

Matt Duhamel: Welcome to the podcast. My name is Matt Duhamel, your host. We'll get to our guest in just a second. Since the first cave paintings were ever discovered, telling stories has been one of our most fundamental communication methods. I think we can all agree that stories are the common ground that allows people to communicate, overcome our defenses and our differences, and even have the power to educate the hearts and minds. This special podcast episode is for you, the storyteller, and we want to help you come up with some good ideas and ways that you can tell your story and how you've been affected by the sex offender registry.

Matt Duhamel: This can also help the family member that have been affected by the registry as well. My guest today is Janice Bellucci. She's an attorney and the executive director for The Alliance for Constitutional Sex Offense Laws. Thanks for joining me today Janice and welcome to the program. Tell me a little bit about why it's important, first of all, Janice, to tell your story and to get it out there in the public?

Janice Bellucci: The public needs to know what it is that is happening in the lives of both registrants and their loved ones. Many people spend little or no time at all thinking about that, and they see that somebody gets convicted of an offense, and they might go to prison or they're on parole or probation, and then they really have no idea beyond that what happens to anybody's daily lives. They really don't know, very few people know, and those who do know are often appalled by what they find out.

Janice Bellucci: It's really important that registrants and their loved ones share this information so that other people can understand how registrants are punished and continue to be punished well after they've served their prison or jail sentence.

Matt Duhamel: It's also a healing process as well.

Janice Bellucci: It could be a healing process if it's done in the right way. Yes.

Matt Duhamel: Let's start off with just a few tips. Somebody listening or watching today has the desire to talk about their story and how they've been affected by their registration, the sex offender registration. What would be one thing that you would advise them of doing so their story is heard effectively?

Janice Bellucci: I think the very most important thing is to know your audience. It's one thing to sit in a group, like in a monthly meeting here in California telling other registrants and loved ones about what you're experiencing. That's one audience, but the whole spectrum here. You might be talking to somebody that you barely know, you might be talking to somebody you don't know at all, including going up to your state legislature or some day to the federal legislature and describing to them what you and your family have experienced. Those are very different audiences and they absolutely have to be approached in a different way.

Matt Duhamel: I'm just reading some of my notes here, and one of the suggestions is don't share in real-time. Basically don't do it right away after the event.

Janice Bellucci: If you were to start talking about your experience, and let's just say somebody who's been recently released from prison. They've had limited experience now with the outside world, and unfortunately some of our registrants are in prison for a very long time, and they may not know about technology, and they may not know what the requirements are. Example, for somebody who's on parole, they may not have any understanding whatsoever before they get out of jail or prison that they're going to have parole conditions, first. Then, second, the extent of those parole conditions.

Janice Bellucci: Again, you can imagine somebody coming out, they're out for two weeks and they're just getting slammed with, "You have to go to this counseling session or we're going to hook you up to a polygraph." Sometimes you can't see your children right away. In California, you can't drink alcohol for the entire period of time on parole. Some people really find that difficult.

Matt Duhamel: What about somebody that wants to talk about their story during probation or parole?

Janice Bellucci: You know what, I do encourage people on parole and probation to speak, but I would really advise that they wait a good six months to kind of the dust settles. One of the things they're going to find out is other people have exactly the same parole conditions or very similar parole conditions, number one. Number two is that if you comply with what your parole or probation officer is telling you to do, most of the time you actually get greater freedom after that first six month period.

Janice Bellucci: If you don't, then what's going to happen is you're going to have fewer freedoms. Again, you just don't have a big enough picture, I don't think, in the first six months to start talking about your experiences.

Matt Duhamel: Obviously telling your story either, again, being on the registry or a family member is obviously not easy. It's scary. It's vulnerable. What other advice do you have?

Janice Bellucci: Well, what I tell people is that they need to practice. Please do not go on Howard Stern or a radio shock jock show, because they will basically cut you into little bits. They are not there to help you heal. What they're doing is they're trying to basically create fresh meat for their audience. By practicing, find the safest place you can to practice what you have to say. Most of us are not a fantastic extemporaneous speakers, and so we need to practice.

Janice Bellucci: In California, we have monthly meetings around the State of California in addition to which we have some phone meetings as well. A meeting like that which is composed of only people on the registry and their loved ones is a

perfect way to get started. If you have something to talk about, stand up at one of those meetings and talk about it. That will give you some sense of what you have to say, number one. Number two, you're going to get positive feedback.

