survivors and from there being people in both our groups who identify as survivors.

(continued later in the interview)

groups are all encompassing in terms of gender.

Are there overlaps in membership?

PP/Philly Stands Up: I originally started in PSU, I was in it for a long time, a year and a half? And then... let's say I got allergic to working with perpetrators. I took a break for several months and then decided to try out PP.

PP: I've ever only worked with one perpetrator as part of the group I'm in. A lot of it for me has to do with this idea that for survivors, you own [the experience of being assaulted] for the rest of your life. You don't ever get to forget about it. It's part of you, and you own it. Or hopefully you have people who will support you, and you have the power to own it and survive it. I think the goal is to get a perpetrator to own being a perpetrator and have that be a part of them in the same way that survivors have to own being survivors.

How often does each group meet?

PSU: Each group meets an average of once a week.

What does a normal meeting look like for each group?

PP: We generally all come to every meeting, and they're generally once a week. Meetings are at members' houses, we switch around. We bring snacks. We have an agenda, and we often have a long "check-in" period because supporting each other is important. A "check-in" is at the beginning of a meeting. It's each person's introduction for the week and turn to say what's going on in their lives, and how they're feeling right then about how emotionally present they are, etc. We also have a rule in PP, and I don't know if PSU does this too, but if you feel like you have a lot to say about yourself and your life, you can put yourself on the agenda, make yourself an agenda item. Rather than doing it at your check-in, you can say you need more time to talk. Our average meetings are about two or three hours long.

PSU: A typical PSU meeting: we get there a half hour early to socialize [laughter]. No really, to socialize, and it helps to break things down, give people time to show up late if they need to, etc. Then we have check-ins, which vary in length, depending on what's going on for us, what the week's like, how long it's been since we've seen each other. We pick someone to take notes, someone to facilitate, based on where people are at, what their mental capacity is, what their work day has been like. Then we go through the agenda; we usually have updates. We'll usually pick one main issue that is different every week to work on—sometimes that's education, sometimes it's preparing for a workshop or a conference, sometimes it's just talking about a bigger philosophical question that we've been struggling with.

Sometimes it will be someone who's been working on a situation that's so hard that it needs more time than what we usually allot for situations. Usually, towards the end we'll get into situations and just go through each one, have updates, and provide each other with support, particularly if someone's stuck on something or someone just needs to say stuff out loud and get perspective. Within the meetings there's complete anonymity for all the situations, so usually if we're working with a survivor or whoever outside, even within the group we won't know who it is. Also, like PP, we have code names for meetings. That's typically how we run it. Then we have check-outs at the end of every meeting, which is important, because it provides us a sense of what went wrong and also what are some big questions that came up, and what future things we'll be working on.

Do you have joint meetings?

PP: Every two or three months, it varies, the two groups get together and we have a joint meeting. The process for a joint meeting is a little different, partly because the processes within the two groups vary slightly, and also because we're dealing with a much larger group of people. It's good because we get to hear what's going on with PSU directly, and we get to hear different perspectives. Each group gets to support what the other group is doing and communicate. Usually in PP we don't do check-outs, but we do at the group meetings and it does seem to be a good thing.

PSU: In all the meetings we have a pretty casual consensus process.

PP/PSU: Yeah.

Was that an example of it?

PP/PSU: [laughter]

How do people join either group?

PP: An example is that I mentioned interest to one of the members and they said, ok, let me run it by everybody else. Then it is discussed at a meeting, people interject how they feel about whether they want the person to come to a meeting. If there's group consensus, then that individual, like myself, comes to the meeting. There are three meetings that you end up coming to, and you can stay for portions of them, but anytime there's anything dealing with confidentiality or a survivor, that's when potential members have to leave.

After three meetings, there's another meeting and everybody says yes or no, or how they feel. It's also important for the potential new member. After three meetings, you start to get a feeling of if this is work that you actually want to be doing. Then you can make that commitment—which also has a lot to do with if you can make the time commitment. Then, you get jumped in! [Laughter] That was a joke! Then you're in and you start doing the work.

The reason why the structure is like that is because of security culture and confidentiality. We set forth guidelines that there are certain reasons why you would block a potential member from joining after those three meetings, and it can't be about something petty or personal unless it is something that deals with an issue that would harm a survivor in this work. We do want it to be more

than just some clique of friends, and that's not what I feel like we are, to be perfectly honest.

PSU: It's a similar process for us. We invite people into the meetings so they can observe the culture and see how we function. But we also straight up interview people. Sometimes people approach us about being interested in joining the group, and sometimes we'll actively recruit somebody. But either way we'll still interview them, because it's never the case that everyone knows that person. We ask them about stuff that's related to these issues directly, and we'll also ask them about what drives them, who they are, their passions, and a big part of that is getting a sense of their analysis. It's not so much about having qualifications for this work or if you have done this work before. Most of us in PSU hadn't done any organizing directly around this, and yet the thing we have in common is that we've all done different types of intense organizing.

The commitment's a strong thing, the endurance is a strong thing. We need to have a sense of whether people have that. Also just having a solid analysis, having their shit together around race, around gender, around so many things that come up. It's something we've identified that it would hold the group back way too much to spend the time holding someone's hand and being like, "this is busted," and explaining every step along the way. No, we need to have each other's backs with that, that's square one, and then we can move on to this other stuff that's a lot more complicated.

