

## A Critical Review of the “Just Yell Fire” Program

By Kevin Miller

As a Violence Prevention Educator and a father of two daughters, I share a struggle with my partner to strike a balance between teaching them to love and trust while navigating a world where a woman is raped every three minutes and every 18 seconds a woman is battered. The impact of this reality on our daughter's lives is a source of great anxiety and sadness to their mother and I. Understanding how women must shape their lives to this reality provides crucial insight into how our current attitudes, understanding, and approaches fail to actually prevent sexual assault. This understanding highlights how radically our response needs to change and how it must put much more responsibility on men to stop rape and allow women to live lives without fear of men.

It is in this context that I watched the self-described self-defense video titled Just Yell Fire. Viewable online at [www.justyellfire.com](http://www.justyellfire.com), Just Yell Fire is the 2006 media project of two incredibly talented Portland-area teenage girls, Dallas Jessup and Catherine Wehage. The hope, as stated by Dallas: "A girl can go to the mall - without fear, a girl can go to a party - without risk; and a girl can just walk home - without dying. That's the world we're creating with Just Yell Fire." Based on this mission the video sets out to teach girls how to 'prevent' being abducted and/or sexually assaulted.

Just Yell Fire starts with a studio audience of young women receiving stay-safe advice from the local Chief of Police. The remaining core content focuses on a list of self-defense techniques presented by instructor Chad Von Dette based on what he calls, "No rules street fighting." Incredibly, girls are also coached not to yell 'rape' or 'help' because bystanders won't take you seriously, but to yell 'fire!' Said with pseudo scientific authority, the effectiveness of yelling fire is seriously questionable but desperately creative in a world where women's demands for the prevention of violence have largely been ignored and minimized.

The video and its female creators are the recipients of many endorsements and awards over the last year. The video obviously benefits from professional direction, production support, and editing. Guest appearances by the 'survivors' of the television series *Lost*, actors Josh Holloway and Evangeline Lilly attempt to lend authority to the video's message directed at the target audience of females aged 11-19. The awards received, rightly so, focus on the leadership of the video's creators. It is notable, however, that I was unable to find a single award or endorsement from a sexual assault agency. For reasons I elaborate, it is apparent that

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*"Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral."  
- Paolo Freire*

## Around the State



### Focus Groups

The primary prevention planning committee has been conducting focus groups throughout the state to assist us in writing the state primary prevention plan. Since many crisis centers will want to conduct focus groups of their own when gathering data for their needs and resources assessment, we have also put together a small focus group guide to aid rape crisis centers in conducting this kind of data collection. To receive a copy of this document, e-mail Morgan at [mcurtis@taasa.org](mailto:mcurtis@taasa.org) or download at [www.taasa.org/prevention/pdfs/FocusGroupAndInterviewGuide.pdf](http://www.taasa.org/prevention/pdfs/FocusGroupAndInterviewGuide.pdf).



## A Critical Review, cont'd

whoever mentored Dallas and Catherine failed to get the advice of those who work daily to prevent and respond to sexual assault.

If they had, they would have been advised not to emphasize the repeated assertion that girls can prevent abduction and rape. Josh Holloway presents the film as, "A strategy to stop predators, stop abductions, and to put a stop to date rape." He continues that girls just need to be, "Smarter, faster, tougher than these guys. Fight like a girl." Josh returns to conclude the film by affirming, "...you can stop date rape..." Evangeline Lilly offers with conviction that Dallas and Catherine, "Have...designed strategies to stop a rapist or an abductor in his tracks and you know what, they work whether you are 11 or 19." She continues to say with certainty that, "Chad is going to show you how to save your own life."

Vancouver Police Chief, Brian Martinek counsels, "The key to personal protection is prevention. Don't put yourself in a dangerous position in the first place." He then offers the litany of stay safe tips every girl ultimately accumulates from teachers, caring adults, family, media, and friends. Advice like always travel in pairs, don't talk to strangers, don't drink alcohol, stay in well-lit areas, etc. In short, the world is not safe and the solution offered is to effectively limit your lives and freedoms. This film isn't really about prevention; it is about how girls must navigate an unsafe world.

Concerned and caring adults should not use this video as an attempt to prevent sexual assault. I understand the frustration in trying to keep kids safe and the urgency to do anything when society at-large does so little to truly prevent violence. But building a self-defense video based on popular rape mythology and placing responsibility on the potential victim is counterproductive to increasing safety. Too many institutions search for a video or one hour presentation so they can check-off the sexual assault education item when in fact we need comprehensive approaches. Even if you edit out the burden of placing rape prevention on the viewing women, you still have to question if effective self-defense can be taught by a 45-minute video without practice guided by a professional.

