

STATEMENT OF T.J. PARSELL

CHAIRMAN WALTON: Mr. Parsell.

T.J. PARSELL: Good morning.

My name is T.J. Parsell, and I was a skinny 17-year-old with a face dotted with pimples. It was a stupid prank that sent me there. I had robbed a Fotomat with a toy gun. So while my friends prepared for high school prom, I was being gang raped in an adult prison.

Young men especially are targeted when they first arrive, and I didn't last 24 hours before an inmate spiked my drink with Thorazine and then ordered me down to his dorm. Even with the drug's heavy effect, it was the most agony I had ever experienced. They knocked me out of the bed and nearly suffocated me as they shoved my head into a pillow to muffle my screams.

I was powerless under their weight as they ripped my pants off. One of them grabbed my hair and smacked me and pulled my head down while the others took turns sodomizing me. When I choked on my own vomit and gasped for air, it only made them laugh. They were unmoved by my crying. It felt like a battering ram being shoved up inside of me, splitting and cracking me open. The crushing weight of that pain has never left me. Yet I was still just a boy.

My rectum bled for several days, but I was too afraid to come forward, even to see a doctor. I

was terrified I'd have to explain what had happened. I just wanted to do my time and get out alive. Everyone knew that snitches were killed.

What they took from me went beyond sex. They had stolen my manhood, my identity and part of my soul. They laughed about it afterwards and openly bragged while one of them flipped a coin to see who got to keep me. The inmate who won was nearly twice my age. He was serving time for aggravated assault. He wasn't one of those who raped me, but I found out later that he had set it up to make me more vulnerable. It's one of the oldest games in prison to help bring you into their fold. So I was forced into protective pairing.

It takes only one or two violent rapes before you start compromising. I wanted to shower and wash away what had happened. I hoped no one would find out about it, but as I walked the yard in a daze, other inmates pointed and laughed. The shame and humiliation I felt accompanied the classic symptoms of rape trauma syndrome. I blamed myself. I couldn't stop replaying the scenario in my head and weighing what I could have done differently to avoid it. I had trouble sleeping at night. I was obsessed with body parts, and I alternated between violent tendencies and suicidal thoughts.

The guards knew what had happened. The prison doctors knew as well. When I saw the

proctologist for my bleeding, I raised concern about the size of his rectal scope, and his reply was, "Well, it's not any larger than what's been going up there."

Most people find the notion of prison rape unsurprising. It's unsurprising because it happens frequently and lies as a constant possibility. I blame prison officials for my rape as much as I blame the men who assaulted me. They created and shaped the environment, both actively and through their negligence, in which I was gagged, effectively silenced, and unable to resist. Ultimately, the attitudes and prejudices of corrections officials contribute to an atmosphere that fosters rape behavior.

Once an inmate has been raped, he's considered turned out, as if having been turned gay regardless of his sexual identity before entering the system. Once an inmate has been turned out, he's considered a target wherever he goes. Gay men especially are victimized. A Pennsylvania study suggests gay men are four times as likely to be targeted.

My experience as a gay man was that gay men would most definitely be victimized unless they chose someone to protect them.

Recently, while touring prisons in South Africa, I spoke with a rape victim inside Pollsmoor Maximum Prison, who described in graphic details the

horrors he had endured. It was strikingly similar to my own experience. Yet when I asked him what it was like for gay prisoners, he said, "Well, that's different, because gay men like it."

"So they deserve to be raped," I asked.

"It's not the same thing," he said. "Gay men like it."

Unfortunately, this type of ignorance and lack of compassion from even a rape victim himself echoes the hypermasculine sentiment of most U.S. prisoners. Homophobia plays a significant role in addressing this issue.

A study by Dr. Helen Eigenberg showed nearly one in four corrections officers in Nebraska believed that homosexuals got what they deserved if raped. And 46 percent of Texas guards believed some inmates deserved to be raped.

Prison rape is often perpetrated by males who self-identify as heterosexuals. In the all-male world of prisons, the restraints of the heterosexual world no longer apply, where in the absence of female objects, men are compelled to use each other as substitutes.

But this activity must coincide with the notions of manhood between the prison code, where a rigid distinction exists between active and passive roles and gender identity is allocated according to those roles. To distance themselves from the notion

of having gay sex, men will often force-feminize their victims. I routinely witnessed gay men who were forced into adopting a female identity, assigned a woman's name, ordered to wear makeup made from pool chalk and underwear dyed red. They were made to wear their uniforms like halter tops and beaten for not talking in a high-pitched voice. Even the guards sometimes referred to them as "ladies" and "girls."

Being gang raped in prison has scarred me in ways that can't be seen or imagined. Today I've been clean and sober for 17 years. I'm a successful businessman, a functioning member of society. But that success has come at a great cost. I've undergone years of therapy to get where I am, but I still don't sleep well at night. I start up at the slightest noise. And as a gay man, I blamed myself for many years. You're degraded so much in there that after a while you start to believe it.

Sexual violence in prison exists not only in direct victimization, but in the daily knowledge that it's happening. It approaches legitimacy in the sense that it's tolerated. Those who perpetrate these acts of violence often receive little or no punishment. To that extent alone, corrections officials and prosecutorial authorities render these acts acceptable.

At the same time, we can't expect a rape victim to report it if he anticipates a lack of responsiveness, a lack of sensitivity or basic

protection by those who are charged with his care.

Please help to make incarceration safe for all prisoners and create an environment where if an inmate is raped, he or she can seek justice without repercussions.

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN WALTON: Thank you, Mr. Parsell.

I again would like to thank all of you for your courage in coming forward and presenting your testimony. It is essential to our mission, and we're very grateful for your willingness to make a public statement under circumstances where I know it's not easy to do so.

I always want to emphasize this, because I think it's important: What we hear coming from all of the witnesses is that there are, unfortunately, people in our society who think it's acceptable for this to occur because people are locked up and maybe because of who they are. And it's not acceptable. From a humanitarian perspective it's not acceptable.

But even if you don't look at it from that perspective, if you look at it from the perspective of selfishness, we have a vested interest in this not happening. Because all of you have suffered either physically, all, clearly, emotionally, and that's something that as a society all of us pay for.

So if for no other reason than self-preservation, as a society, we have an

obligation to aggressively attack this problem.

So, again, we thank you for your
participation.