

The Binding Project

Seeking to Unite and Empower Sexual Assault Survivors

Silence — it often becomes a deafening and hollow pang that imprisons a sexual assault survivor. Fear of reliving the trauma coupled with overwhelming feelings of guilt and humiliation are among many of the reasons victims of sexual assault retreat from family and friends, hiding alone in the shadows of their own memories. Shattering the silence of sexual assault is critical not only in stopping perpetrators from assaulting more victims but also in bringing emotional and psychological healing so that sexual assault victims can make the transition and become strong survivors.

The Ties That Bind

In early May, I visited Angela Rose, my friend and colleague of many years, to discuss various ways to mark the ten-year anniversary of her abduction from a shopping mall parking lot in a Chicago suburb. She turned to me as her friend and as a professional community strategist. She hoped that with the understanding of and the distance from her experience, I could assist in developing a meaningful commemoration that would not only positively impact her continued healing process but also empower other victims of sexual assault.

Over the course of several days, we tossed ideas back-and-forth, but nothing spoke to the gravity of the anniversary and the issue. Then, one day Angela suddenly became nearly paralyzed with fear while standing at a checkout counter. Her body became frozen and her eyes glazed over, as she stared at a bag of zip ties hanging on a display. I asked what was wrong. She slowly and with great trepidation began to explain how zip ties were the only remaining 'trigger' that catapulted her back to the day she was abducted, as her assailant had bound her hands with them.

Since her abduction, Angela has become an outspoken sexual assault survivor — forming PAVE (Promoting Awareness, Victim Empowerment), a national organization devoted to educating college campuses about sexual violence; fighting for tougher laws against sexual violence; and giving lectures across the country. With this one remaining trigger, however, the strength and self-confidence she had developed over the last decade came to a screeching halt under fluorescent lighting and ambient music. It was at that moment that I knew we had haphazardly stumbled upon the way to mark her ten-year anniversary and to reach out to others devastated by sexual assault.

Creating New Ties

The Binding Project was launched on July 13, 2006. It is a nationwide program geared toward victims of sexual assault, their families, loved ones, and medical and health professionals who work with sexual assault victims. The goal — *Breaking Old Binds, Creating New Ties* — is to encourage people to heal by taking ownership over the zip ties and other controlling mechanisms employed by perpetrators, while simultaneously developing a new support network across the country.

First, *The Binding Project* encourages sexual assault survivors to reclaim control over their own lives by identifying who and what gives them strength in times of adversity. Participants in the project

are asked to choose a word of empowerment, write it on a zip tie binding, and wear it as a bracelet for a short period of time. While wearing the zip tie binding, participants are encouraged to reflect on their chosen word and remember that they are no longer victims but survivors of strength.

Second, *The Binding Project* encourages shattering the silence of sexual assault by developing a broad, diverse community of survivors who can turn to each other and gain a sense of solidarity and strength in reclaiming their lives. Participants are asked to submit a duplicate zip tie binding to *The Binding Project*. These bracelets containing each person's word of empowerment will be incorporated into a healing art piece to be displayed in Chicago and New York in 2007. Participants working together in schools, clinics, and rape crisis centers are encouraged to create a mini healing art piece of their own to galvanize the greater community against sexual assault.

With the thousands of words linking people together across the United States, the silence of sexual assault will be replaced with the clamor of words of empowerment.

Moving Forward

Since its launch in July, community response to *The Binding Project* has been highly positive. After years of being emotionally bound by the bindings used by her perpetrator, Angela's recovery has come full circle by wearing a zip tie with the word 'Lorraine,' the name of her grandmother. A California healthcare provider who introduced the project to her group wrote to the creators, "A young girl from our group took on the project and has done a wonderful job getting the community and our local college students involved. [She] really took ownership of the effort here and it has, I believe, been an amazing experience for her personally."

Binding Project Kits have been shipped out to multiple states, with new requests continuing to come in. The kit includes zip ties, educational information on sexual assault, and a PAVE DVD documentary of sexual assault survivors sharing their experiences. A community message board has been set up on the website, and participants are encouraged to write down their experiences in order to broaden the community of empowerment.

The creators of the project encourage professionals working with victims to visit the Web site www.bindingproject.com and learn more about the project. Additional information on PAVE is available by calling 1(877) 399-1346. ▼

Dr. Lisa Rainwater received her PhD from the University of Wisconsin in 2002, where she studied German and European cultural, social, and political movements. In 2000 she began her not-for-profit work as President of the Madison NOW (National Organization for Women) chapter. Currently, she is working as Indian Point Campaign Director for the renowned New York environmental group, Riverkeeper. She is a published author and translator. Her most recent article, "Invisible Poisons", on radioactive leaks at nuclear power plants across the country appeared as the cover story in the fall edition of *Waterkeeper Magazine*. For additional information you may contact Dr. Rainwater by email at lisa@bindingproject.com.