As a father, I have also tried my best to teach our daughters how they need to be safe and they too have received self-defense instruction. Despite this hyper vigilance, we must assure girls and women that being raped or assaulted, regardless of any level of resistance, is never their fault. The assertions made in the video that they can stop rape puts the burden completely on women and sets them up to be blamed. So what is a girl to say if she is raped after having watched Just Yell Fire? Women are rarely believed when they tell us they have been

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## TAASA Men's Task Force

TAASA has formed a Men's Task Force that includes various individuals/organizations who work with boys and men around a variety of issues. This task force meets every fourth Saturday of the month and provides participants an opportunity to connect with others around the state, share resources/information, and more importantly support each other's efforts. The task force will also help TAASA define its prevention of sexual assault work with boys and men around the state and develop the best and most effective strategies at reaching various populations of boys and men. For more information about the activities of the task force or to participate in the upcoming meetings, please contact Emiliano Diaz de Leon at 512-474-7190 ext. 35 or [ediazdeleon@taasa.org](mailto:ediazdeleon@taasa.org).

### Next Meetings:

Saturday, July 26, 2008 9a.m.-3p.m. TAASA Office  
Saturday, August 23, 2008 9a.m.-3p.m. TAASA Office

harassed, assaulted, or raped. They are usually questioned, "Why were you there, what did you expect, what did you wear, did you drink, etc." Now we can judge how well they resisted and ask, "Didn't you fight back?" Women often report the disbelief and questioning by others feels worse than the rape itself. Violation of trust times two. Is it any wonder the majority of rapes are never reported?

Just Yell Fire largely plays on fear of abduction and stranger rape.

It is no surprise that some of the awards the film has received are from the media outlets that thrive on the sensationalism of stranger abductions. Stranger rape accounts for about 20-25% of sexual assaults against women. In 75-80% of sexual assaults, the victim knows the perpetrator. Only one scenario in the video addresses an assault by an acquaintance. This openly hostile assault unrealistically portrays the many dynamics that complicate how one might react when faced with an assault by a boy or man they love, men with authority over them, men years older, unknown use of debilitating drugs, threats of violence, weapons, or simply making personal boundaries known (just because she kissed you, doesn't mean she wants sex).

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## So, What's the Deal with this Prevention "Institute?"

Morgan J Curtis, LMSW, Primary Prevention Coordinator

Some of you may have noticed that we changed the format of our summer conference. In August, we usually host a youth or prevention educators' conference where we bring in various speakers to discuss issues related to school-based sexual violence education. This year, however, we decided to let go of that conference and offer something new in its place that is hopefully more relevant to the needs of rape crisis centers. We also wanted to offer a model for a different type of educational experience that can be replicated in your own communities and in your own prevention work.

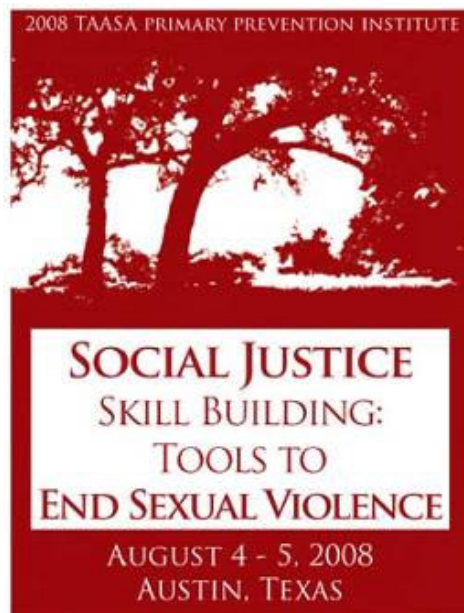
Much of the feedback we have received about the implementation of primary prevention is that folks really need more hands-on, skill building opportunities. Thus, the prevention institute was born. Some of you might be wondering what the difference is between an "institute" and a "conference." Here's the difference as we frame it:

A conference presents material through a series of workshops, usually presented by various people on various topics that may or may not build upon one another. At a conference, participants can choose among various workshops at a given time and may or may not be with similar people in those workshops. An institute allows participants to stay with the same group of people and the same facilitators in order to build upon their learning. The tracks maintain an overall focus while offering various skills and tools to attendees and offering more depth on a given topic.

