“Put resources into solutions that actually address the root causes”: Staci Haines, founder of generative somatics and GenerationFIVE on intersectionality, the interconnectedness of social issues, and interrupting abuse before it happens.

Lissa Harris

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Lissa Harris: Could you please start by introducing yourself and your organization, and describe the problem that you're addressing and how you're going about addressing it?

Staci Haines: The organization I ran was called generationFIVE. The mission of generationFIVE is to end the sexual abuse of children within five generations. It was not a service-based organization, rather a social change organization. It's looking at child sexual abuse as a consequence of social norms, cultural norms, economies that are based on power-over.

Really looking at child sexual abuse is obviously a very intimate, painful, and traumatizing experience. It is a training in domination and harm—as part of the worst of humans, instead of the best of humans. In the US, child sexual abuse started as more of a political and social change issue, then became almost solely a therapeutic one-on-one issue, and almost got the politics stripped out of it. Part of what we were doing in generationFIVE is saying, let's put the social analysis back into this issue and really look at its root causes. To do not just services around child sexual abuse, but how would we literally end it? That was our core question.

One of the projects that became the founding of generationFIVE was focus groups with about 300 people. We gathered people from different kinds of professions and communities. Some of those folks were service providers and worked for the state Child Protective Services. Others were therapists. Many groups were adult survivors of child sexual abuse. Some groups were folks who worked in social change or were movement builders, movement leaders. Others were community-focused, like Asian Pacific Islander communities, Latinx communities, Black communities, et cetera. We asked all of those focus groups, “What would it take to end the sexual abuse of children?” And for most people it was a new question. Even folks who've been in the field a long time. But out of that, what we really saw is: services are essential, and re-politicizing the issue, understanding how it's a part of the society and economy, and a power-over setup was necessary.

What emerged from the focus groups was a call for restorative justice and transformative justice approaches. Because incarceration was not going to work as the solution to ending child sexual abuse. What struck me is that in all of the groups that were adult survivors of child sexual abuse, that is not what people wanted. What people wanted was to heal, to transform their relationship with this person who hurt them, to mend family systems and community. It was much more a longing for transformation than it was for incarceration or even a strictly punitive approach.

Last thing I'll say about all of this, because it is a lot, is that we really look at transformation. That people who've been impacted, or survivors of child sexual abuse, can regain safety and agency and thrive. For people who didn't interrupt [the abuse], or were bystanders to the dynamic—other family members, other community members—their transformation is to become proactive interrupters and changers of dynamics and help prevent child sexual abuse. And then for people who offended or who hurt children, their transformation is active accountability and in some ways rehumanization and healing. And for all the different roles to become active in ending and changing the social dynamics around child sexual abuse. Transformative justice around the issue is really what we focused on, and we did a lot of leadership development and capacity building to support leaders in either integrating this work into their already [existing] social change movements or into their community-based work.

Lissa Harris: Can you talk a little bit about your intended audiences? Who were the main people that your organization was speaking to, and how did you go about reaching them?

Staci Haines: We ran these very substantial, sometimes three-day, sometimes 20-day capacity building trainings that were about helping people understand the dynamics around child sexual

abuse, helping lay it into social issues and show how it's connected to sexism, racism, homophobia, and the exploitative economy. Laying it inside its context, really talking about the dynamics of trauma, the typical responses when people find out about child sexual abuse, which is so often either freaking out, vigilantism, minimization, and denial. They're typical trauma responses.

Our audiences with those trainings were either people who were already doing social change work, so partnering with other social-change organizations who are already base-building or doing community-based organizing or engaged—so, already engaged leaders. And then also adult survivors of child sexual abuse who really wanted to be involved in making change not only in their families or their religious institution, wherever the abuse happened, but also wanting to be a part of broader social change.

Lissa Harris: So mostly working with frontline organizations and survivors.

Staci Haines: Frontline organizations, survivors, sometimes movement-building organizations. Exactly.

Lissa Harris: So less about policy and more about supporting the people in the community doing the work.

