

Paul Shannon at NARSOL's conference awards banquet "Is this really the way we want to live?"

written by Paul Shannon | June 22, 2022



By Paul Shannon . . . To begin, I'd ask all of you to just look at this group and realize how amazing it is that such a gathering even exists – I'd ask you to consider what a great bunch of people we have as we take on the most volatile and difficult of issues that face us – and all the commitment and courage and compassion that fills this room as we battle for the soul and sanity of our country.

When we started RSOL in 2007, given the mood that existed in the country, we felt it would be too dangerous for people on the registry to actually get involved. It was the wives and mothers and intimate partners of registrants who provided the backbone for the project.

When we held our first national conference in Boston in 2009,

we were so afraid that we would be attacked by mobs with pitchforks that we didn't even divulge the location of the meeting until after people had registered.

We launched RSOL fifteen years ago with a manifesto I published in the Counterpunch online magazine. It began:

There is today in our country a growing threat to our legal system, to the rights of all of us, to the quality of life of children, and to common sense. This threat has been fanned by prosecutors, nurtured by the media, and ignored by those who usually speak out against such dangers.

In its most narrow sense, this threat can be defined as the particular approach to sexual deviance embodied in ever-more-draconian laws against all behaviors labeled "sex offenses" – including those committed by minors – and in the sex offender registries of every state and the federal government. In this approach to sex offenses, slander, hysteria, and demonization often replace reason, solid research, and proportionality.

But more broadly, the danger consists of an all-out assault on fairness, on the reputations of some of our most caring people, on necessary social relationships, and on our critical ability to confront the deepening social paranoia of 21st century America.

It went on with many specifics and then it closed:

The present crusade is spreading fear and loathing across our society. Our society does not need more fear and loathing. It needs trust and dignity and redemption. At present there is no telling how far this self-destructive approach to social problems related to sexuality can go unless people capable of courage, compassion, and common sense stand up to stop it and turn our country's attention to real solutions to our problems.

We were stunned by the widespread response from people of all walks of life across the country. 1500 people signed on (including Chrysanthi Leon, our first keynoter of this conference; Dr. Fred Berlin from Johns Hopkins; and historian Howard Zinn) leading to the formation of RSOL.

Tonight, though, I'd like to briefly call your attention to something mentioned in this manifesto. Specifically, the notion of confronting the deepening social paranoia of 21st century America and turning our country's attention to real solutions to our problems.

For the impact of the insidious attitudes we are dealing with go far beyond our group here, go far beyond the registrant community.

Yes, we know that the registry, residency restrictions, job and housing discrimination, and civil commitment have terrible impacts on registered citizens and their families. But the reality is that there is no one out there whose life is not negatively affected by these ideas that poison our lives.

I offer you the idea that the feelings of fear and loathing directed toward those accused or convicted of a sex offense undermine the ability of every person in this country to live out their own lives, to tell their own story in this world, and to find the happiness that they and their children are capable of.

The mantra, of course, by those who presently oppose us is "protect the children." But this is really our call, to protect the children – and not just from sexual violence but from the fear of not being free, the fear that they are surrounded by demons on every side, the fear of mythical dangers – so they can both live their lives more fully and learn how to protect themselves from actual dangers.

And the harm spreads into many corners of American life. There is no one out there whose life is not negatively affected by

these ideas.

How can anyone's life not be curtailed with the threat of false accusation or misunderstanding leading to shaming and social banishment hanging over our heads?

Lenore Skenezy , our banquet speaker several years ago, documents the tragic things we do to ourselves and our kids in daily life America in the name of protecting them.

- A man helping a child in trouble is suspect instead of it being the most natural thing in the world;
- Life is perilous for male coaches of female athletes;
- Men avoid becoming teachers for elementary school kids for fear of parents' suspicions – even though their presence in the classroom would be most helpful to many of those kids;
- Helping a lost little girl find her dad gets you beaten to a pulp;
- In fact, it is well known that men refuse to help children out of fear of being suspected of being “after kids.”

Is this really the way we want to live?

The fact is that this draconian legal regime and belief system around sexual offending directly impact only a small fraction of the population. Unless we are joined in our efforts to rid our country of this curse by millions of other fellow citizens, we will always face an uphill battle.

So an important part of our work is to help our neighbors to see that their lives will be enhanced if they ditch the registry and allow themselves to be freed from the fear and hatred that gave birth to it.

So we engage in specific battles about the registry, residency and travel restrictions, and the curse of lifetime civil commitment and the beliefs that undergird them. But beyond

this huge task, I would ask you to see these specific battles in the context of a broader struggle, a critical struggle, to call our country to its senses, to distinguish truth from falsehood and sanity from lunacy.

To value redemption over condemnation, justice over hysteria, respect over shaming, and our common brotherhood and sisterhood over all that is tearing us apart.

The problem is that, as a country, we have substituted the pursuit of demons in our midst for the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness.

We are a country that lives in fear. Instead of addressing our many problems – including sexual violation – in ways that make sense, we seek to destroy the monsters that we believe infect our society and whose destruction we think will make us safe.

Look at what we have done in pursuit of these demons at home and abroad. We have become like Ahab, chasing the great white whale, hoping to destroy it, to his own peril and the peril of his entire crew.

Who will free our country from such madness? Who will carry the torch of common sense, fairness, justice, and even forgiveness?

Who, if not those who themselves are victims of such demonization and madness and who stand at the epicenter of the hysteria from which this emotional plague spreads out to all the other parts of the body politic as we address more and more of our complex problems within the framework of panic and hysteria?

For this lunacy infects the minds and hearts of every one of us, making it impossible for us to address our social problems – such as sexual violation – in ways that could solve them and even begin to bring healing.

We throw billions away trying to destroy monsters of all kinds instead of supporting the lives of real people who carry heavy burdens on their shoulders as they deal with heartbreak and illness and loneliness and economic pressures and homelessness.

Is this really the way we want to live?

This is the question we need to address to our neighbors and fellow citizens, whether they live in the red world or the blue world: Is this really the way we want to live? – squandering our opportunity to make our country into a place where we all find the respect and support and connection that all of us need.

“Friends,” we need to figure out how to tell them, “can’t you see that banishing people accused or guilty of a sex offense – as well as other monsters you seek to slay – is undermining your own lives and the lives of your children?”

“That you are causing our country irreparable harm at a time when we most need to come together to effectively address our problems – whether they be sexual offending, the drug epidemic, pandemics, our mental health crisis, climate catastrophe, crippling social polarization, or war and peace?”

It is time to come to our senses, to base our lives on reality, so we can make our country into what we really want it to be.

As we struggle for justice for ourselves, and for the registrant and civilly committed community, I hope we will all take up this broader challenge on behalf of all of us, so that in fighting for our own dignity, we are also fighting for the dignity, respect and justice that we all deserve.

Thank you for your attention. And thank you for your work.