Conferences generally focus on didactic teaching methods wherein the workshop presenters are the experts and the attendees are there to soak up the knowledge. An institute (or at least our institute), on the other hand, really focuses on engaging attendees in the learning process and using their collective expertise to help move the entire group toward new ideas and solutions to problems. Facilitators (not presenters) are there to help move the process along and, yes, to do some of the more didactic work to offer a framework for the skills that the group is learning. Moreover, the institute's focus is on helping people walk away with skills, a greater depth of understanding, and hopefully also a supportive network of folks with whom they can problem solve as they try some new tactics in their own commu-

nities. Participants in each track will spend some time reflecting on the ways they can use certain ideas and skills in their own community.

Additionally, for the purposes of this institute, we chose three tracks in order to accommodate the number of people we assumed would be attending and the stated needs and interests of RCC staff. We deliberately chose tracks that we felt would have quite a bit of overlap so that everyone attending the institute would have a similar experience and gain similar skills but would have those skills and ideas framed in slightly different ways. Here is some background about why we chose each track.



- *Building Equality* – Working to create equitable systems and relationships is a key step to prevention of violence of all kinds, since inequality and oppression are the roots of violence. Many rape crisis centers have made anti-oppression work a piece of their prevention or education strategies, while many others have not. We want to continue supporting this work and making it a priority for ourselves as well as our members.

- *Engaging Community* – Prevention of violence involves major shifts in the way a community operates and therefore requires community buy-in and participation. There was an overwhelming response to this track, which was not surprising considering many RCC prevention staff members have mentioned difficulty in engaging their communities.

This track will focus on different tactics and models for community engagement.

- *Mobilizing Men* – Men are key allies in the work to prevent violence, especially sexual violence. Historically, there has not been a large scale effort to involve men as allies in our work to end sexual violence. This is quickly changing all over the world, and we believe it is a critical part of our work.

We are hoping that this new format will be well received and help meet the needs of prevention staff throughout the state. Many crisis centers have already started requesting training and technical assistance that we will provide after the institute. This will be a critical way for us to make sure that we can support you in using and building on the skills and information you will obtain at the Institute. As we are so fond of saying, skill-building doesn't happen in a day... or even in two days.



## A Critical Review, cont'd

Perhaps the most telling moment of this film is when Dallas shares that her parents told her she could not date until she had a black belt. She receives an understanding laugh from the assembled audience of young women. This hauntingly shared familiarity is based on restrictive experiences and clear messages from a culture where radio jocks regularly tell listening audiences of men that women use rape allegations for plausible deniability for regretful sex, where professional athletes rape and get welcomed back to the field, where faith leaders rape, where schools solve sexual assault allegations with promotions, a world where victims are ignored and minimized. What I see Dallas and Catherine wanting, asking, begging is, "Damn it, this is enough! We have to stop this. (are) We on our own here!?"

And we should weep that our daughters have to carry such a burden. Because of this burden, their lives are limited and shaped in ways that men and boys rarely have to experience. We might coach boys about safety, but it is rarely in the context of preventing sexual assault and so much emphasis on limiting their experiences. Why don't boys worry about setting down their drinks at a party?

When a girl's parents tell her she needs to learn how to jab eyes, yank ears, bite, knee groins, and achieve black belt status before dating, what they are really saying is that no boy or man is to be trusted to respect your boundaries. And when our best response to epidemic levels of violence, mainly committed by men, is to teach girls how to fight back, then we have to ask if we have given up on boys and men. When we know nearly 80% of assaults are by someone the victim knows, which men can women trust? How many men have sensed women's discomfort when we share an elevator ride with them or walk behind them on the street? Where does that leave men who believe they are a 'good guy'? If men fail to start making it clear where they stand, then there is nothing left but to teach girls how to fight back and to desperately yell fire.

How do we continue to instruct women and girls we love how to be careful and yet do nothing to change the reality they face? Two courageous teens are being celebrated for their efforts to make their sisters safe and most men would agree the safety pointers in the video are good advice for women. Yet, when men are presented with the fact that nearly all this violence is committed by men and asked to contribute at least the same amount of effort women have expended to respond to and prevent this violence, men check-out or get defensive. Historically men have done little to create a safer world where girls wouldn't have to acquire a black belt to go on a date, go to the mall, or just simply jog.