Staci Haines: Exactly. Now, there were policy change campaigns that are relevant to run, but the thing is, child sexual abuse is already illegal. It doesn't matter. This is the thing. It's not an issue that can be legislated because it's already illegal, but that hasn't actually decreased the amount that it happens. We need a different intervention.

Policy change is a tool. For me, a good piece of policy change around child sexual abuse would be around the US sex offender registry. Currently communities are alerted when a registered sex offender has moved into a community. To me, an interesting piece of policy work would be that not only would a community be alerted that a registered sex offender has moved in but there would be funding to do community education around child sexual abuse, its dynamics and how to change it. Sex offenders, and reporting them to communities, isn’t going to change anything [by itself], because the dynamic is that the wealthier the community is, the more they drive out registered sex offenders. The poorer or more impacted a community is, the higher concentration of registered sex offenders live there, because that community doesn't have the same resources to drive people out. So it could perpetuate some of the same dynamics of oppression.

Lissa Harris: What do you think makes your approach distinct from others that are working in a similar sphere, and why do you approach it the way that you do?

Staci Haines: I have a couple of thoughts on this. Stop It Now started around the same time we did. And of course we're called generationFIVE and they're called Stop It Now. We used to laugh at each other about our different approaches.

To me, it's all about mobilizing people into real solutions. I don't think a generation is realistic (to end the sexual abuse of children). And, I would love to see that happen. I think the dynamics of trauma are much too intense, and I think child sexual abuse gets hidden. And partly the hidden nature of it is a good survival strategy, but the hidden nature is also what perpetuates it.

What's unique about generationFIVE is we keep asking the questions, “What are the root causes of child sexual abuse and why does it happen at the scale that it does?” Lots of people have stats where we're looking at one in three girls and one in six boys are sexually abused before they turn 18. So that makes it a systemic problem, a social problem, and it's an epidemic.

And we have to get away from this individualistic interpretation that it's just a bad apple. It's just this bad person, father, mother, uncle, priest, baseball coach. It's like, yes, there are people that enact this, but if we ask about root causes, we ask, what builds offenders? Why does someone become an adult or an older teen who sexually abuses children? And the factors are multiple. There is neglect. People being neglected in their own childhoods or people being physically abused puts them at higher risk to then sexually abuse. But again, like we learn through feminist movements, it's a dynamic of power. It's often a dynamic of offenders feeling powerless.

In our trainings, we would invite in prior offenders of child sexual abuse who'd done a huge amount of accountability work, therapeutic work, and were already looking to be a part of change. And it was so intense how many people couldn't tolerate even sitting with someone who had sexually abused a child and were now accountable, had gone through the processes of change. So even that approach [is different], that we want to work with people who have sexually abused children, or people who might [abuse children but] interrupt it before it happens, but not demonize those people. Because we all know someone. And so much of the standard way of looking at this issue is to demonize those who offend.

And I mean, I get it. It's very, very painful. But we were looking much more at taking it on as a social change issue, addressing root causes, and looking for the transformation that so many

survivors were longing for, rather than increasing sentencing laws and then having no services when people are imprisoned. There are so many ways we address it that literally make the problem worse.

Lissa Harris: Is there an example that illustrates the impact of the work that you do? And how do you know your work is making an impact?

Staci Haines: I love that you're asking this question, and I don't think any of us know if we're making the impact at the scale we want to. To me, transformative justice as an approach has really taken fire over the last 15 years, but mostly not around child sexual abuse. We were part of forwarding that whole idea and approach, and I think a lot of people are trying to use transformative justice within their communities around adult sexual assault and around other kinds of violence within either social movements or communities. But I think it's a question we all have to keep asking really honestly. Is what we're doing literally lowering the rates of child sexual abuse? Are we allowing for more transformation and healing? Are we allowing for the social change from power over to a power with? I think this is a very good set of questions, and I don't know that any of us truthfully know the answer yet. I hope folks are very honest about it.

