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## The Media's Role in Perpetuating Hateful Stereotypes

by

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The Corry Journal, a local newspaper in Pennsylvania, recently broke a story that got picked up by Headline News (HLN): A 43 year old man was re-elected to fire Chief of his local volunteer Fire Department. This story would normally remain relegated to local news and never receive the attention of the big television news networks, but in this case it was deemed national news worthy due to the fact that fire Chief Gilbert was a "registered sex offender" for having molested a 4 year old. This previous conviction was nearly 20 years ago and wasn't kept a secret – his Mayor and fellow fire fighters were all properly notified of his previous criminal conviction, and they not only voted him their fire Chief once, but twice. There were obviously no laws or probation restrictions that prevented him from being a volunteer fire fighter. No rule was violated, nothing covered up. Yet the HLN anchor appeared righteously indignant, pointing out that "youngsters look up to fire fighters as role models" and that schools often go on field trips to the Fire Stations. She also pointed out that Chief Gilbert resigned the night before thanks to the intense media scrutiny and subsequent social media firestorm this story created.

Why are seemingly intelligent people indignant of a previously convicted sex offender doing something positive and becoming successful with his life? What exactly is the issue? Yes, his past crime was deplorable, but that was nearly 20 years ago and he's not only talked the talk about becoming healthy, he's walked the walk. Yes, he did the crime, but then he did his time and

repaid his debt

repaid his debt to society. He then successfully completed a period of supervised parole or probation. Twenty years is a long time to have proven himself, especially when in therapeutic probation. Twenty terms, recidivism rates are usually capped at 5 years. Gilbert chose to become and remain an upstanding tax-paying citizen who wanted to give back to his community by volunteering with his local fire department. In the correctional field, this is what is called "Restorative Justice" or "Repairing the Harm." There is no accusation or suggestion of any current complaint or even a hint of impropriety. The fact his fellow fire fighters and Mayor were fully informed of his past (and still fully supported him) gives further evidence of his character and willingness to work hard in trying to live a productive life. The original newspaper article in the Corry Journal gives a major clue to the underlying problem that the national news conveniently omitted: the mayor is quoted as saying that she "doesn't understand why the victim's mother won't drop this."

Sex Offenders are the latest group to be legally ostracized, stigmatized, segregated and openly harassed by society. The newsworthiness of the first black, gay, or female person in a leadership position is past, but there was a day when the media would have been similarly spun negativity on such stories. It's time to grow up. There are millions of Sex Offenders in our Country and many of them are good people who made a bad mistake. Chances are increasing that you already work or live near one (or two). There are so many restrictions against sex offenders that prevent them from being an active part of their community, frankly, I'm amazed (but pleasantly surprised) that Spartanburg had no laws prohibiting Gilbert from becoming a volunteer fire fighter. I bet they'll pass a new law or ordinance within months to take care of that "oversight." But Sex Offenders are people too. They need a place to live, and a place to work. They need to go shopping and have social outings with friends and family. In fact, it is exactly this support by an accepting community that is one of the biggest factors in helping them remain law abiding citizens.

The fact this story made national news is itself proof of the inherent inequities and injustices facing Sex Offenders who are simply striving to give back. Chief Gilbert is quoted as saying "every day I get up and try to do good." What is wrong with this dream? Why should the national news networks get involved in helping to destroy this man's life? Chief Gilbert's only "crime" was rising above the prejudice and stigma of being labeled a "Sex Offender" and choosing to become a successful and contributing member of his community. The solution to the sexual abuse epidemic isn't locking people up forever. It's holding people accountable for their actions, giving them the treatment and tools needed to live a law-abiding life, and then welcoming them back into our community with open arms and helping them make good, pro-social life choices.

The Media could have just have easily done a positive story about Heroes and redemption, discussing the challenges Chief Gilbert faced in overcoming his past issues and highlight his volunteer spirit in helping to give back to his community. He has redeemed himself, day by day. He didn't give up on life; he decided to give back to life. His community accepted him (maybe not everyone, but enough to elect and re-elect him to a fire Chief position). This is the amazingly positive and uplifting story that SHOULD have made the news to help celebrate his continued victory over his past mistakes and show other Sex Offenders that it is possible to have a constructive and meaningful life after being convicted of a sex offense.

Sexual abuse is wrong, but the dehumanization of people convicted of sex offenses is also abhorrent and needs to be stopped. It was the negative spin the news put on this story that reflects the hateful prejudices that inflamed public outrage. HLN and the Corry Journal should be ashamed of their involvement and role in perpetuating hateful stereotypes by promoting this "news" story and causing a gross injustice to a man who has repaid his debt to society.