

## John and Alicia Interview

**Interviewer: First off John, I'd like to ask you a few things. How did you get to this point, what is your history?**

**J:** Basically growing up, you go through a lot of contributing factors. You, can't...a lot of people want to blame family, friends, girlfriends...you know, anything that happened through their life. And it doesn't matter what a person's background is or what kind of problems they've had. They've got to come to the realization they're making the choices, they're making the decisions...and...in my case I can't really say I had a great childhood or even in my teens and twenties, I just got my head fairly well screwed up. And um I think the turning point was the failure or what I felt was the part, the failure of my divorce. And then as time went by I got ...I just made a lot of wrong decisions, made a lot of wrong choices. And it put me in prison in '80 and then 17 years later I fell back into the same problem because I had become very complacent, believing that I could live a normal life. A person with my background cannot consider themselves a chance to live a normal life. You can't do that.

**How did you find out about COSA?**

**J:** Uh...when I had, I was violated back on October 6<sup>th</sup>, and I spent eight months fighting because I didn't believe the violation was real then I got a chance to talk with Ms. Ruth-Heffelbower. Um, but it was a suggestion on my parole officer that I meet with the folks at COSA and to be honest with you I was it was really a negative aspect. I figured, well um...I couldn't...

**You didn't believe it would help?**

**J:** I didn't, I didn't, I didn't...well, I'm a bit of a...I had learned to become a bit of an (isolationist). Living by myself...taking care of myself because I had to make those choices, make those decisions and I had to watch everything and every place that I went. That's what I got violated on because I had, uh, I like to jog...and I hadn't...the day that I had got violated I had went jogging and I had jogged near an area that I wasn't suppose to be near. I didn't realize that I was there. That was the problem. And when it was pointed out that I was...I argued about it. I wouldn't have done 8 months if I had, uh, if it had been pointed out that I had been violated on a real reason. But, uh, I had always believed I could only...the only one that was going to take care of me is me.

**J:** I had come to the point where I didn't trust people. I didn't trust anyone. I didn't even trust my parole officer. I didn't, I didn't even trust anybody I consider a close friend. The only one I really believed I could trust was me. And I had, I was making...trying to make proper decisions. And then when my parole officer asked me to uh talk with the folks at COSA I um, we finally got together over at Denny's for a moment and I would...I can't really say that even at that first meeting that I felt a strong connection. Umm...I saw people that was extremely well off...what I pictured as being extremely well off. Uh...I didn't know if there was any ulterior motives behind

that or what they was gaining from it and all that. I was running a lot of tapes in my head as to why. And then when we finally sat down over at the Mennonite Church, umm...there was 5 people and myself, and I pretty much just let it all hang out. I very briefly gave them a 100 percent synopsis of my entire background. And I guess I did it because I figured if they're going to help me they got to know me. They got to know me because they're not going to help me if they're gonna be negative against it. And it seemed like from that point on uh...it was a connection, it was like I can't, I can't, I can't explain the connection...but they accepted everything I said.

**Alicia, were you at that initial meeting?**

**A:** I was not at the initial meeting with John...

**J:** No, not at the initial meeting.

**A:** But I was at the first meeting of our circle.

**Alicia, how did you get to this point? What's your background?**

**A:** Well what's pretty remarkable to me is the similarity between John's and my stories. And I also had a, uh, pretty hideous childhood. It was very abusive, uh, I was uh a victim of childhood sexual assault at the age of 6. I was molested for six months to a year followed by a rape at that age and um primarily because my mother wasn't really a healthy person and was pretty violent, an alcoholic and a drug addict and she just had a lot of unhealthy men around. And um, between the age of 6 and 12 there were many men who abused me. And um...I too learned that I couldn't trust other people. I didn't trust women because I didn't trust my mother's judgment, and I didn't trust men, and I learned to believe that the only person I could trust was myself. And so I too spent a lot of time by myself in isolation and um...fortunately was very blessed that at the age of twelve (12), my father who had been divorced from my mother since I was five (5), he took us away. And, uh, just really gave me an opportunity to live a different life and to have different experiences where there wasn't all of that chaos and um...spent many of my young adult years healing and growing and really trying to um, heal those wounds, and had many wonderful people come into my life to help me do that, and learned how to trust again. And then um, about five (5) years ago I had a profound experience of forgiveness for my own offender, and had the opportunity to speak to an offender who's story was similar to mine...uh...in the Bay area. And I call him my surrogate offender and I had the opportunity to ask him questions that I couldn't ask my own because I'm not able to find him, and really found a profound and deep sense of forgiveness. Also I believe that um everybody deserves a second chance and that we need to walk through this life together. And so, um, I became aware of COSA and um, about uh 2 years ago and approached Clare Ann and said how can I help? I need to help. This is what I need to, not only want to be doing...this is what I need to be doing. For myself, uh, it's really been remarkable for my own healing to be a part of this process. And what can I do to help people like John to have the life they deserve as much as the life that I deserve.