I'll tell you a good success story. One of the people who went through our year-long training around transformative justice and child sexual abuse was a therapist. And therapists are mandated reporters. So if you hear about child sexual abuse, you have to report it to the state and to the police in California, which is where this was. So basically she was like, okay, Child and Family Services is overwhelmed, underfunded, and the main tool they have is to go to the family, do an interview, and then remove the child and put them in foster care. One of the things we know is that children's risk of child sexual abuse increases threefold in foster care. These are all the facts we have to look at and ask, is what we're doing working?

So what she did instead is she took this transformative justice response. She knew she needed to report as well, but the first thing she did was she sat down with the grandma and the daughter. It was the uncle who sexually abused the girl, but the uncle was the major breadwinner of the family and also lived in the house. And she went, okay, there's so many dynamics here. Let's first sit down with the grandma and the granddaughter. And basically she said, listen, who are your communities of support? Who can we organize? These are the bystanders. Who can we organize around you to support the two of you through this, and who can we educate enough to not blame the girl? Because victim blaming is such a big dynamic.

They went to their church community and some other community. She did education around the issue and said, here's how you can be a good ally. Here's how you can support. Don't do vigilantism against the uncle. Support the girl and do not blame her and don't start calling her bad names, because she was hurt. Here's how you can support the grandma. The first thing was to organize the support around the parent, the grandma, and the granddaughter. Then they brought the uncle in and said, okay, one option is you get arrested. Another option is you volunteer to go into treatment, and we organize support around you, and you need to move out. So they figured out he could move in with his brother while still giving money to the household that he was supporting so that they aren't stripped of resources. He volunteered to go into treatment and she brought his brother and other people around as accountability for him.

She took that entire plan, which is a transformative justice plan. She organized the whole thing and went to Child and Family Services and said, “I need to report this situation of child sexual abuse. Here's what we're doing. Here's the support the girl is getting. Here's where the uncle's going into treatment. Here's what's happening for the grandma in the community.” She reported the whole thing, and basically Child and Family Services said, that is more than we could ever do. Thank you. Please report back in six months as to how it's going. Because it was more than that state agency had the capacity to do so.

Lissa Harris: It's very heartening, but also I'm trying to put myself in this therapist's shoes. It's a phenomenal amount of work, and taking that gap of time to set all of this up before you do the reporting could leave you vulnerable as a mandated reporter. What's the time urgency on reporting? And if you can't put a solution together, that's scary.

Staci Haines: Yeah. That’s the thing about people becoming social change agents. Once we really get into understanding those deep root causes of child sexual abuse and how much of what we do now does not work, then taking the risk of going, okay, I'm not going to report for a month. I'm going to do all this organizing work first, but I'm going to actually be taking better care of the child by doing that. It's interesting, because when you give a case to an overloaded caseworker, they sometimes don't touch it for a month or for two months. And the people working inside those systems who are overworked totally know how under-resourced they are in actually trying to take care of families. So it's funny. It's like, yes, it's a risk, but once folks get what's going on and what could help instead, how backed up our systems are and what the root causes are, I think she felt like, I'm totally down to do this because I can actually start to help and make a difference instead of just reporting and knowing it's going in a file.

Lissa Harris: There are so many ways that this goes awry. More support for finding solutions that are centered around what the people in the situation actually need in order to prevent more harm—well, it's not what we have now.

Staci Haines: I'm so with you. I got so inspired. Nobody helped me [when I was abused]. I just bore through until I got to an age where I could start healing, which was in college. And then I took on trying to heal my whole family, which is the opposite of what my role should have been. But so many of us do that. So many of us get no help as kids whatsoever. And it was really those early focus groups with survivors where person after person after person said, what I long for is other adults to step in who aren't going to make me bad, but who also will hold the person accountable, but fundamentally not throw them away either. Just how much people wanted accountability, plus healing, plus some kind of intact experience.

Lissa Harris: In my experience, I did not [go through the court or Child Protective Services system]. Part of the reason was that the revelation came within my own family. I told other family members. And the offender was a teen himself, so there was a whole sturm und drang within the family about getting the law involved. And the law did not get involved, and I was not of an age to have any say in that. I think my mom indeed once consulted a lawyer who advised her not to do anything legal, because they would put me on the stand and traumatize me further. I was rescued from the situation, but there was no accountability and it continues to fragment my family to this day.