Janice Bellucci: The last thing you want to do in your first speaking appearance is to speak to a hostile audience, and that's what I mean by Howard Stern and some of these shock jocks on the radio. In order to do that, you really, really need to have a lot of skill. You won't from the very beginning. I'll say that of myself. I've been doing this now for seven years. In the very beginning I didn't have the skills that I have today, but I've been practicing for seven years.

Janice Bellucci: I'm not saying that people should wait for seven years, but the fact is they should practice. Now some people choose to practice on friends, so maybe a friend who doesn't know you're on the registry. Loved ones, perhaps you have a relative who lives out of town who doesn't know you're on the registry but you know that they care for you. Start with somebody like that where, again, the chances are that somebody will understand the bigger picture and not just, "Oh gosh. You were convicted of a sex offense and now society has slapped a label upon you of sex offender."

Janice Bellucci: Again, start where you think you might have some support, number one. Number two, keep practicing. Then once you get that small success, then you can broaden that success, until, hey, someday maybe you're ready to go on Jerry Springer. I would choose not to do that myself, but maybe there's some people out there. Seriously speaking, we have a lot of opportunities to speak to elected officials and everything from the city council level to the state level and federal as well.

Janice Bellucci: When you go to those higher levels of communication or audiences, you really need to be concise in what you say, and you need to have practiced it. One of the things that I will say to everybody is you need to learn how to frame your message. By the way, you can't frame your message until you know who your audience is. The way to frame a message, this is an example, to a legislator is, "Hey, legislator, do you know how much money it's costing the State of California, for example, to follow people who do not pose a current danger to society?"

Matt Duhamel: Good advice there. How do you think storytelling and telling your story can actually change laws and restrictions? Do you think it does have that power?

Janice Bellucci: I absolutely do, and I've heard a story about Nebraska. Don't really know. I don't have any personal knowledge of this, but what I was told was a 13 year old who was the child of a registrant testified before their state legislature that was considering passing another anti-registrant law. She told about the impact that the existing laws had upon her family, and they said, "Never mind. That isn't a good idea," so with their passing their new law. That's a story I've heard.

Janice Bellucci: What I know personally and what I've observed over the seven years that I've been lobbying in our state legislature is that people's attitude about registrants is changing. What I mean by that is that when we go into the offices of our elected officials, we always go in a team, and every team has a registrant, a family member, and then somebody like me who's not in either category but supports both registrants and family members.

Janice Bellucci: In the beginning when we did that and we would introduce, "Here's John Smith. By the way, he's on the sex offender registry." People would literally recoil. I remember very specifically in one office where the elected official said, "How dare you bring a registered citizen into my office?" By the way, she didn't use registered citizen, she said sex offender. That's what happened in the past. Currently we've had absolutely no problem with bringing registrants into the offices of elected officials. Again, they don't go in alone.

Janice Bellucci: We want to protect our registrants. That's what we're thinking about. We're not thinking about the officials, quite frankly. We're thinking about the registrants, and so we want to protect them, and so they'll be in with our team. What we've seen happen over the seven year period here is that there's no recoil. They're like, "Oh, okay." Then they want to know what is it, a little bit anyway, about that person, and what challenges that they're facing.

Janice Bellucci: This is a really important note, and I hope people will remember it, and I'll probably repeat it a couple of times, which is do not ever, that is never discuss the details of your offense. I don't care what meeting you're in, unless if you're with your parole or probation officer of course you might need to discuss it. In public never discuss the details of your offense. By the way, when we have our monthly meetings, I also ask the registrants who attend the meetings to not talk about their offense.

Matt Duhamel: Is that because of legal issues?

Janice Bellucci: No. The problem is if you start talking about your offense, people's minds just switch into a different gear and that's all they want to talk about. You'll never be able to talk about anything else. If you start talking about the details of your offense, you've lost the meeting. You'll never be able to tell them why public safety is actually reduced and not increased by current registration laws. You won't be able to get out the facts and figures that you have and your own personal story if you talk about that.

Janice Bellucci: That is a very bright line here, a boundary line in your public presentations. I've seen it happen to people, and I will tell you it's very ugly to watch. Of course, the person feels shame about what they did and then sometimes they can't think of anything else either after that. The purpose for the meeting, the registrant's purpose for the meeting gets lost. That is the most important thing is don't ever discuss the details of your offense or your loved one's offense.