How to Support Survivors

The most important thing to remember is to be flexible. People react to sexual assault differently. Pay attention to their responses and be ready to change what you are doing.

1. Deal with immediate needs. Do they want/need medical attention? A change of clothes? A shower? A safe place to be? The Emergency Contraceptive Pill (ECP)?
2. Listen. No, for real. Listen.
3. It's not about you. Don't put your spin on what happened ("You must be furious" or "If only you hadn't been drinking"). Don't put your spin on what should happen ("We should go fuck them up" or "Everyone needs to know"). Let them tell you how they feel, what assault means to them and what support they need. Listen.
4. Respect how much or how little they want to tell you about what happened. You don't need to know anything and they don't have to let it all out. On the other hand, retelling the story over and over might be what they need.
5. Help them feel in control. Assault takes away power and control and restoring these can be helpful. This might mean letting them control where you are, what you're doing or who knows about what happened.
6. Give them options. Some folks get overwhelmed by having to tell people what they need. "Do you want to go home, go to the park or go to your sister's place?" Sometimes people might want you to decide.
7. Let them determine what physical contact is okay. Remember: Someone just took that choice away from them.
8. Validate what happened. Minimizing is common: "I shouldn't be so upset, worse assaults have happened."
9. Don't gossip. Seriously. Let them decide who needs to know and when.

Activities that might help:

1. Tea/coffee/beer/juice
2. Food
3. Walks
4. Bike rides
5. Crying
6. Yelling
7. Offering a place to sleep
8. Not talking
9. Talking
10. TV
11. Massage
12. Helping find a therapist
13. Smashing bottles
14. Leaving them alone
15. Music
16. Family

Some normal reactions:

1. Nightmares
2. Reliving the assault in their mind
3. Trouble remembering
4. Being upset by things that remind them of assault
5. Numbing of responses or being extra sensitive to everything

Hospitals:

Hospitals can do rape kits and give ECP. They can also be incredibly awful to survivors and they might call the cops. Think carefully before going.

This is a very brief starting point, taken from the 2007 Philly's Toolkit organizer.

What time commitment do you get from people?

PP: We ask that they're able to make most of the meetings, more than half. It's basically our goal that unless there's something you absolutely have to miss it for, we all end up going to all the meetings. It's not a half-the-time kind of thing.

PSU: Pretty much the same for us. The difference is that we're starting to move towards a structure where people can participate in different ways, so there are folks who just do logistical stuff or just help out with art or workshops or external things and aren't necessarily working on situations. And vice versa. There are people who will not come to meetings, not do logistics, but will only be tapped on as our reserves for meeting with perpetrators.

What kind of membership fluctuation or turnover has there been?

PP/PSU: Someone invited me to a PSU meeting way back in the day, and there were more people in that room than there are in this room. Then at the next meeting there were three. The meeting after that there were three, and the meeting after that. Then one day, [someone] showed up with two other people. I've been in both groups, so I'm in a unique position. In PSU, there's a slow turnover that happens every now and again. Like me, people get allergic to working with perpetrators. Since I've been in PP, which has been a handful of months now, we've lost one member, maybe a temporary hiatus, maybe not.

Vocab continued

- The concept of **accountability** is something that is often used in reference to individuals, specifically perpetrators. It refers to the behavior of someone who is responsible to a survivor for what they did. To be accountable is to do what the survivor needs to feel as okay as possible. In the bigger picture, accountability can apply to communities, groups of people, in terms of making sure that communities are responsible to a survivor as well.
- **Restorative justice** deals with everybody's needs in a situation, because when a person hurts another person—whether it's sexual assault, theft, whatever—there are communities around that survivor who feel hurt and like they've been betrayed. Restorative justice tries to take the needs of anyone who has felt hurt into account. It's a more holistic approach.
- **Survivor autonomy** is a way of describing one of our foundational concepts, which is that in working on a situation, though we might give information about different options, the survivor is always the person who decides what's going to happen, which is a way of restoring their power.
- **Working on your shit** is a phrase you'll encounter when working with perpetrators. It refers to the process of examining the behavioral patterns that led up to an assault, figuring out how to change, and being accountable to the people you've hurt.

PP: Before that, what happened goes back to what [PSU] was saying about people having their shit together around race and gender. The first group of people came together ad hoc to deal with this one incident, and people weren't invested in the same goals about what a group like this should do. Then a lot of people who are in the group now came together and created what is now PP. We've lost a handful of people, but mainly to moving. Ever since that original shift, in terms of goals, we haven't had that high a turnover rate.

You touched on this already, but I'd like to know in more detail how you all support each other and keep each other from burning out.

PSU: Checking in with one another about what's going on and just being aware, in the first place, of how hard the work can be, how taxing. In our group, there has definitely been members who say "I don't want to work on situations, I'm working more on logistics stuff," and the person's there participating in the weekly meetings, still very much a part of what's going on, but is able to step back from things that are more emotionally impacting. Also, there's just the culture of it. Being able to look at each other and seeing if somebody's taking on too much. When you feel that happening, being able to communicate that to the people around you and get support on it or have somebody take over for you. Having limited numbers makes that harder cause people get stacked up with a lot of things right away.