Staci Haines: Isn't it intense? It fragmented my family, too. People do not have the capacity to deal. It's such a deep and traumatizing issue. And then of course, given the numbers, half the people in our families who can't deal with it are also survivors who've never dealt with it. Or people who sexually abuse other kids.

In California there are sexual offender treatment programs where you don't have to go to prison first. You can actually go in voluntarily and say, “I am worried I'm going to do this.” Or, “I have done this and I want to stop.” Which is something we really, really have to normalize. Like AA.

Lissa Harris: It's so hard for people who don't have contact with this issue to even contemplate dealing with a sexual predator as a human being.

Staci Haines: Exactly. And if we don't, we'll never solve this issue. The more isolated a person is, the more likely they are to offend again. It is just all counterintuitive for people [in their] initial freak out. But we have to get past the freak out, and in your family or mine, get the bystanders

educated enough to behave well. Get the survivors supported. It's huge. And then so often it's us as survivors that are asked to do that for our families.

Lissa Harris: This has been a fantastic side excursion here. And now I have a tougher question for you. Is there something you tried that didn't work but that taught you something important, that maybe others could learn from?

Staci Haines: I love this question. It's so good for us to share our failures. Because then we know, well, that was an experiment and that didn't work. Let's not do it again. Let's keep learning from each other.

I would say a couple of things. First of all, because we had such a big view on how child sexual abuse is a part of other structural oppressions, and we need to work on them all together, I think sometimes we were less than clear about very pragmatic [questions like], What do we do in the next year about child sexual abuse? What community-based experiments do we want to do? We took these people through these year-long trainings and then went, cool, what experiment do you want to do? And I think that was too overwhelming.

Some people had a success story. Other people did a lot of activism at false memory events. They protested outside the bookstores [where false memory authors were featured]. Other people did community education events. All these are great. But I think when I look to the interventions, folks would go through the training and then join one of those so we could really test something like, "Okay, so what happens when we do a long series of community education events, a bunch of incidences of child sexual abuse get revealed and we do responses on those?" Had we put a whole bunch of our resources into very particular interventions, it would've given us more information.

I also think that one of our interventions [should have been] coming up with a policy reform either on the county or the state level. And one policy reform we should have tried is what I said before: let's attach to the state budget that anytime there's an announcement that a registered sex offender has moved into the community, what comes along with that is funding of community education and community organizing. That would've been a super cool policy campaign for us to take on, because it would've kept bringing resources. Transformative justice takes a lot of relationships and resources to be relevant and effective. State resources are needed to help support that. So, some of the mistakes were not choosing two or three concrete things that we could have channeled all these folks we trained into. We wanted to be responsive to what people came up with and what they felt was relevant for their community and context.

That feels important. But I also think more resources and support and focused community organizing or community campaigns would be more relevant.

Lissa Harris: Aside from funding, what are the main systemic barriers to getting this work done that you face? What are the big problems that stand in your way?

Staci Haines: The big problem is we need about a thousand times more people doing the work. When I look at really big issues, like if we look at the racial justice uprisings in 2016 and 2020, millions of people got involved. There are thousands of grassroots organizations that are doing the work of ending white supremacy and structural racism. There are thousands of policy people working on it. That isn't really the case with child sexual abuse, because it's seen as a therapeutic issue only, or like a state family services issue. We don't have thousands of people mobilizing to end child sexual abuse within one generation. So I think one of the things we need are campaigns that focus on getting millions of people involved, and then we need projects to get them involved in, and I don't think we have those set yet.

I think we're at the beginning of movement-building around this issue, and I think it would help us to think about it that way. We want to mobilize millions of people to be able to talk about this in their families, talk about it in their communities, map the resources in their communities so there's some place for people who've offended to go. There's some place for bystanders to get educated. And there's enough support for survivors. And really look at what the local and statewide or country-wide policy campaigns are that will channel more resources into this issue. We need to start looking at it as strategic movement-building, knowing that we need to get millions of people involved.

