

Philly Stands Up: Inside the Politics and Poetics of Transformative Justice and Community Accountability in Sexual Assault Situations

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PHILLY'S PISSED AND PHILLY STANDS UP EMERGED IN RESPONSE TO A SERIES OF SEXUAL assaults that consumed the anarcho-punk community during a summertime festival in Philadelphia in 2004. Both arose as expressions of a community grounded in "do-it-yourself" anarchist politics, accustomed to political organizing in times of need, particularly times of crisis. Though our community differs from those earlier days, Philly Stands Up has gleaned informative lessons from nearly one decade of on-the-ground work responding to sexual assault situations and directly engaging people who have caused harm. Our organization resists dichotomous approaches to this work, balancing national organizing with local education and community-based antiviolence work. This article is an account of our journey, organizational transformations, lessons learned, and the politics developed through this vital organizing.¹

Roots and Radicals

Philly's Pissed (Pissed) and Philly Stands Up (PSU) started as volunteer collectives consisting almost entirely of white, cis-gendered,² mostly heterosexual but also queer, punk-affiliated anarchists in their early 20s to late 30s. When a series of high-profile sexual assaults devastated the punk community of West Philly in the summer of 2004, some community members decided that they had had enough. West Philly punks who were survivors and bystanders to sexual assault that summer and throughout their lives were "pissed," and they got organized.

Philly's Pissed set out to be a group by women for women. When they first organized, the collective viewed women as a category of people who are primarily

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targeted by sexual assault. Therefore, women—as the survivors of this violence—were best equipped to provide emotional, psychological, legal, and general support. As in many communities in the United States, the women who established Pissed had had a lifetime of informal experience in supporting friends or family through the trauma of sexual assault. Enough was enough, in their eyes, and they decided to get organized around this work.

Shortly after Philly's Pissed was established, men in the West Philly anarcho-punk community responded. They recognized that they had a role to play and organized a complementary collective that would work with men who had perpetrated sexual assault. A vibrant queer community existed in West Philly in 2004, some of whom were involved in these groups, but months passed before a critique challenged this traditional gender bifurcation. The shift came from PSU as questions of internal accountability brought about a radicalizing opportunity.

In October 2004, a large crowd had gathered for the monthly PSU meeting. Earlier that week, a member of Pissed had pulled aside one of the few original members of PSU to say that it was necessary to raise a tough issue at the forthcoming meeting. Without betraying the anonymity of the survivor with whom Pissed was working, this senior collective member called out another person in PSU ("Charlie") for sexual assault. Charlie was highly regarded within the punk scene and was widely admired by local anarchists. He vehemently denied any culpability, insisting that he could not possibly have been involved in a situation. Nor was there any gray area of misunderstanding related to sexual assault, sexualized violence, or a crossing of personal, physical boundaries. The room unquestioningly agreed with Charlie. He was a stand-up guy. Any further pursuit of this situation would be a waste of time.

Among the nearly 30 members attending the meeting, only two men thought otherwise. No one was aware of a back-story, but in their minds that did not matter. If someone was being called out for sexual assault, was it not PSU's *raison d'être* to pursue the situation and hold that person accountable? Despite changes, overlooking situations of sexual assault remained the norm in most anarchist/punk communities.

Those gendered dynamics reproduced previous iterations of men's groups in which men rallied around one another, at times falling over themselves to demonstrate allegiance to men of stature. This familiar hallmark of patriarchal behavior has not diminished within grass-roots, politically active groups. On the contrary, thinly veiled male supremacist public declarations and social posturing are rendered more legible by the discrete structures and tight connections within pockets of organized communities.

Consensus decision-making was the default process for PSU. Lacking consensus to ignore the situation and the "accusations" against Charlie, PSU's mandate was to persist with an accountability process. Since time had run out during that meeting, a date was set for the November meeting. When only two people showed up for the next meeting, they still met as PSU. The two met again following week, but were joined by a new member. By December, three more people had been recruited to

the group, and PSU has, since then, remained a small, semi-closed collective of committed organizers who do not believe that status can elevate someone beyond reproach.

Reconstitution and Shifting Points of Unity

Formerly a vast amalgamation of straight and closeted men, PSU now became a tight-knit posse consisting of out queer and gender-nonconforming members. For the first time, the group was not all white. It was semi-open, with new members requiring approval to join the collective, although anyone could request this privilege.