**Now you're at the meeting at the church. So what are your feelings coming in? What are you thinking?**

**A:** I was a little nervous before coming into our first circle meeting, but sitting down in that room with John I felt a deep and profound sense of peace. It's difficult how to explain how you can sit in a room with a sex offender who's telling you some pretty horrible things and yet know this is exactly where you're suppose to be, and I knew in that moment that there's something about John and his willingness to be honest and open, and...um...John wanted help. And I wanted to help him.

**Was there a sense of identification with John in some way?**

**A:** Initially...I don't think there was any extra special connection for me with John. It was John had his story, I had mine. Over time there has been a very special connection developed between John and I...uh...his story is very similar to my story. The way he offended is very similar to the way that I was offended. And, um, John is able to have a relationship with me that, um, brings him comfort regarding his victim. And I am able to have a connection with John that, um, really brings me a sense of peace and hope that maybe my own offender has found some help along the way. And, uh, John and I have a very special friendship today.

**Let's back up a little again John. We're at the meeting at the church and you're just meeting these people. Tell me a little bit about how that went.**

**J:** It was like when I was sitting down with the folks at the first meeting, um...I think just like I said letting it all hang out and just looking to see what would happen. And I think it was funny like I said there was a connection because here was five people that didn't know me from Adam. I mean I had met Mrs. Ruth-Heffelbower, I had met Stan...um...I can't think of his last name. Uh, but anyway, um...I looked at these folks and I looked into their eyes and it seemed like they were listening. They weren't judging, they were listening, they were hearing me. And how else can you (long pause)...it's hard for me to ask for help. And I think when I opened up to the COSA group, like I did, it was like a plea for help and they were there.

**What was their reaction?**

**J:** Their reaction to me, they didn't, they didn't come across like anything was really...I mean like, they didn't come across hateful. They didn't come across angry, they didn't come across judgmental. They offered their support, they offered their help. SO it seemed like from that point on each time we met each Thursday, it we built a closer relationship. It's not (long pause), the COSA folks to me are more than just support...they're friends. Um...they're more than just people there offering a helping hand, they offer from their hearts. They, they, they, they...They want to give me strength. They share. They share their life as I share my life. Uh they share their daily problems with me and I share my daily problems with them.

**When did Alicia share that she was a survivor of abuse and how did that affect you?**

**J:** When Alicia told me about her background, I explained I think more deeply about my background and how one of my past victims was my own daughter. Um...my daughter moved back in with me when she was 14. Even though we tried to build a relationship, as a father and

daughter, the connection was no longer there. I had destroyed it. I had destroyed her trust, her faith, her belief. I had destroyed everything. She tried to be a daughter to me as I tried to be a father to her but I could see what all I had done. And then when Alicia and I talked...her telling me her background and me being able to express what I felt for my daughter for her...it was like(long pause) I was able to explain to Alicia how I felt and how much I regretted everything that I had done. And she was willing to listen and not be judgmental. She was able to express to me the hurt and the pain that she went through, um...in an odd sense she is like a surrogate daughter. She's not my daughter, I realize that, and I can't say I love her like a daughter, but I feel a connection there that is very important to me.

**Alicia, had you planned to share this history with him at some point? What prompted you to do that?**

**A:** I shared with John on our first meeting that I'm a victim/survivor and I had decided to do that before the first meeting because I, I didn't think it was fair to not share that very important piece of myself with our core member and it would have felt like a secret and I don't keep secrets and that's a very important secret not to keep and its important I felt for John to know that a victim can sit in a circle with him and support him. And that I was there also to hold him accountable as a victim from a victim perspective, that I expected John not to reoffend. And that, that he would have to come to every circle meeting and look at me in the eye, a victim, and say I have created no more victims. And I've done that because you're here to remind me and that's what I am to John in many ways. And I'm that to myself...I owe that to myself as a victim and a survivor to stand up for other potential victims and existing victims and take a stand and say no more...no more. This has to stop. And John has given me that gift every time I meet with him.

