

Just Detention International

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://justdetention.org/tom-cahill-hero-of-the-movement-to-end-prisoner-rape-passes-away/>

Campaign and Advocacy

We are heartbroken by the passing of former JDI President Tom Cahill, who channeled the pain from his gang rape in a Texas jail to become one of the nations most effective voices for ending prisoner rape. Tom took over JDI in the early 1980s, turning what was a loose advocacy group into a powerful human rights organization. When JDI secured the passage of the Prison Rape Elimination Act of 2003 the first federal civil law to address this crisis it represented the culmination of years of advocacy by the organization that Tom had built from the ground up. Tom stepped down as Board President in 2006, but he remained involved with JDI as a member of our Survivor Council. He died peacefully in his sleep on June 11, in Cluny, France, where he had been living since 2014. He was 84.

It is impossible to overstate the important role Tom Cahill played in bringing prisoner rape into the national consciousness, said Linda McFarlane, JDI's Executive Director. Tom spoke out against sexual abuse behind bars at a time when few were willing to do so. His tireless advocacy and courage inspired countless people to join the fight to stop this crisis among them elected officials, human rights activists, and an untold number of fellow survivors, who saw their own story reflected in Toms. He was a leader and mentor to everyone at JDI, and a dear friend.

Toms leadership role at JDI dates back to 1982, when he took over People Organized to Stop the Rape of Incarcerated Persons (POSRI), as JDI was then known. Tom had read about POSRI and its founder, Russell Dan Smith, in a newspaper column; when he couldn't locate Smith, he decided to take the helm. He ran POSRI out of his camper van, hammering out press statements and research briefs and sending them to anyone he thought might listen. In 1986, he joined forces with Stephen Donny Donaldson, a gay rights activist and prisoner rape survivor. Under their shared leadership Donny in New York and Tom in northern California the organizations influence grew. By the mid-1990s, JDI which was known as Stop Prisoner Rape from 1993 to 2008 had a Board, a website, and a national reputation as the leading advocacy group fighting to end sexual abuse in detention.

Like many of the organizations early leaders, Tom was himself a survivor of rape in custody. His assault occurred in a San Antonio jail in 1968, following an arrest for an act of civil disobedience. After being placed in packed cell, he was gang raped and tortured over a period of 24 hours. Later Tom would learn that he had been set up; one of the jailers had falsely told his cellmates that Tom was a child molester, and promised them extra rations of Jello if they taught him a lesson.

I used to feel shame and humiliation about what happened to me in that Texas jail, Tom would later write. Eventually, I came to realize that it was not my shame it was my countrys shame. Tom firmly believed that prisoner rape could be stopped, and that its prevalence represented a profound failure on the part of the government. This message resonated with elected officials during the lead up to PREAs passage, including Senator Ted Kennedy, who was one of PREAs Senate sponsors. All of us in Congress are grateful for your role in helping to pass the Prison Rape Elimination Act, Kennedy wrote to Tom in a letter. The nation owes you a huge debt of gratitude for this impressive reform.

Tom was JDI's Board President when PREA became law. He stepped aside from JDI's day-to-day operations in 2001, believing that the organization needed new voices professional advocates and lawyers who could take our work to an even higher level. Back in 1984, when Tom was running POSRI out of his camper van, he told a reporter that my fantasy is to obtain office space to work against the injustices of the prison system. His dream became a reality in 2001, when we opened our first office. Today, JDI has three offices in Los Angeles, Washington, DC, and Johannesburg and 25 staff members and dozens of volunteers. JDI's stunning growth, and the lasting impact the organization has had on prisoners rights, is a testament to Toms courage, determination, and vision.

Tom never left the movement he built. Until his death, he stayed in regular touch with JDI staff, giving advice and cheering on our efforts. We are so sad that hes gone, and forever grateful that we had him as our colleague, leader, and friend.