PP/PSU: The magic glue for both groups is friendship. That's a huge part of the support. We have bonded in a way almost beyond friendship, it feels like family. You can read each other and it doesn't take someone bringing something up as an agenda item to know it's hard for them. Being able to recognize, are you being honest with yourself about how hard this is? What kind of support do you need? At a certain point it's like, why am I even doing this work? This is hard, I'm burnt. But being able to take a deep breath and be like, it's about my friends and taking on this thing together. It goes beyond a commitment to just the work itself.

PP: I think it's key to know that I don't think very many of us were friends when we started, maybe we knew each other as acquaintances, maybe, and that these relationships have grown out of the work and our supporting each other.

PSU: Ditto.

How do people find out about you and approach you, in terms of being survivors or having a situation that needs to be dealt with?

PP: Sometimes people approach you, people approach someone who knows you, e-mails. Sometimes it's being present when something happens. Workshops, sometimes it's other support groups that are doing the work that we do contact us for ideas or advice or what-have-you. People get in touch in lots of different ways.

PSU: We are also thinking of ways to increase visibility. We have to be careful about that, because we already end up feeling overwhelmed with what comes through to us. As PSU we put together something recently to have a public meeting where we invited people to come into our meeting and didn't discuss anything confi-

dential. We plan on continuing that, and hopefully it'll grow and we'll get ideas coming from the outside as well as just increasing our presence. Also, we'd like to give people the skills to be able to handle things on their own without specifically having to come to the group.

Can you walk me through the process of finding out about a situation and dealing with it?

PSU: These aren't examples, they're sort of hypothetical, archetypal situations. A lot of the work overlaps, so I'm going to speak primarily about our work with perpetrators. Sometimes a group or an organization or some sort of collective will approach us and say, "here's this person, you need to work with them;" or they'll tell that person that they need to come find us and hold them accountable, saying, "you are no longer welcome," or suspended.

Sometimes that will happen on an individual basis, like someone's ex-partner or someone will show up from another town and in the town that they're leaving, folks there will be like, "you need to find Philly Stands Up and do the following things." Sometimes perpetrators will come to us on their own, of their own volition; and those are usually the cases where we will protect confidentiality upon request, because they're holding themselves accountable. They can walk away at any moment, so we're mutually invested in working with that person.

We do have a Myspace account, we do have an e-mail address, people will also contact us through there. And like [PP] was saying, every time we give a workshop, there's always a handful of folks who will come up to us afterward—we make ourselves available—and approach us about specific situations.

PP: A common way for people to end up coming to PP is if one of us is at a party just chilling out, and then somebody's like, "hey, are you in Philly's Pissed? My friend could use you, can I tell them to call you?" And then the sort of informal person-who-knows-a-person (I think a lot of times there's a third person involved, like a friend or some sort of support person) is in touch.

Then we select someone who's a point person for the survivor. Oftentimes that will be the person who's approached. The point person for PP will meet with the survivor once or a few times, usually in person, and run down where they're at—establish if they're safe, if this was something that happened recently, if they have their basic needs attended to, if they feel safe where they're staying, if they have any physical or medical issues that need to be attended to.

If it's something that happened longer ago, we try to figure out where they're at with it, like is this something that is coming up now for a certain reason—like a certain person being back in town—and establish their general safety and their basic needs. Once that happens, we find out what else they might need to feel supported as a survivor. That can include helping people find a therapist, helping pay for a therapist, talking to them about the basic symptoms that people often experience after an assault—flashbacks, nightmares, dissociation, what post-traumatic stress disorder looks like, and what things might be normal for them.

We talk about what their coping methods are and

What is consent?

Consent is an agreement that people must make if they want to have sexual contact. The issue of consent can be a complicated and ambiguous area that needs to be addressed with clear, open, and honest communication. Keep these points in mind if you are not sure consent has been established.

All partners need to be fully conscious and aware.

The use of alcohol or other substances can interfere with someone's ability to make clear decisions about the level of intimacy they are comfortable with. The more intoxicated a person is, the less they are able to give conscious consent.

All partners are equally free to act.

The decision to be sexually intimate must be without coercion. Both partners must have the option to choose to be intimate or not. Both partners should be free to change "yes" to "no" at any time. Factors such as body size, previous victimization, threats to "out" someone, and other fears can prevent an individual from freely consenting.

All partners clearly communicate their willingness and permission.

Willingness and permission must be communicated clearly and unambiguously. Just because a person fails to resist sexual advances does not mean that they are willing. Consent is not the absence of the word "no."

All partners are positive and sincere in their desires.

It is important to be honest in communicating feelings about consent. If one person states their desires, the other person can make informed decisions about the encounter.

if those are working for them or if there's something they'd rather be doing. We talk about who is their support network—do they have people in their life who they feel comfortable telling? Do they already know? Are there other people that they might want to tell? Sometimes people want to access social services or medical services. Do they feel comfortable doing that? Do they need someone to go with them to those appointments? Do they want us to meet with their friends and tell them, this is what to look for, this is what's normal, these are ways you can support people?