**How did your relationship outside the circle develop?**

**A:** Oh, I don't remember. When was the first time we hung out? Uh...Oh I know! My husband and I helped you move.

**J:** Yeah I was moving from one place to another and I was going to carry everything by hand, because I had everything I could move myself but I only had to go from one corner around a corner to another place, and (**A:** You were going to all yourself {laughs})...I was going to carry it all (**A:** he doesn't have much) my refrigerator, everything I was going to carry...I'm rather sturdy for my age, you know, and I figured I could do it, which I believed I could. (**A:** I know you would have done it.) But, uh, they offered to come over and it took us less than, (**A:** less than an hour) less than thirty minutes to move my stuff from one place to another. I didn't have a lot but there was, you know, some of it was fairly heavy.

**A:** But you turned us down. You turned us down, "no, no, no, don't go out of your way...don't want to be any trouble...no, no, no." And you're used to doing things independently, I said John, it's no big deal. I'll be there. I will be there...and, and I wanted to be there to show you we can be there for you both out of the circle, outside of the circle and in the circle. And, and, we showed up and it was easy. You were all ready to go, packed up and it was easy. (**J:** I had everything boxed.) Yeah, but I think you were surprised John.

**J:** Yeah I was surprised. It was, it was, it was, it was supportive and whenever they've offered to do something I've, it's been hard for me to say OK. Uh, I don't have a car, I travel by bus. Um, my bus fare doesn't cost me anything. So I go grocery shopping, I do all my shopping myself. I don't ask for help. I figure if I can't do it then it doesn't need to be done. But, uh, like I said it has been real difficult for me to learn to ask for help. Uh...I love to run. And uh, Alicia offered to be at a...to support me by bringing me to a run. And she was there when I took off, she was there when I came back and uh, seeing her smiling face waiting for me, waiving at me, even though I had to make a fast move to the bathroom. (all laugh) It was a real joy. Uh, when another core member (*he means circle member*) comes and gets a chance to pick me up if he can, if he can't he drives me home every Thursday. I mean you know he's there for support. I could catch the bus, but he's offered to drive and I'm trying to learn to accept the help from the folks that offer it. It's...I'm just, like I said; it was, I was afraid to trust because I was afraid I'd do something stupid. Like I don't go anywhere that I'm not supposed to be. In fact, I've got a more stringent parole schedule than even my parole officer has put on me. Um, I did that purposely because the last place I ever want to be is back in prison again. And there's, I don't know if this means anything here or not, but I have a double goal. Um, and I can't accomplish one without the other. One is not to die in prison. Uh...the other is that there not be any more victims. And I have to accomplish one to make sure I accomplish the other. One is supporting of other people but the other one is totally of supporting me, which I've stated I believe is very selfish, because I'm thinking of myself. But, uh, I'm going to accomplish that.

**Was this relationship a surprise to you, too?**

**A:** It has been a surprise to me. You don't start out in a COSA circle and think I'm going to meet this sex offender and help him move, or go on runs with him and um, yet over time as John and I became friends within the circle, I signed up as, in my mind, and each volunteer has their own boundaries about what they're willing to do and not do as a volunteer, but in my mind I'm just willing to do whatever it takes. And one of the key areas for offenders is isolation. It's a very high risk for reoffending. So I'm conscious of that. I think John's conscious of that. And so for me, being social in ways I can do that comfortably outside of the circle is important. But also, I want John to know I'm not just there for him Thursday afternoons. I'm there at three (3) in the morning if John's having a crisis. I'm there on a Friday afternoon if John needs help moving. I'm there when a parole officer shows up and he's giving you a hard time. And that's what John needs and that's what I need to be for him. And it's not an obligation for me. It's coming out of a pure desire to help and be John's friend. I didn't think I would label myself a friend of any core member. And yet I'm proud, very proud, today to say that John is a very good friend of mine and, and it's a very special relationship to me. So I'm there for John no matter what. And in fact I know John is there for me no matter what. If I'm having a hard time in life, uh, struggling with victim issues, I could call John and John will walk through that with me as well. It's a two (2) way street, and I think that's what makes COSA so powerful. Is that we're sharing this life together. We don't just show up and say, "John, how was your week? OK see you later." It's, "How was your week and here's how my week went..." So you get to hear about all of our ups and downs as well, so you know where just there, walking through this life together.