Janice Bellucci: What I tell people in our meetings, by the way, is we love and support you regardless of what offense you committed. We don't care. We're treating people the same, and the fact is that you have civil rights even if you have committed a sex offense. I've had to argue with people before about that, and people telling me wrongly that people who've been convicted of a sex offense have no civil rights and that is absolutely wrong. We can talk about the 4th Amendment, the right to be protected from unreasonable searches and seizures.

Janice Bellucci: While you're on parole and probation, for example, you might have limited 4th Amendment rights, but the fact is when you're past parole and you're past probation, you have 4th Amendment rights, and that means that the police, with a few exceptions, cannot come into your house without a search warrant. I've had all kinds of people tell me horror stories. One gentleman in Los Angeles County who said that the police showed up, he let them in his house, they looked around. Then they said, "Can we go on your computer?" He said, "Yes." Because he said, "I didn't have anything to hide."

Janice Bellucci: Well, they spent 45 minutes, the police, 45 minutes on his computer. Of course, that was appalling to him but he had said yes. Those are the things that people on the registry need to be reminded of. You still have civil rights. Now, having said that most of the time, like if you're in a meeting with other registrants and family members it's great to talk about your civil rights. It absolutely is. I will tell you there's a very limited audience for it outside of our community.

Janice Bellucci: They don't want to hear about it. Remember when I talked about framing the message. Well, what they want to hear about is public safety. Let's talk about public safety with them and say, "Yes, we want the public to be safe too. We have children. We have grandchildren. We have our own bodies, we want to be safe." The fact is you're not going to be safe, anybody, by focusing on the sex offender registry. The reason for that is that people on the registry are very unlikely to reoffend.

Janice Bellucci: You say something like that, and people look at you as if you have just spoken in Martian or something. The fact is that it's enough for them to open up their door in their brain just a teeny tiny bit. They'll ask you things like, "What do you mean by that? Can you prove that?" You want to engage them. You want them to start thinking with their brain and stop having this knee jerk reaction. It's so easy for people, they hear sex offender and many people think monster.

Janice Bellucci: I've been in court before, I mean with a judge in a public setting, in a hearing, and this judge is telling me that everybody who's on the sex offender registry is a monster. He was willing to say something like that in public. Wow. If a judge is willing to say that in public, what's your nextdoor neighbor might say or something like that. The fact is we have an opportunity here, and I think we actually even have a requirement to educate the public.

Janice Bellucci: They don't know who people on the registry are, and they need to find out because once they find out most of the time they go, "Well, I know who you are and I know you're not a monster. I wonder about those other people on the registry too." You know what, Matt, I think about the gay movement many years ago, even decades ago, and I happen to have a family member who is gay. The issue about the gay community is for a while people thought, a long while, people thought that anybody who was gay was a monster. Now, people think differently. Most people think differently.

Janice Bellucci: The way they got from point A, all gay people are monsters, to point B, no, gay people are not monsters, I believe, has a lot to do with people telling their stories, telling their members of their families, their neighbors, their loved ones that, "Hey, I'm gay."

Matt Duhamel: Humanize it. Definitely humanize the situations. Stories can be told anywhere. Your story can be told. It doesn't have to be this elaborate, huge presentation. My point is some people may have the desire to get on social media, mention something about their being on the registry or a family member might mention, "Hey, my son is on the registry." There could be some backlash. I've seen it. I've seen the shaming going on, on social media. I've seen the issues that can arise. What advice would you have on that? If someone says, "Hey, I want to talk about my situation on social media."

Janice Bellucci: Well, my advice is to be careful and cautious about it, because it can be vicious. It's not just our issue either. I'm not sure that I would encourage people to do that if you're a registrant. I think it's much safer if you're the family member of a registrant. What can people call you? You're the mother of a sex offender. You're the wife of a sex offender. If the person is strong, can say, "Yeah. So what? Not only is my son a registrant, my son is also," and then what else he is. He's a great poker player. He's a great dad. He volunteers by picking up trash on the side of the highway, those kinds of things. Broaden people's horizons and let them know something about the individual more than they're on the sex offender registry.

Janice Bellucci: Again, if only people would stop and think about what does that mean, somebody's on the registry, and why is that important if somebody's on the registry? Most people they think that if somebody's on the registry that they're likely to reoffend. We have so many statistics that show that is not true. People on the registry are very unlikely to reoffend. There may be a few people who do reoffend, but most people on the registry don't reoffend.