We've done basic stuff, like getting food for them or a cup of tea. We work with the survivor on what examples of demands are. A lot of people are profoundly disempowered at that point and can't even imagine what that would look like. A lot of people who come don't even know what the options would be for support for them. We talk with them about what the options are in terms of if they want something to happen with the perpetrator. Some survivors might have additional requests that are more specifically related to the perpetrator, and so that is maybe half of the cases that have specific demands for a perpetrator. In that case we may wind up talking to PSU and asking them for a point person for a specific situation. The point person from PP and the point person from PSU will work together to try and get all of the needs addressed.

Also, I want to mention that sometimes we can't be support people. There are eight people in PP right now. That is not a lot of people. Sometimes we need to recognize that wow, we really can't handle this right now. Establishing our own boundaries in this work is incredibly important. That doesn't mean that someone contacts us and we're like, "oh, too bad, we're closed!" What we try to do is find networks that already exist around that survivor, like communities or friends, and then we can go in and maybe do a training, or just give some advice so that another network can build that's more organic than us coming in. That has definitely happened.

Do people come back after they've gotten some distance on what happened and make demands later?

PP: We have people come to us and say, this thing happened five years ago, and now I want this to happen. Definitely the demands have changed depending on how they're feeling.

PSU: Those are almost exclusively the types of survivors we work with. It's usually that there's been some time and distance, and they feel empowered and comfortable enough to approach us and say, "I've had time to process and reflect, and this what I need to happen."

PSU: Someone might find themselves wanting to distance themselves, to not think about it at all

and be separated from it, but then come back later and find that maybe they've been thinking about it more because they don't know what's going on. In cases where we're working with a perpetrator, a survivor might come to Philly Stands Up and want to know what's happening, what we're doing, what we're saying, what we're getting from the perpetrator, and that could be helpful to them. But at another point in the process, they don't want to know any of that, they don't want to have anything to do with it or think about it at all. It evolves by the individual and the situation and the context, be it time or whatnot.

A lot of our main work goes into directly sitting down with a perpetrator. And the first step of that is getting them to sit down with us. We don't necessarily have an agenda, but if there are demands to communicate to them, of course that's going to happen. Any kind of demands can be communicated through us to a perpetrator, and that will happen at the first meeting. But I feel like what's been effective in our first meetings is finding out where the perpetrator's coming from. It tells a lot just to sit down across a table from them and find out why they're there. Cause it can range from anything like, "I really want to clear my name, this is making me look bad in the social scene," to, "I didn't realize I hurt somebody, I fucked up and I want to work on this and make this better, I care about the person that I hurt."

We're not counselors or anything like that, to know exactly what somebody's psychology behind it is, but from a first meeting with the person you can kind of get that perspective just from what they talk about and what their concerns are. There's a lot of resistance that we'll get in different ways. We'll be avoided, phone calls won't be returned. And then there are the people who just know the "speak," who know how to talk about activisty things, like, "Oh, I'm working on my shit, oh, I want to find ways that I can be accountable" and all these things. Like, they know the language. That's been a challenge for us, but that's also part of that first meeting of seeing where this person's coming from.

Before we even sit down to meet with folks

Consent means...

Consent means YOU ARE NEVER ENTITLED

Consent means hitting on them before they're drunk

Consent means knowing your own boundaries and asserting them

Consent means asking if they want to be touched, and if yes, asking how

Consent means stopping in the middle of whatever you are doing if they say so

Consent means asking "Is this ok?" or "Do you like this?" throughout the experience

Consent means never assuming that just because they had sex (or a specific sex act) with you before, they want to do it with you again.

Consent means not punishing them because they won't have sex with you.

Consent means paying attention and stopping when you realize something is wrong.

Consent means many different things to different people

Consent means enjoying yourself and your partner.

Consent means more than what can be defined on a piece of paper.

(from a pamphlet by Philly's Pissed/Philly Stands Up)

that we're working with, a lot of work goes into understanding the dynamics of a situation. Not what specifically happened, but understanding what is the boundary that was crossed, or what is that boundary as the perpetrator understands it or misunderstood it. The first step uses listening as a powerful disarming tool. It also helps to build trust with the perpetrator, which is the biggest part of our work. Often nobody wants to listen to them—for very good reasons. Half the time we don't want to listen to them. We're putting ourselves in a position where we're going to intentionally listen. It's important to clear the air, get all the defensiveness out of there, and then it's like great, now let's actually start working on stuff. Let's start identifying patterns. It's not about revisiting a situation, but to look forward: what is your analysis, where is it at? In hearing them talk, we can see how they're thinking, and how they have mapped out what sort of boundaries are there.

For a lot of people we're working with, there aren't necessarily concrete violations, so when that's the case, some of [the first meeting] is, "guess what? We're not calling you out for something more extreme." So get over your anger, get over your defensiveness. What we see happening in many assault situations—certainly not all of them, it gets very complicated—is that when there is a survivor and a perpetrator, or several survivors and a perpetrator, and we see the survivors feeling as if they've lost a lot of power. And as members of one or many of our communities, we've lost trust in the perpetrator. With the restorative justice model, we see our work as building that power back up for the survivor and building that trust back into whatever dynamic is going on with the perpetrator. Feeding them demands and being like, "we're asking you to do the following things, and if you make good on that, that's a show of trust." That's one hook. That's one way to get them to stay committed to working on their shit.

