

# Deconstructing child sexual exploitation

## - an interview with Raven Kaliana, founder of Outspiral

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### Introduction by Anna Glinski

It is not often, as professionals, that we have the opportunity to have a frank discussion with someone about their experiences of extreme adversity, when we are not also in a 'helping' relationship with them. Raven Kaliana, children's rights activist, puppeteer, survivor of childhood sexual abuse and exploitation and founder of Outspiral, offers us just such an opportunity. Having recently visited our service to deliver a training presentation, involving the screening of her critically acclaimed film, *Hooray for Hollywood*, followed by a Q & A session, Raven's drive for social justice was strikingly apparent. The session was inspirational and enlightening, and involved learning on many different levels.

Afterwards I took the opportunity to talk with Raven about NOTA and the organisation's mission and she agreed to give us the following interview.

**Anna:** Can you tell us a bit about how your organisation, Outspiral, came about?

**Raven:** On the first showings of my autobiographical puppet play, *Hooray for Hollywood*, on surviving child sexual exploitation, Childline helped with the post-show discussions. I approached Childline supervisor Willie Harrison about a project on prevention, interrupting generational abuse, and large-scale public education. He advised that I start

an organisation – which I did in 2011.

Outspiral ([outspiral.org.uk](http://outspiral.org.uk)) now works towards prevention of child sexual exploitation and human trafficking, and increasing public awareness on these issues, using puppetry for adults to spark discussion and social change.

**Anna:** Can you tell us about some of the work you/Outspiral does?

**Raven:** I present the film version of *Hooray for Hollywood* when providing training sessions for professionals; organise public awareness-raising events; write articles and give interviews; teach workshops on using puppetry for personal healing and political change. Presentations have proved useful to researchers on human trafficking prevention in the UK, and for outreach to audiences at universities and UN events in Geneva and New York. Our new play, *Fragile/Sacred*, shows a story about sadistic abuse and the shapes the mind takes to survive that, and I'm working on a puppet film about post-traumatic stress.

**Anna:** *Hooray for Hollywood* is your critically acclaimed theatre piece/film using puppets that you created - can you tell us where this idea came from and how it has developed into its current form?

**Raven:** A few years after I escaped, Folkmanis Puppets hired and trained me as a puppeteer – which gave me such joy. After a while, I realised puppets might make the best medium to tell stories from my own life - easier on the audience - and on me. After many years and a move across the globe, it premiered in 2008, and it's been an amazing journey.

**Anna:** Most people don't like to think about sexual abuse. You have spoken out about your personal experiences of abuse; what is it that motivates you and where do you find the strength to do this?

**Raven:** Throughout my childhood, hundreds of 'innocent bystanders' glimpsed the abuse I was suffering, but all those adults were too afraid to stand up for me. I want to empower people to face the issue of child abuse - it's a problem we can solve.

I do this work also in memory of all the people that I've lost... My own parents, who were too damaged to be trusted with the role of parenthood, other children I saw raped and tortured and murdered, childhood friends who cannot face their own memory of that horror, other survivors who fell into addiction or died by their own hand. It helps to give meaning to that senseless suffering and loss of human potential.

**Anna:** Despite facing significant adversity throughout your childhood you have gone on to become a successful artist, director and children's rights activist – what do you feel has helped you survive your experiences?

**Raven:** For me, these things helped build resilience – perspective, validation, and love.

A connection with nature helped me understand that what was happening in my family was disordered. For instance, watching a mother cat care for her babies - and fiercely defend them - showed how it 'should be' in a human family. Spending time in nature helped me feel a part of something larger, and picture life beyond my family.

There were bits of validation from other children - in primary school, a neighbour boy and I would sometimes talk about the abuse, as we walked to school. Years later when my denial was breaking down, he would sometimes just sit with me silently.

Another friend and I would team up and try to escape the studios where we'd been trafficked to be raped in front of cameras. He'd earnestly try to protect

me from harm, unlike my own parents. This helped show me how love is supposed to look, and kept my heart alive.

As a teen, one teacher noticed that I'd grown alarmingly thin after being starved. After class, she asked what was happening at home. She was just 'there' for me - listened and let me sort through my jumble of pain and confusion. She supported my choices and helped me make a short-term plan to help stabilise my situation, and a long-term plan to get away. It worked.