**J:** It's not just, it's not just Alicia. Alicia and I have a special friendship, but each (circle member) is like to me a family member. My family is scattered from hell to breakfast. (I'm not

sure if these were his exact words...it was too hard to make it out.) Uh, I've got people all over, but I have no idea where anybody is. I haven't even seen my daughter since 1990. Um, but with COSA over the last few weeks, over the last few months, each (circle member), whether they're able to come to the meeting or not...I know they're there in spirit. Because they're part of my circle. They're...I call them my brothers and sisters. I don't know how else to put it. They're my brothers and sisters.

**What kind of progress have you made since being in COSA, and how has the circle been involved in that progress?**

**J:** Uh...the circle in their involvement of my life is uh, well one of the members...I had a meeting I had to go to at um, one of the parole offices. One of the (circle members) waited outside for me. Drove me over there, and waited outside, and drive me, uh, back. He didn't have to do that. Um...the progress...I'm on my retirement. I had a triple bypass three years ago, two-and-a-half years ago. So basically, I'm on retirement. I'm not seeking work, so I spend a certain amount of time in my apartment. Otherwise I go shopping. If I need to call any one of the (circle members) I can call any one of them and talk to 'em. I have their numbers on my cell phone. Uh, if I need to meet with someone, I can call them and they'll say yeah, we'll make arrangements to meet. I don't think there's any (circle member)...if I, if I was having a problem and I needed to talk, I don't think they wouldn't go out of their way to be there. They'd find out a way to get there. Uh...they're my support system. They're my friends. They're about as close to family as I can get. Um...

**Where do you see yourself going from here?**

**J:** Well, with COSA? There's not much that I can give back to COSA. Not like they give to me. Uh, they give their time, their hearts their souls. All I can do is try to give back what I can and one of the things is sitting here in front of a camera. Uh, I don't have to do that...I don't *have* to do that, but, it's something COSA asked me to do because it means it's helping them. So, COSA's a lifetime to me. I have another group that I meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays. It supposedly ends around January. Whether I sign up and go another year with that I don't know. But the mental contract, the heart contract, whatever you want to call it that I have with COSA's a lifetime. I need them...and I'll never let go.

**So you have changed through COSA. Do you see yourself changing over the next year...or do you even look that far ahead?**

**J:** Basically I live day by day. I go out running, I do my shopping, uh, whatever I have to do. As far as looking into the future, I figure...um...I'm there for whenever COSA need anything from me. Um, I'll continue jogging, I'll get back in my golf. Um...and I'll follow all the requirements that I'm suppose to follow, plus the ones I've added on for myself. Nothing's going to change. I'm not going to live a life of an "isolatory" like I was.

**Alicia, part of the reason you got involved with COSA you said is some healing issues of your own. Looks like you've made some progress. Again, same question" Where do you think you're going from here?**

**A:** Oh, how many circles can we have?! There's nothing more important to me than knowing that there's one less victim. And if I get to the end of this lifetime and there is only one less victim, that's one less victim. And how can you count that anyway? Right? Our relationship is special; it's continuing to support COSA's growth. It's continuing to give victims a voice in the process, allowing victims to transform into survivors and continue their healing journey in whatever way that means.

**John, you're aware of what society's views of abusers are. Are they correct? What *should* they be? What do we need to know now that we maybe don't?**