PP: When we're working with survivors, we ask survivors to tell us what we need to know or what they want us to know about a situation.

PSU: Part of it is recognizing that it is a long process. We're not going to have everything solved in x amount of time, and trust isn't going to be restored immediately. A lot of things we can't have mapped out—what needs to happen from the very beginning or what this person needs to do—just knowing that it's going to take a long time and that everybody along the way gets pretty frustrated.

What are your personal positions on involving the justice system—do you have a group position? How do you support people who choose to do that? And if you're against it, do you really feel like you're offering viable alternatives?

PP: I think it's important to inform survivors about what it could be like. There are people in this group that know the process and have been through that process in various capacities. To share that information so that the person knows before they walk into that environment of police, of being in court, what it is possibly like. Especially when it gets to court—if you're being a support person or ally for the survivor—to let them know what a defense attorney is going to act like. That is really important to know. I would never honestly recommend that to anybody, but that's my own personal opinion, and it's up to a survivor to decide.

In cities and scenes where there's no mechanism like Philly's Pissed or Philly Stands Up, would your advice to people considering the "justice" system be any different?

PP: That's a complicated question. Sometimes the nature of an assault or a rape necessitates someone going to the hospital, and sometimes hospitals are required to bring in the police. That takes a lot of that decision out of the immediate hands of the survivor, at least at that moment. It's important to know if there are groups that do advocate work. There is a group in Philadelphia—which some of the survivors we've worked

with haven't had the most positive experience with—that meets with a survivor when the police interview them. They're supposed to be advocates. But they definitely believe in [the justice system], so it can be problematic. It's hard. I guess I can't really give advice.

I would like to acknowledge that, in a situation where people don't feel like they have a support system or don't have a community that can support them, I would understand why somebody could feel more empowered by going through the court system rather than feeling that they don't have any choices and can't do anything. We are in a huge city here, as you pointed out, so there are a lot of resources we have that other people might not have.

PSU: Part of what we do is try to build networks of these kinds of groups; and when there is not a group like this, there needs to be.

PP: The whole issue of the criminal justice system is a tricky one. In the group I would say there's a unified opinion that it is not something we are personally invested in, or don't personally have faith in, or think it's an awful process and does not pursue justice. I look at it from the perspective of giving someone all the information I could about what that process would be like. I've supported people, not with this group, in going through the criminal justice system because it was what they needed to do, and personally I'm not going to bring my own beliefs into that because we support survivors and the choices that survivors make.

PP: Also, the justice system in our experience—and statistically—will not lead to people going to court, people going to prison, any sort of follow-through. It does lead to situations like multiple interrogations by police officers, by defense lawyers, by prosecutors, by a number of people who would just further serve to invalidate what a survivor has to say. And this is particularly true in the case of people who are poor, who are sex workers, who are people of color, who are transpeople, who are

queer people, who are marginalized by society in general, they are going to be that much more marginalized in those systems. And one of your questions was do we have the resources to deal with these things...

It was, do you provide an alternative to approaching that goal of making the perpetrator also own the experience?

PP: I think we do in a lot of cases, but there's at least one situation I can think of where I felt like we didn't have the resources to deal with it. There are people who are sociopaths in the world. There are people who can take responsibility or take accountability, and then there are people who have done things that are so atrocious... there might be people who are going to do other atrocious things to other people, and I think that we have a system that works for people who have at least some shred of humanity in them.

There's been at least one situation we've come into where that has not been the case, and I've been genuinely concerned about that person being out there in the world. We're not experts, and we're still learning. We have experience in certain cases, but in other situations we're not sure what the best course of action is. There are people who are sociopaths, there are people who are repeat offenders of pretty gruesome actions.

What do you do if there are needs that fall outside of the range of your ability or scope of influence?

