

# Fearless

*Finding strength in community*



by Paul Hanley

**S**OME THINGS ARE just hard to talk about. Many years ago, I attended court-ordered therapy for a sexually-based offense. I wasn't interested in making friends. I'm a survivor of long-term childhood sexual abuse, and I didn't want to be hurt again by dangerous people. I thought I was different than the other group members, that I was better than "them."

Flash forward twenty-two years, to 2017. I had just published a book called "Roller Coaster to Hell and Back" about the journey of rehabilitation and recovery I started after I committed my offense. After over two decades of blood, sweat, and tears, I felt called to turn my mess into my message. I wanted to help others break the cycle. I wanted to help people heal and prevent sexual abuse.

About that time, I was invited to speak at a "Fearless" meeting. Fearless meetings are support groups for people on the registry and their loved ones. Here I was again, dealing with "them." This time, though, I didn't judge. By now, I knew that everyone has a core of precious humanity in their heart, no matter their past.

Still, I was scared to give the talk. I never dreamed that soon after my presentation I would join the Fearless group knowing that "they" are now my brothers and sisters. I never thought I'd find a group of people with whom I fit in.



Paul Hanley receiving the "Perseverance Award" from AZRSOL co-director, Pat Borden.



Paul reads from his book, 'Roller Coaster to Hell and Back' to a group of people attending a Fearless meeting.

*“I remember crying on the way home after my first meeting because I felt as though I finally had a safe place to talk with others facing the same hurdles and challenges.”*

I soon learned that I was not the only one who felt this way. Terri has been attending Fearless groups almost from their beginning.

“When you have a loved one convicted of any crime and sentenced to years away from you, it is devastating,” Terri told me, explaining why Fearless groups are so important to her. “But when it is a sexual offense, you lose so many people in your life—even other family members—because those are the crimes nobody wants to address. Your only hope for people to talk to who can understand all of what you’re dealing with is in a group of people feeling and dealing with the same issues.”

I knew exactly what Terri was talking about. I remembered my time in therapy years ago and finally understood what a difference it makes to be among a group of people who truly understand what I am going through.

“Along with the support and friendship is a great deal of education,” Terri continued. “We regularly have guest

speakers who have direct knowledge of what our loved ones face while incarcerated as well as the difficulties faced when released. The Fearless group is invaluable to me and I see so many others benefiting from the group.”

Our Fearless meetings start with a reading of the “courtesies,” which are the rules we follow to keep the meetings safe for everyone. Then comes a presentation by a speaker. A member named Vicky, who had been attending Fearless meetings for about six months, said she is excited that she has already heard from many speakers who are experts in their respective areas of criminal justice.

“We have heard from public defenders, probation officials, and former inmates, all of whom have provided insight into navigating life on the registry,” Vicky told me.

Members of Fearless groups often help each other deal with issues related to being on a public registry, like getting probation or parole officers’ permission for activities, advocating for ourselves, and building relationships with people who can help us succeed. The group does not give legal advice, but they can often help Fearless members find good lawyers or other resources.

One of the founders of this particular Fearless group explained, “I learned about the Fearless groups when I lived in another state. I felt very alone with a son in prison and learning about the registry and terms of release was overwhelming. It was at the Fearless meeting that I met the most wonderful and supportive people. I found that we were all in this together, and we were able to share our feelings and learn from each other. I remember crying on the way home after my first meeting because I felt as though I finally had a safe place to talk with others facing the same hurdles and challenges.”

But after moving to Phoenix, she found there was no Fearless group in the area.

“I was introduced to a local advocacy organization and together we formed a Fearless group. Today, we regularly have 18–40 members attending our monthly meetings and over 200 people receiving our minutes from the meetings. We have brought in many speakers and made wonderful contacts in our city. I couldn’t imagine my life without the Fearless group.”

Pat Borden, along with her husband Terry, runs AZRSOL, a local advocacy organization for people on public registries. Pat explains the origins of the Fearless group in her area. >>

» “The Fearless group started as five people in our living room and has become an integral part of the mission of AZRSOL. As an Italian mother and grandmother, I believe it is important to nourish the body as well as the soul. Because of that belief, desserts and coffee are an important part of what we offer to the attendees of our group. We even had a Thanksgiving pot luck to celebrate our year of individual and collective successes in living a life on the registry.”

AZRSOL, an affiliate of the national organization NARSOL, recently scored a huge victory when they were able to help an inmate in one of Arizona’s prisons realize his goal of getting a Fearless meeting going in his unit. Volunteers from AZRSOL go into the prison and facilitate these monthly Fearless meetings.

I was given the honor to speak at one of the prison Fearless meetings. When I spoke at the prison, the guys welcomed me and ate up what I had to say about succeeding on the outside, even with a sexually-based offense on your record. And there was a lot of expertise among the inmates already, so when it came time for them to share, I ended up learning more than I had taught. Fearless meetings in prisons are a powerful way to help inmates help themselves.

I have grown tremendously attending and speaking at Fearless groups. At one time, I didn’t see past the shame people piled on me for “letting” myself get sexually abused, and then abusing someone else. Only when I looked for my value in my own eyes did I see past the shame to the real, precious human inside me.

Mirror work is the most helpful recovery and rehabilitation therapy I’ve ever used. The power of looking intently in the mirror comes from seeing the goodness and beauty in yourself. The strength. The creativity. The wonder. From seeing a fantastic person in the mirror to acting like a fantastic person is a very small step.

Talking to people at Fearless meetings can be like looking in a mirror that shows you your true, good self. With enough time, your PO, coworkers, and other people critical to your success can’t help but see what your fellow Fearless members see radiating from you, because you are acting like the wonderful person you are.

A Fearless group could be the start of the most powerful support network you will ever have. You can make friends with people who are going through what you are, and you can help each other succeed. ■

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Paul Hanley is the author of five books, including “Roller Coaster to Hell and Back: A True Story of Sexual Abuse and New Hope.” Paul works for himself as an author and editor helping people write and publish their stories. Most recently, Paul was the recipient of AZRSOL’s Perseverance Award. To contact Paul, visit [pauldhanley.com](http://pauldhanley.com).



*Speaking to a Fearless meeting inside the Arizona State Prison Complex, Paul talks to the men about the importance of looking for the good in ourselves and others.*

Fearless Groups are a mix of the 12-Step structure familiar to many and Circles of Support, which have proven very helpful in allowing former offenders of all sorts to successfully reintegrate into society. Brenda Jones, Executive Director of the National Organization for Rational Sexual Offense Laws (NARSOL), introduced Fearless Groups in 2016, though some groups have been around longer. NARSOL encourages individuals and organizations to launch local, independent Fearless groups. For more information about starting a Fearless group in your area, visit NARSOL’s Fearless page at <https://narsol.org/projects/support/fearless/> and contact NARSOL at [contact@narsol.org](mailto:contact@narsol.org). The website explains the basic concept of Fearless groups:

“These groups are much MORE than support groups, however. Their goal is two-fold: first, to provide a strong community for persons who find themselves marginalized and ostracized by our society at large, bringing hope and empowerment and, second, to educate group members on such wide-ranging topics as advocacy, self-improvement, and civil rights.

“The ultimate goal is to empower registrants and their loved ones to succeed in spite of our society’s restraints so that they may become a part of the solution. Meetings contain two key components: a presentation of some sort that will inspire and educate Fearless members and a sharing/discussion component where members can apply what they have heard, connect with one another, and build community.”