

SOAR

On July 16th 2020, I graduated from the SOAR (Sex Offender Accountability and Responsibility) program. SOAR is a nine month to one year Cognitive Behavioral program. The program is intense, emotional, powerful and life changing.

The SOAR program began in 1991 at Hamett Correctional located in Killington, North Carolina. The purpose of SOAR is to teach men why they committed their crimes. And to help them develop empathy for their victims and give them tools that will contribute to them living as law-abiding citizens and not reoffending.

Men who participate in the program have committed heinous offenses such as: statutory rape, statutory sex offense, indecent liberties with a child/minor, child molestation, child pornography, sexual assault, and first degree rape.

The SoAR program is operated by three women and one male (who happens to be the secretary). Many people in prison do not believe in the work these women do with men who have committed heinous sex offenses. The women of SoAR believe in us. They do not judge us based on our offenses or circumstances.

The women of SoAR work to help us find healing and understand how our actions affected our victims, families and communities. They believe we deserve a second chance if we have received proper therapy and treatment. The proof of SoAR is in the pudding.

98 percent of SoAR graduates "never" return to prison. And the 2 percent that does return to prison its "never" for committing another sex offense.

People who have committed sex offenses recidivate far less than any other crimes in the United States. According to Maya Schenwar

and Victoria Law, the authors of "Prison By Any Other Name." Wide-ranging government studies have confirmed again and again, that people (convicted of sex offenses) are less likely to be rearrested than other formerly incarcerated people.

The Department of Justice (DOJ) own statistics verify that people with sex offenses have the lowest recidivism rate in this country for the past 30 years.

The SOAR program is voluntary. A person cannot be court ordered to participate in SOAR. Neither can a person who claims his innocence for committing a sex offense participate in the program. Any person who desires to be considered for the program must submit a psyche evaluation.

When I attended SOAR there were 20 men participating in the program. Eight of the men were white. Eleven of the men were black. And one man was Hispanic.

We were divided into two groups. Each group had a total of ten men. Every man in the group was assigned a PCC (Peer Counselor). Peer Counselors are former SOAR participants who completed the program. Many former participants become PC's, so they can make amends and help the therapists by serving their peers.

However, the SOAR program is the only program of its kind in North Carolina Prisons. The backlog for people seeking to participate in the program is immense. And since the Covid epidemic, a program that was six months has stretched out to eight months or longer. And transfers from prison to prison have slowed down to a snails pace.

There are many men with sex offenses in North Carolina prisons who refuse to take SOAR. Many men fear the retribution, ridicule and violence associated with being branded "sex offender." I've personally witnessed people convicted of sex offenses get extorted, pay commissary to live in the block or dorm, and beat up.

Administration personnel purposely assigned men with heinous sex offenses to blocks flooded with gang members, so they can be viciously attacked. But the SOAR program is a "safe place" for men with sex offenses.

My time in SOAR was educational and special. SOAR taught me I am not a monster, even though I committed an monstrous offense. The program taught me I am a warrior and human being. And SOAR taught me the term "sex offender" is an improper word used to described people with sex offenses.

The term offender has the implication of one who is still offending. And I have not offended or committed a crime in 15 years. I am not a sex offender. I am a man who has committed a sex offense. The term "sex offender" is a term used to dehumanized, demonized, stigmatized, ostracized, and categorized people with sex offenses.

During my time in SOAR, I completed twenty modules. I completed homework, cleaned the dorm, played games, watched movies, draw and colored pictures, wrote essays, poems, and memorable moments; performed skits, had group meditation, discussions, and exercise; kept a weekly journal and had one-on-one therapy sessions with my therapist and assigned PC.

When the program became mentally and emotionally taxing the therapists and PC's encouraged us to step away from the work. They warned us that the deeper we dive into the work, the more anger would rise to the surface. One group member quit the program during orientation. He was not ready to admit what he had done, or face the fact that he had ruined someone's life.

However, the biggest impact of SOAR for me came in the form of role play. In the roleplay I had to play the part of my victim. And someone in my group, who I chose, played the part of me, the perpetrator.

Leading up to the role play I had to present an essay using my victim's voice, of how I believed she felt the night I had "sex on" her. In SoAR we never say we had "sex with" our victims.

"Sex with" means consent. "Sex on" means without consent.

For the men participating in SoAR most of our victims were under age. According to the Federal Statute of the United States, any person under the age of 18 is a child. A person under the age of 16 is considered by law to be nonautonomous.

Autonomy is the capacity for rational adults to make their own decisions. Any person under the age of 18 is believed to have a diminished form of autonomy. This means children lack the capacity to make rational decisions. The medical term for this is weak paternalism.