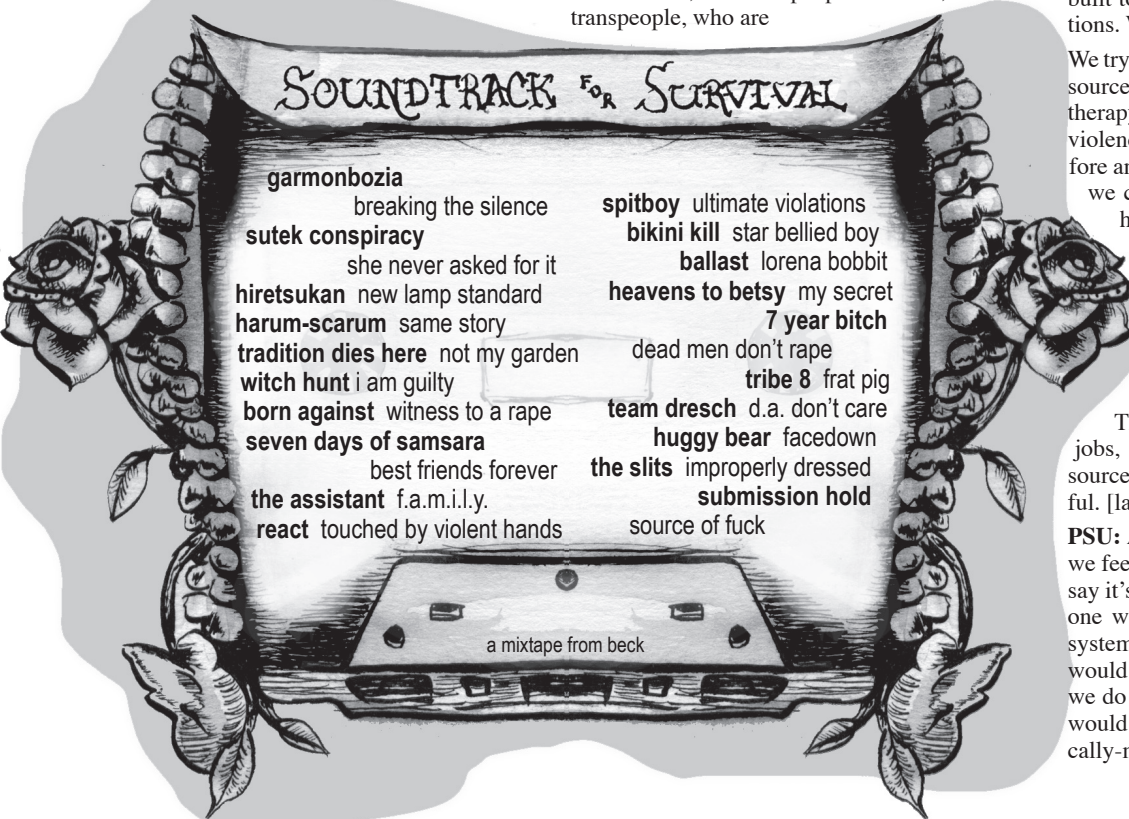
PP: People have various conditions, from alcoholism to mental illness, to all these things we might not be equipped to deal with or have the facility to create a safe space for someone. We just don't have those resources. That's something that can be problematic. We're within a much larger world and system, and a lot of times [assault situations] aren't just these isolated instances. They're often tied with a lot more big, complicated issues that need alternative systems built to deal with them as well. We have limitations. We're nine people; [PSU] has five or six.

We try to get resource lists together, we try to find sources that can help. If things cost money, like therapy, we try to get money together. Domestic violence, that's one thing that has come up before and is something that our group has felt that we can't handle in terms of the resources we have. When situations like that occur, we try to assist by getting resources together or by doing workshops with people.

What do you consider your scope of influence to be?

PP: I think it's varied. People have different connections, different resources. There are people who have social work jobs, so they have those skills and those resources at their disposal. We're not all-powerful. [laughter]

PSU: As far as going outside the scope of what we feel we can handle, part of what we can do is say it's something we can't provide. If it's someone wanting to use a justice system or a legal system that we don't necessarily agree with, we would still fight like hell, and work as hard as we do on anything else, to make something that would be a horrible process better. Being radically-minded groups, we can try to find different



services in the city that are going to come, somewhat, from that perspective.

If it's something with the legal system, there's so much bureaucratic fucking bullshit that is hard for anybody to go through, and if we can find out what the next step is for a person, we would do whatever research we could to help with that process if it goes outside of our scope. One thing that we do and should be continuing to do is find what local resources there are, ones that we trust and ones that maybe seem like they might be ok. There's so much to wade through that if we can do that beforehand, we're giving somebody a step up, giving them those next steps, is helpful for things that go beyond our own scope.

PP: I don't think we have the resources to handle addiction adequately. Something that's come up a lot in demands is for someone to stop drinking. If someone is drinking all day every day, we don't have the resources to go through a physical detox with them. We don't have the resources to watch someone withdrawing. It is a common demand to say stop drinking, or don't have sex with someone while you're using, and those are the kind of things we can support people on but we can't adequately handle, and the mainstream bureaucracy is also not adequately dealing with that, so there's a gap between a need and the systems that exist.

PSU: I want to add something that's been conspicuously absent from most of our responses so far, and that's how the demographics of who is in our group affect our work. It's both a limiting factor and an expanding factor, because so much of this work is social and word-of-mouth. It means that whoever the last person we worked with is, we might end up working with three more people who are from a similar or overlapping community. It has a self-perpetuating component to it.

The perception of our group also influences who's going to approach us. That said, we work in many different communities. Some of that is on a political spectrum, some of that has to do with different social groups, people with different gender and sexual identities. I feel like [PP and PSU] have pretty queer groups, so we're equipped to understand and be connected to those communities. We've come across situations where we have had people of color in the groups who will be working on situations that not everyone in the group is working on at the request of folks. We've had people of color who have left the group because they felt they were not dealing enough with their own communities, or they want to go solo in supporting people in their communities.

We do a lot of self-education. We had an intense year in PSU working on mental health and understanding threads within that community. We partnered up with the Icarus Project and went to workshops, did a lot of self-education, web research, and found out more about supporting people. Because sometimes we'll call someone out, and then find out that all sorts of stuff comes up around depression, around suicide, around self-blame... How do you simultaneously support someone in that situation and also hold them accountable? We've come up with situations where we're working with a perpetrator and it comes up that they're also a survivor.

In any situation, there is the community of the survivor and the community of the perpetrator; sometimes there's a lot of overlap, sometimes there's not that much. Our ability to interact with each of those communities—that is our capacity. Our work is providing support to people who are going to be there in the every day supporting the survivor. Or to a perpetrator—holding them accountable, making them feel that group pressure. That's really our only power.