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Why might men be unwilling to do more? Could it be that from birth boys are taught that 'being a man' is to devalue most things feminine? (don't be a sissy, you throw like a girl, etc.) How does 'being a man' shape men who abuse and how does it keep the rest of us so called 'good guys' silent? Rape is perversely framed as a women's issue. Women have had to take leadership in the response to rape and assault, so why would men do what is perceived to be women's work? How does consumption of 'male entertainment' and pornography affect men's view of women? How does the hyper sexualized, objectifying media affect men's expectations, devaluation, and disrespect of women? When the dominant stories tell men that women are here to serve men (domestically, sexually) and are less valuable than men, it creates a dangerous and unfair culture for women to navigate. How are we as men able to navigate and participate in this culture that devalues women while also loving women as partners, mothers, and daughters? Are we even willing to sit with these questions for the benefit of our daughters?

We need to change course in responding to harassment, abuse, and rape of women. Women have told us this for years. Until then, we probably should teach women self-defense, but we cannot continue to place all the burden and responsibility on women to be safe. Men need to see that the men who endanger our partners and daughters are not boogiemens in the bushes, but guys just like us. Guys that we hang with at the gym, in the boardroom, at the ball game, in our places of worship, in our neighborhood, and in our families. Men need to confront dangerous attitudes and myths expressed in jokes, discussions, and media that devalue women. Men have the privilege of silence when we know of or witness our peer's degrading attitudes and behavior toward women. Men almost always choose silence because we fear that we might be seen a little less manly in that moment or lose status as one of the boys. Protecting ourselves from these fears is cold comfort for our daughters and partners who live with fears of assault daily.

The accolades piled onto a video that instructs our daughters to just yell fire, to kick-ass, to stay home, or never travel alone should serve as a wakeup call to all on how far we have to go to making this a safe world. How much more desperate does the reality reflected in Just Yell Fire have to get to motivate a broad movement of men into action to truly create a world where women can enjoy the same freedoms and the same sense of safety that men can?

*Kevin Miller lives in Seattle, Washington and works with multiple organizations in the meaningful engagement of men to prevent gender-based violence. He can be reached at [kevin@menagainstdv.org](mailto:kevin@menagainstdv.org).*



## News & Events

### *Documents Available on the TAASA Website*

Just a reminder that there are some great resources available on our website to assist you in your primary prevention planning process. Links to the documents are available below:

- ♦ **Engaging Communities Guidebook** - A guidebook to help you with efforts to engage your community in prevention work
- ♦ **E-newsletter archives** - All of our older e-newsletters with articles and resources.
- ♦ **Workshop and TA Descriptions** - Information on the kind of trainings and technical assistance TAASA's prevention team can provide to your crisis center.
- ♦ **Request for TA Form** - A form you can complete to request TA from TAASA's prevention staff.
- ♦ **Prevention 101 Guidebook** - Coming soon! This guidebook will cover the basics of primary prevention from both a public health and a social justice standpoint. It is perfect for new staff members.

*Do you want to have a voice in the process of developing the state primary prevention plan?*

The statewide Primary Prevention Planning Committee (PPPC) wants to have your input as we develop a plan for primary prevention of sexual violence in Texas. In addition to offering open meetings for you to observe our process (information to be sent out soon), we are also seeking active participation via our Virtual Council. By becoming a member of the Virtual Council, you can offer feedback about the PPPC's process and work products and help us to know that we are creating a plan that will have ample input from stakeholders in the state. **If you are interested in learning more about this opportunity or more about the committee, please contact Morgan Curtis (contact information to the right).**

## Resources

### PreventConnect Wiki

The PreventConnect wiki allows people who work in sexual and domestic violence prevention to share resources and ideas in one centralized location. The site currently includes ideas about activities, sample job descriptions and research.

### Elementary Age Anti-Oppression Curricula (from Prevent Connect Wiki)

This portion of the PreventConnect wiki offers resources related to doing anti-oppression work with elementary students. It includes links to three different resources.

### The Uncommon Man

The Uncommon Man is a blog run by the Men's Resources International. They publish letters, articles and other pieces about gender equality, gender-based violence and masculinity from various parts of the world.

Question? Comments?  
Please Contact:

Morgan J Curtis, LMSW  
Phone: 512-474-7190 x31  
Fax: 512-474-6490  
E-mail: [mcurtis@taasa.org](mailto:mcurtis@taasa.org)



**Texas Association Against Sexual Assault**

6200 La Calma ♦ Suite 110  
Austin, Texas 78752  
[www.taasa.org](http://www.taasa.org)