

Dealing with a Changing Culture

An Interview with
Janet Jensen, Founder, The Jensen Project



Janet Jensen

EDITORS' NOTE Janet Jensen is the founder of Human Investments, a foundation established in 1987 with a mission of promoting the welfare of women and children, and a commitment to supporting compassion, education, and integrity.

Following graduation from college, she advanced up the corporate ladder at the Raytheon Company. A tragic personal experience led her to start Human Investments, a foundation whose mission was to help survivors of sexual assault receive the assistance and counseling they require.

She recently launched The Jensen Project, a social awareness initiative committed to encouraging empathy in young children by providing them

with the tools and resources needed to teach them compassion in various areas of their lives.

What are the goals of your foundation?

We are committed to working with college students and younger children because something must be done about sexual assault, bullying, and hazing. We recognize the urgency of reaching children as early as possible, as they enter school, to give them the emotional and spiritual tools they lack, such as empathy and compassion. Our primary goal is to ensure that this next generation is better prepared to deal with a changing culture. In addition, I am starting to develop a clearinghouse that can provide resources for parents and educators who want to teach children about compassion and empathy. Every time someone is abused, assaulted, or bullied, we suffer as a society.

You've been working with survivors of sexual assault for some 30 years. How did that happen?

One afternoon while I was jogging at a park near my apartment complex in Dallas, I was sexually assaulted. The trauma of the experience combined with the insensitivity of the authorities and hospital personnel was an experience I'll never forget. It happened so fast and yet the painful memory stayed with me more than 30 years.

I eventually took a course to be certified as a volunteer at the rape crisis center.

I also started pushing for legislative changes to help victims. I assisted in the production of the first television documentary about sexual assault. Within a year, I developed a volunteer program at a private hospital and began a foundation to help survivors and fund rape crisis centers.

In 1982, it was very difficult to talk about rape. Most people never believed it would happen to them or any of their loved ones even though one out of four women from 18 to 32 had been assaulted in some way or another.

Despite the public discussion, the insensitivity and the stigma remain.

Your most recent initiative involves college students?

Yes. While new laws have fostered many changes around the crime of sexual assault and how a victim is treated, very little has changed at the college level to my thinking. Very often, when there's an allegation of a sexual assault, students are fined, they are disciplined, sometimes they are expelled, but the punishment doesn't match the crime. Sometimes nothing at all happens.

Throughout their lives, many women have been led to believe it's best not to say anything if it happens to them – that silence is the best way to carry on. I've seen this firsthand. A stigma is still attached to being the victim of a rape.

Right now, I am working with two northeastern universities. When I got to the campuses, I wondered what was going to happen and how we would be received. I was pleased with the reception. The members of the administration and faculty are very dedicated to their students. One of the first things we did was launch a program with a video competition that gives students an opportunity to talk about bullying, hazing, and sexual assault so they can reflect on the culture of their college. More men joined the competition than women, and there was a very sensitive side to the pieces they created.

My effort at the universities is designed to encourage a campus-wide discussion about these topics. I want to reach everyone on campus and have the entire community involved in a dialogue about the problem, which is pervasive. I want to create a much-needed openness and awareness. One young woman who did a documentary, I was convinced had been sexually abused by the way she responded. There are, I am sure, many others like her who are not speaking out, and we need to reach them.

What is the role of parents in this formative process?

Obviously, there are good parents and bad parents. If your kids get away with anything and everything at a young age, what will happen when they get into junior high and high school? By then, it's extremely difficult to change their behavior.

As a society, we must have a greater commitment to better parenting because it's not something school systems can remediate if there are deficiencies. Parenting requires time and effort. It's more than buying your child the latest iPad or enrolling him or her in the most competitive classes and activities. Disciplining requires commitment and love. These are lessons that have to be learned at home and reinforced in the classroom.

My efforts are also being directed toward teaching young children about the need for compassion and empathy. Bullying, hazing, and sexual assault all result from children who do not have compassion. Compassion isn't something that you can learn from reading a book or watching a television program. If parents don't display it to their children at an early age, children can grow up with a deficiency in their value systems.

What role does the entertainment industry play in influencing society's values?

I watch television, but I often find it an unsettling experience. There's so much abusive behavior and violence, and we have to wonder: What has the greatest effect on children and young people? Their minds are being filled with constant negative images. Even prime-time television excels in violence and sex. What should be the commitment of the entertainment industry to young people? As much as our culture rails against crimes like sexual assault, they seem to be popularized on television shows. The Internet has increased the problem exponentially.

In addition, we're all familiar with the pervasive violence and sex on video games that young people play. Hundreds of studies have been done that link violence and sex in films and TV with aggressive and anti-social behavior in later life. Is it any wonder our society faces the crisis that it does? If our work can make a small difference in teaching parents and children the value of old-fashioned empathy and compassion, we will consider ourselves successful. ●