Each collective had been characterized by casual, consensus-based decision-making processes and had begun as open groups, in which anyone who attended a meeting automatically “joined” the group. Pissed and PSU adopted explicit Points of Unity—principles to which all members agreed and that spelled out the commitments that grounded their work. These living documents were constantly amended to reflect the shifting politics of our nascent movement and its members, and were a critical reason for the endurance of both groups. Since much of our work is with men who have caused harm, our members must hone a sharp analysis of patriarchy and apply these understandings to struggles with internalized male supremacy that arise in our interventions.

In the process of joining the collective, new members are asked to review the Points of Unity. Prospective members must affirm the document’s politics or submit changes to improve it. Disagreements are understood to challenge and develop the collective as a whole. For example, one suggestion asserted that assaults were not limited to women; anyone, regardless of gender, sexual identity, or any other factor can be a survivor of sexual assault, and, likewise, anyone can be a perpetrator of sexual assault. Several PSU members, including cis-gendered men, realized and confided in the group that they too were survivors of sexual assault. In this light, PSU formally acknowledged that it would cease to be a “men’s group” and invited people of any gender identity to join the organization and work with people who have caused harm. Gender and cultural diversity expanded the reach of the individuals and communities with whom we felt equipped to work, thereby strengthening our work.

Since our organizing revolved around countering sexual assault, we discussed how fellow members could only be effective if they had a solid analysis of the interconnectedness of systems of oppression, including the dynamics of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, ableism, citizenship status, etc. A shift at Pissed followed soon, so that their organizing expanded to include people of any gender in their collective. This strengthened their capacity for working with survivors of all gender identities. Over time, members of the Pissed and PSU collectives moved fluidly between the organizations whenever the work became overwhelming or the other group was more suited to an individual’s needs. Following

the dissolution of Pissed, former members of each group were instrumental in the formation of the Philly Survivor Support Collective in 2011.

The relationship between Pissed and PSU shifted over time. In the first year, accountability went one way, with PSU sharing its notes and business matters with Pissed. Pissed issued work assignments. PSU's politics and Points of Unity were informed by Pissed, they followed Pissed directives, and were beholden to the survivors at the core of each accountability process. In the early years, accountability meant "consequences," ranging from smear campaigns using fliers that warned people of a perpetrator's misdeeds to sanctioned violence in retaliation for uncooperative offenders.

Both organizations eventually grew uncomfortable with this relationship. We all recognized that to be effective, the groups needed to be respected, independent, and autonomous. This goal was impeded so long as PSU remained subservient to Philly's Pissed. That dynamic drained rather than sustained energy, and it bred mistrust instead of generosity between the groups. Over time, Pissed members developed increasing unease with a politics of spite and retaliation. With PSU dealing with perpetrators, enough distance was created between members in Pissed and the "screw-ups" in our community, as some Pissed members called them. The integrity with which PSU approached its work increased the comfort level within Pissed as PSU grew more autonomous and eventually became independent (while remaining closely aligned). This somewhat accidental structure afforded members of Pissed the distance they needed from those who had caused harm. They could give their own needs as organizers and survivors the attention needed for healing. In short, the less energy they put into chasing down people engaged in assaulting others, the more capacity they had to fully invest in the healing and prosperity of survivors.

Who We Are Now

Despite the enhanced capacity Pissed gained from transforming its politics and relationships, it would be too little to sustain the group and prevent burnout. After over four years of organizing, its membership diminished to the extent that the few remaining members could not support the weight of the work. In 2008, the organization dissolved, but its legacy was a punk-anarchist community in West Philadelphia with a sophisticated perspective on sexual assault. The efforts of Pissed and PSU are at the foundation of that complex understanding.

PSU, an unincorporated, grass-roots volunteer collective, has between four and eight members. It seeks to create community-based responses to sexual assault through direct involvement with those who have caused harm in those situations. Central to its organizing efforts are the needs of survivors of sexual assault, whom members believe, support, and attempt to re-empower. PSU meets face-to-face with people who have caused harm and works with them to understand and change their behavior. Much energy is dedicated to public education, with the aim of preventing future assaults, fostering a culture of sexual responsibility, and cooperating with

efforts to abolish prisons. Our demographic profile has changed over the years. All members live and work in West Philadelphia and are primarily connected to queer, trans, and gender nonconforming communities with explicitly left politics. All of us are in our 20s and 30s. We work with youth and elders and support parents as organizers.

