

## **Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition (TASSC International)**

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The Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition International (TASSC) was founded in 1996 in Washington (DC) by Sister Dianna Ortiz, an American nun who was a victim of torture in Guatemala during the late 1980's. In her novel *The Blindfold's Eyes: My Journey from Torture to Truth* (2002, Orbis Books), Sister Ortiz recalls being abducted from a secured convent compound and being taken to a secret detention centre where she was gang raped, beaten, burned repeatedly with cigarettes, lowered into a pit with dying and dead bodies, and then physically forced to brutally slay a fellow female captive. After a horrific twenty-four hours of interrogation, Sister Ortiz was released when the English-speaking commander of her torturers, whom she later learned was American, ordered the end of her ordeal when he recognized her from media reports. In the months and years that followed, Sister Ortiz embarked on the long and arduous road to healing, vowing along the way to never forget those who had suffered beside her and to speak for those who could no longer speak for themselves.

The Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition International is the only organization founded by and for survivors of torture. Made up of survivors from all over the world, TASSC's mission is to end the practice of torture wherever it occurs and to empower survivors, their families and communities wherever they are. Through a variety of efforts including protest marches, rallies, testimony sharing, and media campaigns, TASSC seeks to increase global awareness of torture and to influence domestic as well as international policy regarding its abolishment. Recognizing that torture survivors often face a number of unique challenges that make traditional forms of treatment difficult, TASSC offers a variety of different programs designed to help these individuals as they attempt to rebuild their lives and put their horrific experiences behind them.

### **INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITIES OF HEALING**

Despite the alarming worldwide prevalence of torture, only a handful of treatment centres exist for survivors. Due to the difficulties that survivors often have trusting those in authoritative positions, traditional forms of therapeutic treatment are regularly ineffective. Through their International Communities of Healing, TASSC seeks to provide survivors with a safe and supportive atmosphere in which they can come together and help

each other heal. International Communities of Healing currently exist across the United States and in countries all over the world, including Canada, Mexico, Bosnia, the Philippines and the Democratic Republic of Congo. From meeting weekly for coffee to forming recreational sports teams and participating in art or self-defence classes, these communities are founded on the notion that survivors are often in the best position to support and empower one another throughout the healing process.

### HELPING HANDS

While it is impossible to calculate the number of torture survivors, recent estimates suggest that there are approximately 500,000 survivors currently residing in the United States alone. Many of these individuals have fled their native countries as a result of persecution and abuse, and therefore often lack financial resources and access to social services. Through its *Helping Hands* program, TASSC seeks to aid survivors as they make the difficult transition back into society and attempt to rebuild their lives. *Helping Hands* provides survivors with medical, psychological and legal assistance, as well as help with tasks such as learning a new language or finding a job. As survivors adjust to their new lives and find stable employment, they are given the opportunity to contribute to the *Helping Hands* emergency fund, through which they can give back to the program and help fellow survivors who are beginning the process.

### TRUTH SPEAKERS

Due to their unique knowledge and experiences, the members of TASSC believe that survivors are often the ultimate experts on the subject of torture. Despite this belief, however, survivors' voices are often noticeably absent from academic and political discussions regarding torture. In response to this exclusion, TASSC has formed *Truth Speakers*, a community of survivors willing to speak out about their experiences of torture. *Truth Speakers* gives presentations to a number of different organizations, including church groups, non-governmental organizations, advocacy groups as well as high school and university classes. By encouraging survivors to speak out about their experiences and help educate the public about the realities of torture, TASSC is attempting to send the message that these individuals have authentic and valuable contributions to make to international discourses concerning torture.

### BREAKING THE SILENCE

TASSC International further disseminates information about the significance of abolition efforts and support services through its documentary *Breaking the Silence: Torture Survivors Speak Out*. The video features mainly a support group setting whereby survivors from countries like the Philippines, Kenya, Lebanon, Syria, Colombia, Honduras, El Salvador, Argentina and Paraguay recount various experiences of torture, persecution, humiliation, threats and deprivation, including being urinated on, beaten, whipped, asphyxiated and shocked.

Some of the more harrowing experiences revealed in the documentary include the testimonies of two women. One shares her story of being forced to hold the cranium of her beheaded husband in her hands. Another woman explains in agonizing detail how, when she was eight months pregnant, she endured a two week ordeal during which time she was brutally raped, beaten, hooded, burned, given electric shocks, had her finger nails removed, and was taunted with food and water yet always deprived of it. She states that while being tortured “*I could no longer feel my body. I only thought about my womb. I felt my baby moving up and down. I felt as if we cried together*”.

Beyond the shocking details of unfathomable torture, *Breaking the Silence* also reinforces the significance of TASSC’s contributions in the lives of individual survivors and their families by demonstrating the extraordinary healing potential of its services, particularly those that enable survivors with shared experiences to gather and support each other by speaking out against human rights violations.

This process of empowerment is further illustrated by the TASSC logo, which is intended to reflect how underneath the protective and supportive umbrella of a community of survivors, a person can rise courageously and safely from the position of bowing under oppression. In addition to the programs listed above, TASSC also helps to coordinate the United Nations International Day in Support of Torture Victims and Survivors each year on June 26<sup>th</sup>. Their members tirelessly lobby government, insisting that perpetrators and supporters of torture be brought to justice, regardless of the high-ranking governmental positions that they may occupy. Through this powerful combination of activism and support, TASSC reminds its members that what has happened to them is not their fault, and encourages them to speak out towards positive change. These courageous survivors are conveying a powerful message regarding the exemplary strength and resilience of the human spirit in the face of tremendous adversity.

### **CONTACT INFORMATION**

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Shannon O'Connor* is currently completing her Master's in Criminology at the University of Ottawa. Since receiving her Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology from Queen's University, Shannon has been concerned with the relationship between mental illness and the criminal justice system. Her concern for torture survivors began with a paper that she wrote for a graduate level criminology course on human rights and crimes against humanity. She is particularly interested in exploring the psychological effects of torture, as well as the various forms of treatment available to support survivors and their families.