**Anna:** What advice would you give to children and young people who find themselves living in abusive situations?

**Raven:** Call Childline! Childline works outside social service reporting rules, so the young person can discuss the problem at their own pace, without setting off new trauma from a lot of sudden intervention. With Childline, the young person can stay in charge of what happens: they can discuss their options, prepare for possible outcomes, and find resources for support beyond their family.

**Anna:** You have spoken previously about your own parents having experienced abuse when they were children, how do you envisage the cycle of abuse being broken?

**Raven:** Childline conducted a study into the motivations of perpetrators who had been abused themselves as children. When asked to identify the tipping point where they went on to harm another person, the overwhelming reply was, "When I tried to get help, and I was not believed". Emotional validation is key to helping a victim see that support is available outside the abusive system – hope for change.

**Anna:** NOTA membership is open to any professional whose work concerns intervention with sexually aggressive individuals. What advice would you give professionals who work in this field as a result of your experiences?

**Raven:** Trauma does not just disappear, even if it's denied or repressed, and

criminal behaviour towards children does not appear out of nowhere. I believe that every person who perpetrated against me when I was growing up came from a history of being victimised themselves as children.

Of course, not every person who suffers abuse goes on to become an abuser, but trauma leaves a profound impact on a human being, and that damage has to go somewhere. It may manifest as the abuse of another person, or as co-dependency, self-harm, addiction, exposing one's children to an abuser, or marrying into domestic violence. Or the survivor may work it out through therapy or other creative and meaningful expression which releases the pain and reconnects that person back to the world.

One of the hallmarks of perpetration against children seems to be lack of empathy for the victims. And, likewise, for a survivor beginning the healing process, great effort must be undertaken to develop empathy for the victim they were as a child. 'Reparenting the inner child' is a technique frequently used by survivors to rebuild empathy with their own vulnerability and the trauma from which they've disconnected.

Many survivors block out the trauma until later in life. Though many perpetrators may say they were not abused as children, it's also true that many survivors in healing once believed they were not abused either.

Perpetrating sexual abuse may be a form of adult 'acting out' – a child might demonstrate sexual assaults they've suffered with their toys and drawings, or they may bully or sexually assault another child. 'Acting out' is a way the child 'tells' about emotionally overwhelming experiences. The child may block out traumas from their day-to-day awareness, making it hard to verbally ask for help.

No magic switch stops 'acting out' behaviours at age 18. Dissociating trauma only conceals the damage, creating a pressure cooker effect. The victim copes with the fallout according to role models, family patterns, lack of consequences or permission given by

society to indulge in various destructive or self-destructive activities and addictions, their own inner strengths and support, or their level of damage and isolation.

Social training plays a part in what we do with the damage. Women are socially pressured to 'forgive' sexual assaults, particularly within the family. Admonitions to reconcile often result in victimisation of their own children by the same perpetrators who assaulted them. Boys may grow up battered, sexually assaulted and ridiculed if they show empathy towards women, and are discouraged from expressing emotions other than anger. Social permission manifests as denial of justice for victims; shaming survivors; lack of role models for change for perpetrators; permission for men to pursue objects of arousal without regard or consequence for criminal behaviour.

Survivors struggle to establish healthier romantic relationships, because the trauma binds the child's understanding of love to exploitation. Developing sexuality gets commandeered by the abuser – tying the child's first sexual associations to these assaults, instead of consensual peer relationships, chosen when ready. Seeking out abuse images or sexually assaulting children may be a learned behaviour or physical association, conditioned in childhood.

Survivors often begin to recognise their trauma histories after addressing an addiction – alcoholism, drug addiction, co-dependency. People who sexually assault children or consume child abuse images may use these behaviours to control emotions related to repressed trauma - described sometimes as addiction. Rehabilitation is often approached with behavioural therapy. However, for long-term change and protection of children, it's time to look also at the source.

**Raven Kaliana**, A survivor and children's human rights activist, theatre and film director, puppeteer and puppet maker offering training sessions and workshops.

[outspiral.org.uk](http://outspiral.org.uk)