PSU pays no one to do this work. Our usual business is conducted during two-hour weekly meetings, supplemented by special work sessions and retreats. Self-education is part of our routine and we designate every fourth meeting to contemplating complicated questions and polemics or to strengthening our analysis and expanding our knowledge. Our stable core of five to six people receives support from concentric circles of ex-members, interns, and allies in the form of childcare, information technology, or direct work with people who have caused harm. Although their numbers have never exceeded the size of the core collective, the outer ring has been invaluable in sustaining the group.

Above all, we are friends. Even when incorporating a new member into the core, the level of trust and intimacy that this work demands always drives us to nurture genuinely close friendships. We feel accountable to one another with respect to tasks and logistics, political allegiance, representations of our work and our philosophy, and the responsibility to maintain our reputation. The latter is an irreplaceable currency that gives us the access needed to work with people who have caused harm; survivors also gain the trust that restorative elements can be infused into demands and the process of healing.

From Restoration to Transformation

Working on individual situations can become a quagmire, but those of us in Philly Stands Up and Philly's Pissed nonetheless held regular discussions about alternative justice philosophies. What are we really doing? How does it fit into frameworks of justice? What systems and practices have other communities created elsewhere or in the past to think through hurt, healing, and accountability?

In the winter of 2006, one member and a friend from our community introduced the notion of "restorative justice" to both collectives. We were instantly and irrevocably intrigued. Shortly thereafter, we plunged into a torrent of research. We incorporated generative discussions into our weekly meetings and the groups jointly held analysis-building potlucks. A recurring topic was the assertion in the restorative justice (RJ) literature that sexual assault cases were among the few instances in which these processes did not work or could not be applied. We questioned why sexual assault would be exceptional. Why was something that felt "so right," professed to be so wrong? In fact, stories of the origins of, experimentation with, and implementation of RJ in First Nation, indigenous, American Indian/Native American communities indicated that sexual assault had been successfully addressed using a RJ framework.³

The primary inspiration PSU derived from RJ was the validation of our approach to working with people who have caused harm. Rather than shunt them off as

pariahs, we recognize them as complex, connected members of our community who are thus worth keeping around. In part, this reconceptualization popularizes the idea that when sexual violence takes place, everyone is affected. Therefore, all of us must heal from the incident. All of us have a role to play in holding the person who triggered the harm accountable, and in rebuilding the trust we lost in them due to their behavior. Our work departed from traditional RJ practice mainly in that we never asked the survivor to sit down with the person who caused harm. In the aftermath of a sexual assault, this experience would be tremendously retraumatizing and unproductive.

Still unresolved on the matter, we attempted to overcome the limitations of RJ by salvaging its core principle: that, in these situations, we are all affected, we all need to heal, and we are all involved in restoring the community back to the way it was. Yet, in the process of restoration, *what is it that we are restoring?* Would these efforts lead us to the same troubled, problematic world plagued with patriarchy, homophobia, fatphobia, insecurity, heterosexism, racism, anxiety, depression, ableism, and all of the other conditions that feed into sexualized violence in the first place? If sexual assault is a catastrophe that rips through an entire community, how can that crisis be transformed into an opportunity? Could restoring community also advance our work toward a socially and economically just world?

PSU members observed that the people moving through our accountability process emerged as changed individuals. The goal of restoration aside, people were never the same after a sexual assault. That was true even if survivors had healed and those who caused harm had taken ownership of their actions, interrogated their own egos, and reflected on their frames for analysis and interpersonal relationships. People involved in the accountability process now so clearly understood what had taken place that they augmented their behavior and relationships.

In short, our efforts toward justice produced a *transformative* impact. We plugged into the work that queer, gender-nonconforming, and women of color-led organizations were doing to explore and promote a transformative justice (TJ) framework. For the first time since the reappraisal of our work had begun, the restless disquiet that had permeated our attempts to graft restorative justice onto our organizing work was hushed. Moreover, TJ offered a conceptual apparatus that directly linked our sexual assault work with the various political projects and leanings in our lives, from economic justice to radical mental health, and, most substantially, prison abolition. Working from a transformative justice framework means that PSU acknowledges the broader systems of oppression (e.g., racism, male supremacy, capitalism, and the prison-industrial complex) that instigate sexual assault. Furthermore, we do not assign sole culpability for the assault on the perpetrator or the “person who has caused harm.” Rather, we ask: What did the community do to create and support safer spaces or to ensure cultural competency in communicating sexual needs, desires, and boundaries?

