

Charity Spotlight: University of Exeter x Devon Rape Crisis & Sexual Abuse Services

Last term, we saw the University of Exeter Law Society celebrate Pro Bono Week by introducing a variety of different community projects to students to raise awareness and allow people to learn more about the pro bono opportunities surrounding us. The Pro Bono team had the honour to host a Q&A with Mandy Barnes, one of the Founders and Training Managers of DRCSAS.

Devon was one of the first to launch this service in 2011 after the Ministry of Justice provided start-up funding. Prior to this, there had been a Rape Crisis helpline in Exeter, but it had closed years before due to lack of funding. The team was fairly small, starting with trustees and only three members of staff, and slowly introduced trained volunteers throughout the year, opening up its telephone helpline in December 2011. The services continue to support survivors of various ages and backgrounds alongside some amazing achievements:

- DRCSAS prides themselves on having trained over 100 women volunteers and receiving an accreditation for their tireless work to help the community.
- DRCSAS offers the chance to try group work as well as special Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing style of recovery.
- DRCSAS successfully opened two branches in Torquay and Barnstaple, as well as expanding the Exeter offices to include bespoke specialist rooms.
- DRCSAS is the winner of the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service 2019.

Volunteering with DRCSAS

Volunteers are provided with full accredited training over the course of six months, after which their main responsibilities include providing support for the survivors of sexual abuse through the helpline as well as the email support service. Secondary roles include campaigning, promoting publicity, fundraising and activism.

DRCSAS Projects:

“

Older Women's Project

There is a chilling silence and invisibility around sexual violence against older women (aged 55 and over) in the South West of England and more widely across the United Kingdom. For some women this sexual violence will be recent and ongoing; for others it can go back decades to childhood, leaving them with a potential life sentence of trauma. Many will have experienced sexual violence multiple times.

The South West Rape Crisis Centre Partnership, which is made up of Somerset and Avon Rape & Sexual Abuse Support, Devon Rape Crisis & Sexual Abuse Services, The Women's Centre

Cornwall and the Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre Gloucestershire, undertook research to understand sexual violence experienced by women aged 55 and over (at any time in their life), themes around impact and coping strategies, and, information on barriers that may prevent older

”

women from accessing specialist support services.

“

Homeless Women's Project

Since February 2019, DRCSAS has been running a project supporting women with experiences of trauma who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in Exeter. Working with two other local organisations, St Petrocks Resource Centre and Gabriel House Hostel, the project supports vulnerable women to develop coping strategies and work towards recovery from trauma.

Recognising that violence and abuse is both a cause and consequence of women's homelessness, and that this group of women find it especially difficult to access specialist support, our Homeless Women's Project provides a responsive, flexible, and effective service to homeless women in Exeter. Our Specialist Support Worker for Homeless Women provides trauma services within the settings and communities where homeless women live or meet, through a combination of drop-in sessions and scheduled meetings, depending on the needs and preferences of the individual woman. We work through building relationships with women and providing a safe space for them to explore and understand their experiences. We also equip them with skills to deal with trauma symptoms such as panic attacks, flashbacks and nightmares, increasing their ability to cope and move towards recovery.

We are also developing and delivering training in trauma interventions for staff working in homelessness settings, along with resources that can be used across partner agencies. This ensures that the project will have a sustainable and meaningful impact.

Common myths and misconceptions about Rape & Sexual Abuse

MYTH: Rapists are strangers.

FACT: Around 90% of rapes are committed by known people, often by someone whom the survivor previously trusted or even loved. Rapists can be friends, colleagues, clients, neighbours, family, partners or exes.

MYTH: Women are most likely to be raped outside, in dark alleyways late at night, so should not go out alone.

FACT: 90% of women are raped in their homes, in their workplaces and other settings where they have previously felt safe.

MYTH: Women cannot rape.

FACT: The majority of sexual assaults are committed by men against women and children. Nonetheless, a small number of women do perpetrate sexual violence. Often women and children who've been sexually assaulted or abused by women, for example within their family or a same-sex relationship, are particularly fearful that they will not be believed, that their experiences won't be taken seriously or won't be considered 'as bad' as being raped by a man. This can make it difficult for these survivors to access services or justice.

In law, only a man can commit the offence of Rape [S.1 (1) SOA 2003], as this is defined as penetration with a penis. Non-consensual penetration with something other than a penis is defined as sexual assault by penetration. For those who've experienced sexual violence that involved penetration by something other than a penis, whoever the perpetrator was, these legal definitions can feel restrictive, and as if their experience is not considered as serious.

Anonymous Helpline: 01392 204 174
support@devonrapecrisis.org.uk