Lissa Harris: Can you talk about how shifting cultural norms is part of your work, and what strategies are effective at getting that done?

Staci Haines: There's so many things. We really need to shift this norm, in a deep way, that children are not full human beings. And that we can manipulate kids into not telling. And that kids are resilient, it won't matter anyway. There are some real beliefs about young people and children that need to pivot to that children are sacred. And they're our next generation, and we want to do everything we can to take care of them. That's one. Another is we have to shift this idea that people who sexually abuse are forever evil. It is a kind of denial that keeps us stuck. The people who do it need to be accountable, but they also need to heal and be rehumanized.

And I look at some of the campaigns around how we criminalize and make drug users evil. Or how Trump makes all immigrants evil. It's a tactic that gets used over and over again for political gain. And I think in child sexual abuse, it gets used to help people stay in denial. We just have to break it.

If we think about the mass output of new ideas and norms, that happens a lot through movies and Hollywood. It happens through Netflix series. I would love to see us engage the major media makers not just around how horrible child sexual abuse is but also start to give images and possibilities of offenders being able to heal. Of a community or family being able to organize around this transformative justice response. We need different images other than people just freaking out. I've talked a lot about social change issues for my whole life. People's attention span, which is mostly their emotional capacity attention span, lasts about 15 to 90 seconds around child sexual abuse. That's the attention span we have to grab and help grow. It will take generations, but it's okay. Let's get it done.

Lissa Harris: Can you talk about the role that partnerships and coalitions play in your work, who your main partners are, and how you cultivate and maintain those relationships?

Staci Haines: Anyone who's looking at social change, child sexual abuse is relevant to that issue. Even if we look at climate, if we look at racial justice, if we look at gender justice, and the numbers of people who've been impacted by child sexual abuse, those folks are in your community, those folks are on your staff. An intersectional approach to this can happen with any grassroots organization or community-building or community-based organization that's looking at social change for more equity, more freedom, more climate justice.

The easiest places are of course rape crisis centers and gender justice centers, folks who are already dealing with and knowing about sexual abuse. Also anyone doing criminal justice reform. Because they're already really looking deeply at what doesn't work around incarceration, what doesn't work in a punitive response that gives no resources for transformation. Also those folks already know that hardly anyone actually goes through the criminal legal system for child sexual abuse.

So criminal justice reform, abolitionists, gender justice. And then folks doing restorative justice. Because those folks are already looking at transformation. They're just looking at it after someone has already been incarcerated for what they did. Lastly, folks looking at community empowerment. How do we as a working class or poor community, as a targeted community, become more empowered, have more agency about what's happening in and to our

communities? Those are the places that are totally natural allies. And they're already organized. This is also helpful: take places that are already organized and then bring in the relevance of child sexual abuse to what they're doing and the possibility for healing, transformation, accountability, and agency-building. Because folks know what's happening in their communities, it's just that nobody wants to talk about it. But it's useful to move with places that are already organized.

Lissa Harris: What big insights or big lessons could be taken from your work that other people working on ending child sexual violence can learn from? What advice would you give for people who want to go about doing this work?

Staci Haines: Don't do it alone. Ask the question of what's the root cause, and work at the root cause. Because that's the quickest way we're going to end this. People talk about primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention. And when I look at services, which are totally needed, that's not prevention. That's doing the cleanup after the poison was already dumped in the river. We want to get upstream to the place where the poison is being produced and say, we need to stop producing poison and stop dumping it in the river. Ask, what are the root causes? Ask what is relevant to the communities I am working with or organizing? And create your strategy based on that. Maybe there's already an anti-violence program going on. Awesome. Partner with the anti-violence program and bring in child sexual abuse and expand out the education and the resources that way.

Another big thing is look, map your community, your county, your state, and ask, what programs are there to help people who are thinking about sexually abusing kids, or who have, to help them transform and be accountable and then be socially active? And can those programs be accessed without going to prison? Can they be volunteer-based, where people do not have to enter the criminal legal system to actually start healing and being accountable? Those are some of the things I'd invite people to look at.