Transformative justice in situations of sexual assault asserts that the state, the courts, prison system, and police inadequately address the damage done. Not only does the prison-industrial complex fail to offer solutions to community problems, it also fuels additional cycles of sexualized violence. Its apparatus targets low-income and working-class communities and people of color, especially black and Latino/a communities, destabilizing family life in the process. We acknowledge that when someone is sexually assaulted, everyone in the community is harmed; everyone needs to heal; and everyone has a responsibility to support a survivor and hold a perpetrator accountable. Thus, the aftermath of an assault represents an opportunity to dismantle institutionalized oppression and bring the group closer to social and economic justice.

Our work no longer aims to restore our community to the way it was. Instead, we seize opportunities to use community organizing to push back at the injustices inflicted by capitalism and the state, including intimate partner violence, child sexual abuse, rape, sexualized violence within incarcerated populations, and the broad spectrum of behaviors that can be understood as sexual assault. All are instances in which capital and the state can be challenged and communities and individuals can be transformed.

Toward a Culture of Care

Working toward community accountability in cases of sexual assault can be arduous, exhausting, disappointing, and scary. It gives rise to self-doubt, insecurity, bad dreams, and feelings of isolation. Central to PSU's functioning is individual and collective well-being. Being honest about needs allows us to persevere and gain strength as a collective. For the work to be sustainable, we must adhere to certain guidelines that support everyone in the group. These precepts acknowledge that effectiveness in organizing can only be achieved through a politics of care.

Although often dealing with crises, PSU cannot operate in an environment of crisis. We recognize the paralyzing consequences of internalizing panic. To avoid being consumed by the work, we maintain a sense of long-term movement-building and always stay active in projects outside PSU. We seek to remain calm and present and to encourage a culture of asking for assistance. Next, PSU recognizes that organizational burnout can occur when individuals take on too much responsibility to avoid guilty feelings that might arise from leaving the work undone or saddling colleagues with it. Capacity is finite and real, and a group should take on only a sustainable level of activity. Members regularly check in concerning capabilities and desires and work is redistributed as necessary within the group. By nurturing a balanced organizational culture, we act responsibly to fulfill commitments while valuing care.

Encouraging one another to do the things that make us feel awesome requires intimate knowledge of how each of us works, plays, and struggles. We encourage

and nourish a strong sense of self, valuing growth from spiritual practice, playing in a band, going on dates, taking time alone, sneaking off on vacations, spending time with family, or engaging in academic study.

We have developed an organizational structure that facilitates many levels of involvement. Someone's participation can be limited to attending meetings; preferring not to work with perpetrators of assault is not a problem. For those needing a break, we ask only for clear communication so that responsibilities can be covered during their absence.

Above all, we love one another and are proud of one another. We challenge and trust each other. Ours is a family with considerable room for difficulty and a great capacity for creativity and magic. Believing in one another and in what we are creating together takes us much further than one might imagine.

It Takes a Village

The community PSU members have built over the years rests upon general understanding, agreement, cooperation, support, and respect. It is a social network of coworkers, friends, lovers, ex-lovers, housemates, queer kinship-networks, childcare providers, co-organizers, and neighbors who are interconnected with our work. The special environment for this West Philly community was forged from a dialectical process. Our collectives and our community pushed forward a stable accretion of compassion, layered upon healing support, genuine friendship, and a sense of social justice. Any success in this experiment in transformative justice and community accountability would require each component.

PSU could have sidestepped the challenge of holding its members accountable, but instead gained a new level of trust by persistently advocating for that survivor's demands. For some community members, particularly women and survivors in the West Philly activist scene, it was a litmus test for PSU's value. Survivors and their supporters became comfortable enough to bring their situations to PSU. In their view, we could be completely trusted with confidential information and capable of maintaining the anonymity of survivors and those who had caused harm.

Much of this confidence flowed from the public trust Philly's Pissed vested in us. Together, Pissed and PSU were reliable, accessible, and delivered results. Our community felt secure in confiding with us. Our help was enlisted to squelch rumors when questions arose about any given person. If a cautious approach to a community member was appropriate, people knew that we would make them conscious of that fact. Being privy to confidential information, we could assess whether people who had caused harm were a high or low risk at conferences, dance parties, as intimate partners, housemates, or just walking down the street.