**J:** People like myself, I believe have a mental illness...that is not to the point of um...psychologically not controllable. Um, it can be controlled. It can't be concurred. There's no such thing as a cure. I spent twenty-six (26) months in the Oregon State Hospital back in 1981-83. And I learned process and everything else that I thought was going to keep me straight for the rest of my life. There's no such thing as a cure. For people to look at persons like myself (long pause)...the one thing they don't have here, I believe, is a training program like they had in Oregon. That was the most stringent I had ever heard of in my life. And it worked for me. I don't know how it worked for others, but it worked for me for fourteen (14) years. Until I set myself up. They need training; they need support groups like COSA. They need, uh, instead of just throwing somebody into prison and burying them they need to work with that person and find out if he's got the capability of living a life out in the community. They're not going to do that with him locked up in a cell with nothing and no support, being afraid. On SNY yards, (they're) afraid to open their mouth, afraid to say anything. (They're) afraid for themselves, afraid for everybody else, afraid to get back on parole. They're not getting support, they're not getting help. As for people out in the community, there's a lot of sick people out there. There's a lot of sick people out there. But they're not getting the help that they need. It's not like a regular hospital. Regular hospital...uh, where a person with cancer's got some kind of (deadly) illness where they can get help. Mental illness such as a sex offender, a drug addict, an alcoholic, I don't think they've got enough for those people. They don't concentrate on it enough. They want to put all their money into putting people in the prison, and building more prisons and locking more people up, and putting more people in prisons. They're not helping the people that really need the help. If the person wants help and if he really shows, if the person, if, if he's shown he can be helped, if he's really got any...I'm trying not to be rude and say a word that I don't want to say. Um...if he's got the guts to look at himself and look at what he's done, then he's got the guts to seek help. And if he's got the guts to seek help, they need people out there that's going to help him. They don't need to spend the rest of their life in prison. They can live a life out in the community if they have backing, if they have people there to support them. Far more than just their family because mostly family doesn't want to hear what they've done. Mostly family doesn't want to hear the problems that they're going through. They think people out there that sit down and say, 'hey you know, we're here. We're here and we're going to be here.' And to me that's what COSA is. COSA's...there isn't anything I won't do for COSA.

**Alicia, same question to you. You are aware of society's attitudes about victim/survivors of (sexual) abuse. What do we not know that we need to know?**

**A:** About victims? I think the most important thing that people don't realize about victims, especially childhood victims but I don't want to discount adult victims of sexual violence, is it shatters your life completely and it never goes away. There's not a day that goes by that I'm not in some way affected by what happened to me; consciously or unconsciously. The way I dress, the way I cut my hair, how much I weigh, the food I eat, where I go, when I go, who I go with. Everything in my life revolves around what happened to me as a child. And people, it's uncomfortable; it's painful for people to see that in another person, because there is nothing they can do to change that. And just like John is saying that an offender has to know within him or herself, to have the guts to change, a victim has to have the guts to change as well; to not continue to live life as a victim, but a victor, to live life healed and whole and complete. Not that you forget, it's impossible to forget. And I wouldn't want to forget anyway because by not forgetting, I can turn my life and those experiences that I had into something for good. To help make this world a better place just as John is trying to do that himself. And so, um, for me the message about it is, it's not a little wound that just gets fixed and then we can ignore it. It's a lifetime change and impact forever...forever...it's huge...it's huge. And I tell you, for myself, I used to think, 'Lock em' up, lock em' up.' When I was angry and unhealed and just wanted to lash out, every sex offender in my mind could be locked up...forever. That's not reality, that's not the way it's going to happen. I think that's what our society is trying to do as long as possible. But eventually, these people have a right to be released, and to come back into our communities. And just like I don't believe we should be ignoring the wounds of victims, we should not be ignoring sex offenders by isolating them into particular parts of our community that are really kind of the pit of the area, and expect that we can just not be affected by that. And so, they're coming into our communities anyway, they're here, and we can either help them, or we can ignore them. If we ignore the wound of a victim it's not going to heal. If we ignore the wounds of an offender, it's not going to heal, and we're going to have a broken society.

**J:** I think one of the things I want to say at the closing of this, is that when an offender blames society or his past for his actions, he's a walking failure. An offender needs to look at himself, he needs to look at what he's done, and he needs to come to the point of saying, 'I can't change the past and I can't take away the hurt, but I can prevent it ever happening again.' And having people like COSA to stand by you, if you fail you're stupid and you deserve to fail. That's all I got to say.

**A:** And I'd just like to say that that, what you've said now just, John, it's the hope of COSA, it's the core of COSA. That, that we will be here for people like you who are reaching out their hand for help. Whether you don't know what's going to happen or not when you walk into that first circle. That is the hope of COSA, that you will step forward and walk this journey with us so that you can live a good life; you can live a life that you don't go back to prison, and you can live a life knowing that you are not going to reoffend to the very best of your ability and our ability to help you. And that's hope...that's hope, and that's wonderful.

**J:** And that's something I haven't had much of.

**A:** Yes. And I just thank you from the bottom of my heart, the bottom of my heart John; I just thank you for your commitment to not reoffending. Thank you.