Almost anyone can be organized into being an ally or a resource around child sexual abuse. Therapists can be, social workers can be, adult survivors of child sexual abuse, because we care. So we can also ask, who can we invite and then educate to play a role in ending this? I think it's going to be very much community-based organizing that helps us do that, as well as, of course, the relevant policy changes and enough relevant transformative services that both survivors and offenders have a place to go.

Lissa Harris: What do you think is most needed from other actors or partners to advance change?

Staci Haines: Stop thinking that incarceration and foster care are going to solve child sexual abuse. They're not going to. And the more we stop putting a ton of resources there and instead put resources into solutions that actually address the root causes and meet the needs of survivors in the communities where this has happened, and meet the transformative needs and accountability needs of offenders, the faster we're going to end this.

Lissa Harris: What do you think has the potential to make a significant impact on the field in the next five years? Is there anything that you look towards that might change the dynamics here?

Staci Haines: To take on this issue as an issue we're going to end, to take on this issue as a broad social change issue rather than just a services issue, that's key. Trying to do this internationally also feels really key. Trying to [find] a collective vision to end the sexual abuse of children and actually do shared strategy. The field has been atomized. And with very few resources. But resourcing this vision and then continuing to convene leaders who are doing this in their countries and regions to grapple with and build shared strategy will have a much, much bigger effect than atomized, small, under-resourced organizations doing great work in their communities, but not part of a bigger movement.

And the last thing is that criminal justice reform work, abolition work, is totally relevant to child sexual abuse. The more funding we put into prisons, whether it's private or state funding, the less effective we're going to be on child sexual abuse. For everyone to see how connected that is and how restorative justice work, criminal justice reform work, abolition work, and child sexual abuse work start to come together. Because we have joint aims.

Lissa Harris: What does it take to get the organizations that you're working with to really feel responsible for this issue, to really own that it's something that they need to engage with?

Staci Haines: I think all it takes is an invitation. What amazes me is when we call folks and say, "Hey, we know you're doing intimate partner violence prevention work. Can we talk to you about child sexual abuse?" Most people are like, "Oh, holy shit. Totally." It's because nobody talks about it. So I think it's not hard. I mean, we have a lot of training resources, a lot of educational resources and publications. Those are places to start. But I think it's mostly because people don't bring it up. Lots of folks would say, "God, we're so relieved. Half of us are survivors. We

didn't know what to do about it. We're really relieved you're here. We're happy to partner with you." I think mostly it's that: having leaders bring it up, have resources, and then have projects or interventions that they're inviting folks into.

Lissa Harris: Is there anything that we didn't get to that you wanted to make sure that we talk about?

Staci Haines: Having lived through this, and having heard thousands of people's stories, I have a lot of compassion for how intense and hurtful and traumatizing this issue is for survivors, for the family members around them who know, or for the community. And it's so profoundly polarizing. Because we don't have enough collective capacity to say, we can do this, we can hang with this. This is very painful, but we can do it. Instead, people splinter, polarize, and act all kinds of a mess. So I just want to say, okay, come on everybody. We need to develop the emotional capacity to hang with the issue through to the moments of transformation. And I feel like it's all of our responsibility to build that emotional capacity.

Then the other thing would be, see the intersections. Sexism, racism, exploitative capitalism. All of these are connected to child sexual abuse, even though they don't seem connected. But if we don't see the connections, we will come up with not good solutions. I think a lot about women of color. I'm thinking particularly of this Black woman who was a part of generationFIVE, and she said, how much the state already polices my community, surveils my community. We're trying to get the state out of our homes, not more into them. Because it's so debilitating and oppressive. And if white folks who aren't thinking about that organize all these increased state responses, it's not going to work. It is not the solution. So seeing the intersectionality is so key then to understanding the interventions and solutions we're coming up with.

Lissa Harris: Thank you so much for talking with me, this has been great.

Lissa Harris is a freelance reporter, science writer (MIT '08), and former local news entrepreneur based in upstate New York. She is currently working as a consultant on capacity-building and local solutions-oriented community projects in the rural Catskills.

***This conversation has been edited and condensed.*