

Promoting Healing and Healthy Futures for Survivors

An Interview with Janet Jensen, Founder, The Jensen Project

EDITORS' NOTE Janet Jensen is the Founder and Executive Director of The Jensen Project where she leverages her strengths in business, innovation, and creativity to cultivate opportunities for individuals and organizations dedicated to empowering survivors of sexual violence and reducing exploitation. While she holds a bachelor's degree in business administration and a Series 7 license from FINRA, Jensen is an entrepreneur at heart and has launched multiple businesses, foundations and social initiatives. She served on the boards of numerous organizations dedicated to social change and self-empowerment and is a frequent speaker on college and university campuses, sharing her personal story of trauma and resilience and promoting an environment of compassion, empathy, and support for survivors.



Janet Jensen

ORGANIZATION BRIEF The Jensen Project (thejensenproject.org) is a nonprofit organization fueling strategic partnerships in the fight against sexual violence.

What was your vision for creating The Jensen Project and how do you define its mission?

The origins of the Project go back to the early 1980s. My vision has always been to provide access to opportunities and resources that promote healing and healthy futures for victims. I cannot emphasize enough how important it is for survivors to know that they are seen, heard, valued, and supported. I know

this because I, too, am a survivor of sexual assault. It happened one sunny afternoon when I was jogging in a park, and the details of it are still vivid in my mind. Equally vivid is the response of the police and medical personnel when I reported the attack – their skepticism, their detachment, their apparent belief that either I was making it all up or that if it did happen, it wasn't all that serious. Decades have passed but those two moments are still frozen in time. That is the life-altering impact that this horrific crime can have.

Out of that experience came my determination to create a better tomorrow for others like me. Following my assault, I decided to get more directly involved in making a difference in my local community. I underwent training and began volunteering as a victim advocate for a local rape crisis center in Texas. Ten years later, I had helped more than 50 survivors and, while I was grateful to have been of support to them, it led me to the realization that the scope of victimization was enormous and much more was needed to address the complex challenges facing survivors. I reached out to several national organizations and became a public speaker and advocate. In 2017, I founded The Jensen Project with the mission of combating sexual violence against women and aiding the victims of such violence. We do that by honoring their lived experiences, validating their voices, and collaborating strategically with other stakeholders to create and support sustainable solutions.

How has the work of The Jensen Project evolved since its founding?

One of the most important things that my staff and I learned when we were developing our organization was that there are many deeply committed organizations that are doing the hard, face-to-face work it takes to help survivors of sexual violence. These organizations all face similar obstacles, particularly in raising funds to support operations. We knew that The Jensen Project could meet this need by mobilizing a national network of stakeholders who have the financial capacity to help, but lack the capacity to vet programs or evaluate sustainability. We designed a system that encompasses safe housing and economic empowerment initiatives, addressing the short and long-term needs of survivors. Our research continues to reveal the myriad of amazing but underfunded programs across the U.S. as well as unfunded ideas. We knew there was much more happening than we were unaware of which led us to create the "GrantTank," a unique application-based program that awards \$2 million in annual grants ranging from \$100,000 to \$1 million, depending on need. The response has been overwhelming and we are thrilled to provide much-needed support to so many deserving organizations.

Will you highlight The Jensen Project's holistic approach?

It takes funding to support organizations devoted to helping victims of sexual violence, but that's just the starting point. They need additional resources and strategic partnerships to accomplish their missions. The Jensen Project's holistic approach analyzes the needs of each nonprofit and empowers them with organizational support to reach their annual objectives. We offer

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leadership development, inspiration, ingenuity, and innovative solutions to tackle some of their most challenging issues, freeing them to do what they do best – serve survivors.

Will you discuss The Jensen Project’s strength in providing insights and thought leadership?

Many organizations in our field start from the ground up, led by determined individuals who are the first “hands and feet” of the organization. Essentially, they begin at the programmatic level and learn the aspects of administration and development over time. They are building the plane while flying it. The result is often an under-resourced and understaffed organization. They need space to develop their leadership skills and cultivate a network of like-minded professionals and to get support with staffing, cash flow, fundraising, day-to-day operations, and more. That is where The Jensen Project can step in. We work with organizations to forge partnerships that address all their challenges. We provide an objective perspective as well as consultation in strategic planning and program development.

While you are dedicated to stopping violence against women, you are also involved in the fight against human trafficking. Are these problems connected?

There is an undeniable connection between these problems. Human trafficking is one of the most violent crimes that could be committed against a person and encompasses a host of sexual offenses. According to one recent estimate, 40 million people are trafficked across the globe and the annual profits are a staggering \$150 billion. Traffickers usually operate in two industries, commercial sex and manual labor, but there is

considerable overlap between the two, with many of the women exploited sexually. While it is a crime that impacts every community in our nation, it is often undetected and underreported. Catching, prosecuting, and convicting human traffickers is difficult, frustrating work. The enforcement policies exist, but there are many challenges, such as competing law-enforcement priorities and lack of financial resources. Traffickers recognize that this is a difficult crime to identify and prove, and they are very good at insulating themselves. Cases typically rely on the testimony of traumatized victims who are asked to face their abusers in court and relay the details of their ordeal to a judge and jury. That process can be terrifying, not to mention life-threatening. Many victims are unable to pursue justice, leaving them without the critical victim compensation and resources they need to heal.

What can be done to improve this situation?

The starting point is a collaborative response that addresses all aspects of the problem: prevention, intervention, restoration, and prosecution. That means passing effective legislation and establishing community-based programs with prevention education, community awareness, outreach to vulnerable persons, life skills development, victim-centered judicial systems, and training for all professionals. We also need safe housing, victim services, economic empowerment, dignified employment opportunities, and access to higher education and job development for victims. The crime of human trafficking is always evolving and we must evolve with it. By combining our resources, financial and otherwise, we can present a unified front against a common enemy.

How do you define success for The Jensen Project?

Violence against women of any kind has no place in the world. While we can’t prevent all acts of violence, we can mitigate their impact. We can improve society’s response to victims, change their access to life-giving resources, and ensure a hopeful future exists for those who want it. We believe success is defined by the number of individuals who receive safe housing and holistic support through our grants, by the growth in capacity of our partner organizations, by the individuals who successfully reintegrate into their communities, by the transferrable skills demonstrated by our survivors, and by the protections put in place through effective state and national policies.

Are you able to take moments to reflect and appreciate the impact of your work and what you have accomplished?

That’s a good question. It’s true that I’m guilty of getting so caught up in the work that I do forget to step back and consider all that I’ve accomplished or what we’ve accomplished as a team, but then I remember some of the highlights. For example, in 2016 I sponsored the Stand Up, Speak Up video contest for students at the University of New Haven to raise awareness about sexual misconduct on college campuses and empower students to take an active role in changing the culture. Afterward, the university awarded me an honorary Doctorate in Humane Letters. That’s a moment I’ll never forget. Beyond that, I’m still here, I’m still standing, and I’ll do everything in my power for the rest of my life to make sure that victims of sexual violence have the space to say the same things. ●

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