My victim could not make a rational decision

because I silenced her voice, I groomed her to do my bidding in the bedroom. She was an object I used to satisfy my own selfish sexual gratification. And once the atrocious sexual exploitation and degradation of her body was complete - I discarded her.

Before I read the essay I had written, my therapist instructed me to sit in the middle of the room, in a chair bearing my victim's name. I began to read the words that did little to justify what I had stolen from her. In my attempt to be God's gift to women - I stole something innocent, sacred, valuable and of virtue. And in the process I murdered a part of her.

In SoAR, I learned, "Sexual Assault is Soul Murder!"

Before I could get through the first paragraph of my essay my lips began to quiver. My body began to shake. And tears began streaming down my face. And it became unbearable to read in my victim's voice what I believe she felt the night I had "sexed" her.

When I finished my essay, I received instructions to wait in an isolated area in the dorm. While I waited the PC's created the scene from the night I first had "sex on" my victim. They had me wait alone in the dorm to build anticipation for the role play. And to remind me that my victim waited in fear and anticipation every time I had "sex on" her.

My PC came fifteen minutes later and escorted me back into the room. Upon reentering the room I noticed my friend, who I chose to play me, the perpetrator, sitting in a chair. He instructed me to lay down on the floor and watch TV. Five minutes later he spoke the words I said to my victim that night, "get ready for bed."

I walked over to the makeshift bed the PC's created and laid down on it. I cover myself with the blankets they provided. The lights in the room were turned off. The room became engulfed in darkness. The role play was now being recorded.

As I laid on the makeshift bed, the blanket I

had over me, slowly was removed. I felt a pair of hands touch my legs and I cringed. Even though we could not do physically what I had done to my victim the night I had "sex on" her, the recreation of that night seemed real. At the end of the roleplay they used a lubricant oil on my legs to serve as ejaculation. I sobbed uncontrollably.

At the conclusion of the roleplay the lights were turned back on and they played the video for me to watch. As I watched the video I cried. I thought about all the times I had "sex on" on my victim. I thought about all the times I offered her money for sexual favours. I made her believe her self-worth equalled twenty dollars.

When I felt the lubricant oil hit my legs I felt dirty, ashamed, guilty, used, violated, unwanted, unloved and humiliated. And in that moment, my heart broke for my victim. For the first time in my life I experience empathy for another human being. For the first time in my life I understood the seriousness of my nefarious actions.

Playing the role of my victim changed my life. Sexual assaults occur everyday in this country. Many sex offenses against children are underreported.

North Carolina Prisons seem to be filled with men of color from low-income communities who have committed sex offenses. Sex offenses are an epidemic in poverty stricken communities. And these communities have limited resources and high crime rates.

Even though I have received intense and life changing therapy there will be people who only choose to see me as a monster and sex offender. There will be people who choose to see me as a leper and unclean.

One of the biggest misconceived myths and fears in society is that people with sex offenses upon release will reoffend over and over again. This is a false narrative created in part by the Supreme Court, who in a 2003 ruling affirmed that the addresses, names, and photographs of those labeled sex offenders be posted on

the internet, making the sex offender registry public.

Sex offender registration serves no purpose except to shame and humiliate the more than 900,000 people who are currently on it. The data does not support that the registry reduces sex crimes or keeps communities safer.

Believe me when I say that I want our children and communities to be safe. But not by using political ploys such as life-time monitoring and the sex offender registry to punish a marginalized group of people, who have already been punished and served their time.

And here's a side note: 95 percent of sex offenses reported to the police every year in this country are not committed by someone on the registry. This is because most sex offenses are committed by people closest to you and your children. Rarely, does sex offenses happen by a complete stranger.

The person I had "sex on" was my niece. Betraying my niece's love and trust is my story. Committing a sex offense is what I have done. I am not a saint by any stretch of the imagination. And I'm no longer the man I was when I had "sex on" my niece.

Just because a person may have committed an monstrous act it does not mean they are a monster. It does not mean they cannot be rehabilitated and change their behavior. And it does not mean they are undeserving of a second chance.

I write to share my story, educate, and sound the alarm, to the plight that people with sex offenses face in prison and upon release. I understand my efforts may fall on deaf ears. Because I must live in the world as it exists and not as I would have it to be.

I may not be able to change the hearts and minds of how people view me. But I have the power within me to have empathy for

any person who has ever been sexually abused. And thanks to treatment, I have the knowledge and the power to live the rest of my life by the same motto, "No More Victims!"