Trust in this system expanded due to our reliance on social networks that communicated information in both directions. When issuing alerts, care was taken not to smear reputations. We generally refrained from publicly broadcasting a

“risk factor.” (Sometimes it was deemed necessary, especially in cases of outright uncooperativeness or genuine threats to our community.) This is done out of respect. We seek to maximize openness, hoping to encourage people who have caused harm to work with us. Friends serve not as a gossip circuit, but as vital eyes and ears that ensure safety by warning others or removing unsafe individuals from group situations.

Over time, positive results from this organizing enabled us to expand efforts to design a culture of sexual responsibility in which all individuals and local institutions could play a role. If Pissed insisted that we bar a particular band from playing in our community, community members complied by removing those acts from shows. If PSU recommends that the security team for a punk fest undergo training on creating safer spaces, the event organizers trust that we are looking out for the community’s best interests and invite us to facilitate it.

Through this work, our community has realized that tremendous power can be marshaled through organization, trust, and a commitment to a more humane politics. With power, the West Philly punk anarchist community shifted away from politics rooted in weakness and insecurity. It no longer demanded to know the identity of every perpetrator, or that each of them be chased out of town. Once it started to slow down and tune in to these buzz words of “restorative” and “transformative justice,” our community moved from being pissed to being curious.

Bringing about this social climate was not a magical process, although there was a poetic glimmer to it. Our contribution was imaginative, but rooted in the fact that real and lasting change requires patience and a long-term view. Our vision is to expand our scope beyond the punk, radical, queer, Quaker, Jewish, well-educated, English-speaking, and mostly interconnected people spanning a few zip codes.

PSU is now discussing non-imperialist ways of building solidarity with local communities and organizers who are not enmeshed in our environment of grass-roots TJ, or in the movement to abolish prisons and liberate the incarcerated human spirit from the prison-industrial complex. As hip-hop MC “Slug” of the group Atmosphere says, we “got a lot to teach, but even more to learn.” In integrating our beliefs and our practices, we realize how far we must go to bring the world we envision into being. The dynamics of silence, hurt, male supremacy, strained communication, intimate-partner violence, and sexual assault are ever-present, even within the community of care that we work to nurture. Governments can change policies with enough political will and chamber votes, but shifting a social culture is a far more daunting undertaking. Creating a culture of responsibility and compassion is a long-term goal. It begins with practice in our everyday lives and in a firm conviction that neighborhoods are better equipped than lawmakers are to break harmful cycles and redefine accountability to foster, rather than destroy, community. Every practice has its component skills. Each day we strive to expand our skills, to hold, to watch, and to listen.

Addendum: Principles

Our Praxis of Accountability

The alchemy of our accountability work is a serendipitous mixture; part art, part science. To be sure, the skill and complexity involved in working on accountability processes is difficult to finesse. Nevertheless, we affirm that average people, regular folks in communities all across North America, develop and exercise their own processes for making justice in sexual assault situations internal to their communities. In doing so, average people will meet more success, by any measure, than the state ever has in addressing the chaos of issues stirred up by incidents of sexualized violence.

What we now know, we learned through trial and quite a bit of error. Our missteps enabled, and in some cases exacerbated pain for which we are both responsible and repentant. Very few of us in the history of PSU came to the group with formal prior experience working on sexual assault issues, let alone doing work with people who have caused harm. We are average people, figuring out how to do thorny work and our achievements stem from being committed to our values and purpose. We believe that people who have caused harm can change, and that everyday people can play a crucial role in catalyzing that shift.

Defining Accountability

When we say that we work to hold people who have perpetrated sexual assault accountable⁴ for the harm they have done, this means that we strive for them to:

1. Recognize the harm they have done, even if it was not intentional;
2. Acknowledge that harm's impact on individuals and the community;
3. Make appropriate restitution to the individual and community;
4. Develop solid skills toward transforming attitudes and behavior to prevent further harm and make contributions toward liberation.

Five Phases of the Accountability Process

We conceptualize five phases to an accountability process: the Beginning, Designing the Structure, Life Process, Tools We Use, and Closing a Process.

Phase 1—The Beginning:

People find us in many ways. We are known from leading educational workshops, contributing to zines, and also through word of mouth, the Internet, or through personal connections with individual members in PSU.