Considering the limited number of people in each of our groups, we span so many different types of communities. Even beyond that, for ones that we're not actively in, we have great communication skills. So we're very much able to be in touch. That's limiting as well: if there's a community that we can't find a common language for, that doesn't work the way we work, if a perpetrator's part of a community that frankly doesn't give a crap about accountability or peers or any of this stuff, and they're just like, "you either get the cops in here or I'm not listening; what authority do you have?" What can you say in that situation?

Sometimes groups of people are reluctant to come to terms with a person being outed as an assaulter, especially in cases where it's a well-known or respected person. At best, they suspend judgment, at worst, they disbelieve, gossip. What are the options in a situation like that? What are the rights of the community?

PP: Sometimes the best we can do in a situation like that is to being the rumor control, which can be as simple as saying "I don't think we should be talking about that. I don't think that's appropriate." That can help keep the survivor safe from the fallout.

PSU: Focusing on who [the situation] is about. So if my roommate is central to the thing, it's not about me. It's about my roommate. If my drummer is central to the thing, it's not about me, it's about my drummer. Getting over the ego trip where you're like "I have a right to know!" No. I don't need to know all the facts, because it's not about me.

PP: I want to focus on "the rights of the community." While anyone has the right to not be supportive, that's what they're doing—not being supportive. Feeling like you need to set yourself up as judge and jury of these situations is not helping. That's a trap a lot of people fall into, in the context of the rumor mill. Also, I think that people who take that position don't realize how invasive it is.

PSU: Right. And we want to channel that impulse in a different direction. Not to make people say "Oh I guess I don't need to know. I don't need to know anything about it," and bury their heads in the sand—which happens a lot, people say "Oh, this guy's close to me. I'm just not going to talk to him about that. I'm not going to deal with that." If someone wants to know all the details, you can say, well you don't need to know all the details but if you want to be supportive in the process, these are the things you can do to either hold this person accountable or to help the process of the situation. That energy can be redirected.

PP: There's also a larger question in there that we didn't hit yet, which is the idea that there are

Suggested Reading

This is far from being a complete list, but below are some interesting, diverse, and relevant resources.

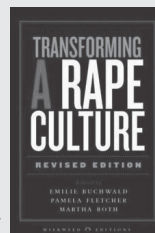
Zines



- **Support**
ed. Cindy Crabb.
Microcosm Publishing
- **Women's Self Defense** series, ed. Ariel Firestarter Press (POB 50217, Baltimore MD 21211)
- **Supporting a Survivor of Sexual Assault** MARC/UBUNTU (marc_nc@riseup.net and ubuntuNC@gmail.com)
- **What Do We Do When?** (#1 & #2)
ed. Bekka (wdwdw@belldonnadiy.org)
- **Conversations About Consent**
(pomegranate@riseup.net)
- **Free to Fight** Candy-Ass Records
(POB 42382, Portland Oregon 97242)
- **Thoughts About Community Support Around Intimate Violence**
(jamiesays@earthlink.net)

Books

- **Refusing to be a Man**
by John Stoltenberg
- **Transforming a Rape Culture** (2nd Edition)
ed. Emilie Buchwald
- **The Survivor's Guide to Sex: How to Have an Empowered Sex Life After Child Sexual Abuse**
by Staci Haines



Web

- Philly's Pissed: phillyspissed.net
- XY Online: Men, Masculinities, and Gender Politics: xyonline.net
- **Some Strategies for Community Accountability in the POC Progressive Movement**
incite-national.org
- **Suggestions to People Called Out For Abusive Behavior** by wispy cockles:
fruitondesign.com/dealwithit/02wispy.php
- Antioch College's Sexual Offense Prevention Policy: antioch-college.edu/Campus/sopp/adda.html - Antioch College developed a comprehensive policy on sexual assault and definition of consent, definitely worth reading.
- Louisville Center for Women & Families: thecenteronline.org - This center provides a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) so that survivors who get the rape kit aren't forced to deal with the often re-traumatizing process of interacting with the examiners the state provides.

these statements that come out. We'll get an e-mail in our inbox that has gone through 15 people, a forwarded, unsigned statement from a different city. There is a need to have a stable network

of people working on these issues who can be counted on as reliable sources—not for details, but just to confirm that yes, this is something that has happened and this is something that needs support around it. Statements can be signed by someone or a group—doesn't have to be a survivor at all—but a contact person who you can get in touch with just to verify. Not to question if there is a survivor, but to verify the situation. Sometimes things go public that weren't meant to go public. To make sure that whatever happens is what the survivor requested.

That's one of the reasons that having groups like ours is useful: That's something we can do. Not that we want to be the clearinghouse for all information about sexual assault, but we can be a group that knows what's going on and isn't the survivor or this also-traumatized group of the survivor's friends.

How do you hold a group accountable for their complicity in an assault or contributing to the environment in which it occurred?

PP: That's a question that we can answer in terms of what the survivor wants us to do. Does the survivor want us to hold a group accountable in some sort of specific way? It's not something we'd take on our own.

PSU: In modeling this idea of taking back power, we like to create our own spaces, structures, do things on our own terms. If we see something happen we'll be like, hmm, that was busted. Let's have a more proactive hand so that next time there's a show coming through or whatever we make sure that there is childcare, that there's substance free housing, that there's queer and trans friendly housing.

