

NSVRC Interview Alan Berkowitz

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Interview with Alan Berkowitz

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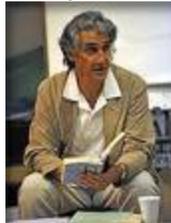
[Joan Tabachnick](#)

Dear Engaged Bystander: I had a wonderful opportunity to talk with Alan Berkowitz to learn more about what he is focusing his work towards these days. If you don't know of Alan, he is an internationally recognized expert on bystander behavior, violence prevention and social justice issues; author of [Response Ability: A Complete Guide to Bystander Intervention](#); and always an inspiration to talk with.

Below is a part of the great conversation we had last week:

Joan: Why do you think there is this growing attention to bystander approaches to prevention?

Alan: It is a very exciting moment in the prevention field because we are beginning to frame the solution as a community responsibility. In the past we tended to look only at the impact of sexual violence on the victim or to invest in the punishment of the perpetrator. Now people are seeing that sexual violence takes place in a community and that community either inhibits or



unintentionally encourages that violence.

Joan: I love the deep values that you bring to this work, can you talk about that a little? Alan: I believe that most people have a good heart and want to do the right thing. But as professionals, we often approach a community with ideas about how to “fix them”. We tell them there are things they don’t notice or don’t seem to understand. I am taking a radical step here, and saying that we need to approach people with compassion for where they are and begin there. The good news is that most people want to do the right thing and be part of the solution. We can even approach the perpetrator with the ideal of compassion, while holding him (or her) accountable for their behavior. If we believe that most people want to do the right thing, it gives us a way to engage them as bystanders and help them act on their concern. To change this around, we need to start with the positive, what people do notice. I am convinced that there are a lot of people in every community that are waiting and willing to do the right thing, who are uncomfortable with mistreatment. I am convinced that WE need to figure out how to invite them into the discussion. Joan: Why do so few people think they can intervene? Alan: As a society, we have set up artificial barriers for anyone to get involved. Then when someone climbs over those barriers, we call them heroes and we say how very special they are and essentially, we are saying that we can’t possibly be like them. But we can teach people to get involved and lower the barriers. Take Rosa Parks. One day she decided not to give up her seat and she sparked a huge social movement. What most people don’t know is that she went to the Highlander Center for years for training. One day she got fed up and decided

to do something. On the one hand she was undoubtedly a marvelous human being and yet at the same time it was also what she learned through those years of training that allowed her to be an agent of change – and these are things that we can all learn. Joan: What are the barriers that people face? Alan: One important barrier is MISPERCEPTION. Human beings are social creatures. We pay attention to people and we are influenced by them. For example, in the research about men we have found that the biggest influence on men is other men. Research has also demonstrated that, the biggest influence on whether a man will intervene is whether THEY THINK THAT OTHER MEN will intervene. And in general we think that others are not bothered, or don't want to do anything, when they do.. That is a huge misperception that inhibits us from acting on our instincts to do the right thing. That is a cognitive barrier that we can correct. We can make it known in a variety of ways that we do care and that we would get involved and that we would support others who want to act. Another important barrier is a SKILLS BARRIER. In general, we don't know what to do and if we have some sense of that, we don't know how to do it. We can teach the skills to intervene and we need to make sure that the interventions are both comfortable and doable. That is what my book, Response Ability is all about – choices on how to intervene. The key message is that doing something is better than doing nothing. Joan: Can you give me an example of addressing this skills barrier? For example, someone makes a joke that objectifies someone. Our job is to give everyone something that they can do. It is fine to deflect the situation, rather than confront. Even an abrupt change in conversation shows that what was said was not acceptable. Activists, who have been involved in the movement, will sometimes say that deflection is a cop out. But I believe that we need to give everyone something to do. There really is a RANGE of SKILLS that can be taught, from direct and confrontational to indirect to what I call a place of “generosity” – taking the time to engage in a conversation to find out why they said something so objectifying. Joan: What do you think is your contribution to bystander intervention? Alan: There are a lot of people doing great work in this field. Each is offering something valuable. I feel that my unique contribution to the bystander discussion is the essential belief that we are all part of something bigger. I began this work from a social norms perspective. There is now empirical research which shows that people can change their actions by correcting a misperception of their peer group, and that intervening is a skill that can be taught. Our desire to act shows that there are values or a connection to something bigger that we share –even though we may not realize that it is shared. Our desire to act shows that there are values or a connection to something bigger that we share – our job in the bystander movement, is to tie our work to this common desire to act. When we are successful, we will begin to see the kind of changes we so passionately want in our communities. For more information about Alan's work, you can visit his [website](#).

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