Sometimes a person who has caused harm gets in touch with us, saying something like: "I really messed up and the person I hurt told me I need to work with you guys." Others might say: "A few years ago I was abusive—I sexually assaulted

someone—and I was not really ready to deal with it until now.” In our workshops, people are often surprised to hear about those situations. The reality is that people who have caused harm are a complicated variety of people, and as they grow, many folks reflect on past behavior and see problems that they need to resolve.

Another approach is that someone might say: “I was sexually assaulted by so-and-so, whom I want to hold accountable.” They would then task us with tracking down that person and attempting to instigate an accountability process. Beyond these cases, there are always instances where someone who is neither the survivor nor the person who caused harm gets in touch with us on behalf of either party.

In any event, once we have touched base with the person who has caused harm, we vaguely sketch out the situation and discuss it as a group. We first find out if two collective members are able to take on this situation (we learned early on to always strive to work in pairs). If so, we discuss what we know about the situation and we honestly assess if we are equipped to handle it. There is always the possibility that there are pieces of this situation that we cannot handle. Sometimes we are not qualified for one reason or another and by trying to work on it we could cause more harm than good. Sometimes PSU members decline to engage in a situation because of elements that feel emotionally triggering.

After we have assessed the situation, we schedule a meet-up with the person who has caused harm. We typically meet in places that are public, but run a low risk of encounters with people we know; examples include parks, train stations, hotel lobbies, food courts, or outdoor cafés.

Phase 2—Designing the Process:

Next we try to design a process based on what the situation warrants. Often, we have a document listing “demands.” Demands are actions the survivor needs from the community or the person who caused harm in order to be safe and to heal. Below is a sample list of common demands:

“Pay for my STI testing/abortion/doctors appointment”;

“Deal with your drug/alcohol problem”;

“If you see me out somewhere, it is your responsibility to leave the premises”;

“Don’t talk to me or contact me”;

“Don’t go to ‘such and such group’ meetings for now” (typically an organization in which both the survivor and person who has caused harm participate);

“Disclose to all the people you are sleeping with or dating that you sexually assaulted someone and are in an accountability process”;

“Write me a sincere letter of apology.”

Demands are the central document in our accountability process. In situations where we have a list of demands, they fundamentally drive the design for our process. Our goals as facilitators of the process are to meet the demands laid out by the survivor and, in some cases, the community at large, both in letter and in spirit. In designing a particular process, we bear several principles in mind:

First, we try to involve the person we are working with in the design of the process. If they help to make the plans, timelines, goals, and help to brainstorm the things we can do together, then they feel more invested in everything. They are reluctant to back out because they do not see themselves as walking out on an externally imposed program.

Second, in order to engage them, we figure out methods that specifically work for the other person. If it is a visually oriented person, we make drawings or word maps to describe what we are talking about in a meeting. If they hate to read, we might record a reading for them. If they have ability needs that make it hard for them to sit down for meetings, we might plan walks around the block while we talk. In our engagement efforts, we have even arranged meetings consisting of street skating and board games. Our motto is to be accommodating and creative.

Another important practice is to use the meetings as an opportunity to model the behavior we are trying to build in the person with whom we are working. Some examples of how we demonstrate preferred behavior include: articulating and maintaining discrete social/physical boundaries, striving for clear communication, practicing empathy, showing respect (which is perceptibly appreciated among people who have been ostracized in the aftermath of sexual assault), and exemplifying utter honesty.

If the person we are working with misses a meeting or arrives late, we will discuss how they needed to communicate this better and help them to understand the ways in which it was inconsiderate. Together, we lay down ground rules for how we want to communicate with one another, giving us concrete agreements for holding folks accountable. We use their progress in adhering to agreements to create positive momentum; it is an endorsement for their capacity to grow and change and to be their better selves.

Phase 3—Life Structure:

When needed, we often emphasize fostering balance and creating structure in the person's life. If they are unstable, then it becomes difficult for them to be present in the work we are doing together. In such situations, it is crucial for us to account for the fuller context of challenges in their lives. The more grounded one is, the better their chances are of following through on their accountability process.

Toward that end, we create space for them to have a personal "check-in" at the beginning of each meeting. This is a moment for them to share anything they wish about their daily lives, emotional state, or logistical hurdles. The check-in allows us to hear, for example, about their progress in finding a therapist or stable housing, or about job interviews or family visits. At times, we have actively passed along job prospects, accompanied people in looking for viable housing, and given people rides to therapy appointments. This humbling and more fundamentally "human" work has helped us to see what it truly means to acknowledge that we

are all in community together, that a politics of trust depends on everyday support and interdependence, and that nobody rests outside of that in a just society.