We've gone as far as having a cell phone, and publicizing that number, and wearing our t-shirts during the event. The cell phone was prepaid and we made sure that we scheduled ourselves, within both groups, so that there was always somebody who was on call and had that phone on them. So that if there was a call at 3:30 am we could take it.

PP: That's only for large scale things. Protests, convergences.

PSU: Yes. In our own town, we might be there at that space identifiable with flyers, making announcements. We've even trained people who are bouncers, so it's not people who are necessarily super concerned about these issues, but will show up to staff the event and know what to do. Then when people come back to Philly they know that there will be this community presence.

Katy Otto, with whom I have had the pleasure of doing a few workshops related to this, often speaks of the importance of staying humble throughout this kind of work, especially for people interested in dismantling power based relationships. What kind of presence does that sentiment have in your process?

PP: One of our most basic rules, which [PSU] touched on before, is: It's not about me. It's not about me. It's not about me. But what goes along with that is recognizing your boundaries and knowing when to say you need some help. Often, when people are doing support work and not getting their own needs met, that is when it becomes hard to separate oneself from the work

and see that it's not about you. One of our principles is that any of us can step back from the work at any time, and that feels important. That's part of remaining humble. When it becomes more about the egos of the people [in a group] instead of what the hell the survivor wants and needs and what the hell the perpetrator needs, that is where you get into these problems. It's not about us; it's just not about us.

One of the things that we also allow for is that there are people in our lives who aren't in this group that we trust, that respect this idea of confidentiality and security culture. Those are the people that we can turn to outside of this group for support for us, for what we are doing within these groups. [Assent from PSU] I think that's helpful for trying to keep our egos and our personalities from dominating what a person needs, having someone where you can be like, wow, I had an intense meeting and I'm going to decompress with you.

Before I was in PP, I was doing this work. It's always been around. Another way that it is important for us to be humble is we're not experts. We're experts only by virtue of the fact that we've been working on this for two or three years in a group that doesn't exist in a lot of places. We are learning things as we go and we've made mistakes. I'm sure we'll continue to make mistakes.

In my experience, there's a lot that's about balance... supporting someone and trying to respect their psychological, emotional, and physical boundaries and keep them in control, but at the same time making sure that their safety and health are being taken care of. How do you act with respect to that balance?

PP: A way I have of approaching that has a lot to do with the principle of harm reduction. Harm reduction is this idea of meeting someone where they're at and giving them the resources and ideas and tools they need to make the changes that they want to make in their life to make something they're doing more safe. It can relate to drug use, it can relate to mental health issues. Not taking responsibility for their well-being in the world, but finding out from them what resources or information they want, or are willing to accept. And also, validating the way that they are already coping with things. It might not necessarily seem healthy, or might be complicated. But being like "This seems to be a valuable way that you're dealing with this, and also these are some risks that might have, do you want to talk about a way to make it more safe?"

If you approach choices you might see as choices you'd consider unhealthy, and if you're judgmental, or the only consistent advice you can give is for them to not do those things, it does not work. It contributes to shame, and isolation. If you tell people "oh, you shouldn't go out and drink, that's a terrible idea," they'll just be like "OK, well I'm not going to talk to you about this." It doesn't make that person safer or more supported. Another big part of that is that the survivor has already had a lot of power taken away from them. We don't want to control their lives.

One common response for some people after something awful happens is that they want to go

out and get completely wasted. One [harm reduction] way of dealing with that would be [asking] are you going to do that in a place that's safe, where someone can take care of you, and where if you need to talk about stuff with someone, you can. From other perspectives, people would say "You can't drink! You can't get fucked up! You need to do it this way, because it's not healthy for you right now!" Instead we just say, ok. Here's what you want to do, is there a way that we can minimize the risk that's gonna put you in?

Another coping mechanism that's common in these situations is cutting. That's another thing that people are quick to make a judgement about. But that's a coping mechanism, and it's something that makes that person be able to cope at that time. So a way to be able to [apply harm reduction] would be to say, ok, you're going to cut yourself. Do you have something that is clean to use to cut yourself, if you hurt yourself a little more than you can handle is there someone you can contact to help you?

I remember reading something bell hooks wrote where she basically says that she doesn't think long-lasting, functional relationships, social movements, or communities can be based on pain. Is there a community being created at the same time that this issue is being dealt with?

PP: I don't know if I'm getting the question right but I know that I've been excited by meeting other groups doing this work and also doing it differently. That has been inspirational. I've also thought it was great when there have been conferences and people talk to us, then I see them at another event and they have this group! Communities dealing with sexual assault have existed forever, and are existing that we don't know about. I'm excited to see that more permanent structures within some of these [subcultures] are developing. But it's not only those types of communities doing this work.

PSU: I don't see the impetus for this work and organizing as coming from the pain, I see it as wanting holistic and sustained and vibrant community. A piece of that is when something is wrong in that community, organizing around it, but it's part of this broader work. So much of what we do is positive stuff around consent, how it is sexy, sex-positive things, educational things. The majority of the organizing we do in the communities we're part of is positive, celebratory, forward-looking. It's before the more gruesome stuff goes down.