Phase 4—Tools We Use:

Each process is unique. Most meetings consist primarily of talking. We talk about stories, the instances of assault that took place, relationship patterns, and countless connected issues. We employ several general tools as guides in the meeting space:

- **Story telling:** We ask to hear stories, encourage discussion about dynamics or emerging themes, and use these didactically, sometimes revisiting their stories.
- **Writing:** Giving “homework” is a good way to maintain continuity between meetings. Sometimes people write down recollections of an instance of abuse, record what certain words mean to them, keep a log of times they felt frustrated or angry (common emotions we work with), and maintain a journal about how the accountability process is going for them.
- **Role-Playing:** Taking a cue from Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*, we sometimes try to act out interactions that have occurred or that could occur. Role-playing is great for building the skills of perception and empathy, and is a safe way for people to try out new behaviors and understand past ones.
- **Reading/Listening/Watching:** Most situations that we come across call for educational development. There are countless helpful texts, films, lectures, podcasts, etc., that help to explain everything from patriarchy, to substance abuse, internalized oppression, and dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression. Here, our role is to tailor any resources for the person we are working with.

Phase 5—Closing a Process:

Self-improvement is lifelong work for everyone and certainly for folks who have a history of perpetrating violence. Most of our accountability processes last between nine months and two years, and could usually continue ad infinitum. This begs the question, “When is it time to wrap up a situation?” Much like therapy, there is no objective answer to this, but there are some indicators for when it might be appropriate to wind things down.

One obvious moment to close out a process is when both the letter and the spirit of the demands have been met. If a demand is to “write me a letter of apology,” it will not do for the person who has caused harm to draft a letter within the first few months of their process. Composing an apology may be the technical letter of the demand, but writing it to convey sincere contriteness is the true spirit of the demand. This penitence can only be declared once hard work and requisite time have

gone into understanding one's role in the harm of the assault, and once they have gained a sense of empathy for how it affected the survivor(s) and the community.

If a demand calls for sobriety or a reduction in the use of illicit substances, then fulfilling the true spirit of the demand would require cutting back substance use and moving toward a true understanding of how the survivor (or community) came to this demand. We look for recognition by the person causing harm that in their case drinking or using creates conditions in which their judgment is impaired and how this traces to their abusive behavior. Making that connection and changing their relationship to that substance would therefore be true fulfillment of the demand.

Another indicator for transitioning out of a formal process is that the person who has caused harm has identified ways to change the behavior that has led to sexual assault and has demonstrated a capacity to navigate through "gray zones." Here, it is important to see how they have practiced this shift in daily life and feel confident as a guide in the process that this change is profound and lasting.

Often we would be hesitant to wind down an accountability process unless we were confident that whomever we are working with has developed responsible and sustainable systems of support in their life. We look for clues that they have not one or two, but plenty of upstanding friends with whom to talk about matters of consequence. This can include housemates or family members whom they can trust for support when challenges come up, particularly on issues related to this work. We also work to ensure that they are familiar with the resources available to them around the city that can serve their needs.

Usually, "ending" a process looks more like phasing it out. Over time we go from meeting each week, to twice a month, to once a month, until finally we are only meeting to check-in periodically. After an accountability process, the people with whom we have worked know that we are here for them whenever they need us.

NOTES

1. The author has been a core member of Philly Stands Up since the end of 2004. His perspective is unique as a queer, black, cis-gendered man, a parent, and the longest-standing member in the history of the group. The voices of past and present members of Philly Stands Up are woven throughout this piece. Special thanks to Philly Stands Up member Jenna Peters-Golden for invaluable contributions, insights, and support, all of which made this article possible. Jenna's contributions are particularly noted with regard to the article's appendix.

2. The term "cis-gendered" refers to people whose biologically assigned gender aligns with their gender identity.

3. A great example of this is *Hollow Water*, the 2000 documentary film directed by Bonnie Dickie, which chronicles how the silence on child sexual abuse was confronted and transformed using restorative justice in a First Nations community in Canada.

4. Our working definition is based on Generation Five's articulation of accountability in their 2007 document, *Toward Transformative Justice: A Liberatory Approach to Child Sexual Abuse and Other Forms of Intimate and Community Violence*.