Janice Bellucci: The problem is if people are focused on the list of individuals on the registry and think, "If only I keep my children away from that list of individuals, my children will not be in harm's way," well, they're absolutely wrong. The fact is that it's over 90% of perpetrators of sexual assault upon children are family members, teachers, coaches and even members of the clergy. Folks, parents, if you really want your kids to be safe, that registry gives you a false sense of security.

Matt Duhamel: Definitely. I agree with that. There are statistics that show that. It's interesting, because one of the big points that I'm learning about today's discussion is storytelling can humanize the situation. You mentioned people on the registry, they have jobs, they're fathers, they're mothers, they're professionals. Like myself, I'm on the registry. I'm doing this podcast. I've done films. I'm a father. I have a normal day-to-day life, and I think that's important just to tell your story to let other people know that you're not the monster that most people may think you are.

Janice Bellucci: Absolutely. How about the flip side, which is you're a productive member of society, and you do not pose a current risk to society? Whether or not people understand that immediately, the fact is when they see somebody like you, Matt, or they see other people who look just like them, look just like their neighbors and their family members because they are their neighbors and their family members, and they go, "Huh, maybe I need to rethink this." It's that thing, again, erasing the picture of the monster because that's what so many people think.

Janice Bellucci: As we approach the million person mark, in other words we almost have one million people in the United States of America on a sex offender registry, I mean that just should blow everybody's mind. How can there be one million monsters in the United States of America? There aren't. Let's not tar people with this label of sex offender. There's all kinds of social stigma that's attached to it. In some respects it is like a social death being on the registry. You're basically having to pull yourself up out of a very deep hole.

Janice Bellucci: The luckiest registrants are the ones who have family members who understand, who support, and continue to love them. I've seen some really awful situations where that doesn't happen. The family members themselves become deluded and turn on their own family member who is a monster because they looked at a picture, and we're talking about in California you can basically be convicted of possessing child pornography if you have a picture of a teenage who's naked.

Janice Bellucci: By the way, the teenager herself or himself might have taken that photo. This is how ridiculous it's getting.

Matt Duhamel: One thing I want to ask is if someone is ready to talk about their story on the podcast specifically, would it be a good idea to write out their story in advance, or maybe make some bullet points before?

Janice Bellucci: I think it would help to at least write some bullet points. I've done that for this conversation today, quite frankly. Some people maybe who don't have as much experience, they might want to write it out word for word. That's not my preference. Again, I have enough experience, I don't need to do that. Some people might need to do it. The reason not to do it is you sound like you're

reading, because you're reading. Can you speak spontaneously from your heart? That's the best way to do it.

Janice Bellucci: The reason to have an outline or bullet points is to make sure that you cover certain things. You say these are the three messages I want to make sure I deliver, and so I have done that. For example, when I said never discuss the details of your offense, this is written down on one of my points, a point to make today, and to emphasize. I think, again, in order to prevent people from wandering and in order for them to get their message across, then they need to establish a focus and they need to stay focused.

Janice Bellucci: By the way, we talked about knowing who your audience is. It's also important to know how much time you have to speak. This podcast that we're doing right now might be longer, I'm not sure, than time that other people have to speak, but I will tell you, I sometimes go to a city council meeting and my time is limited to three minutes, so I need to make sure I hit my major points in three minutes time. I will tell you, three minutes is not much time at all.

Janice Bellucci: Folks, when you're going to make a presentation, be sure not only do you know your audience but you also know how much time you have to speak, because they don't always tell you that.

Matt Duhamel: Some listeners may say, "I'm not a professional speaker." Janice, you're an attorney, you're doing public speaking. I've done radio and public speaking and TV. They might be like, "Man, I can't do this." Do you really need to be a professional speaker or presenter to talk about your story?

Janice Bellucci: Not at all, and some of the most effective speakers are not professional speakers. I will tell you about one of our board members, and when she first joined us in the state legislature, my mouth was agape, because she was so effective in what she had to say. You know what, she was speaking from her heart. She was talking about, and, in fact, she's the one that came up with the phrase false sense of security to describe the registry, because she was one of those parents that thought if only she kept her children away from the monsters on the sex offender registry that her children would be safe, and that turned out not to be true.

Janice Bellucci: She just spoke, again, as I said, from the heart. She doesn't have any experience or she didn't have any experience. Folks, you're never going to know how good you could be until you give it a try. As I said, my advice to you is you practice in a safe situation. Now, she had practiced in some of our monthly meetings before she went to the state legislature, that board member. Wherever you can do it in a safe place, even if you're looking in the mirror at home and you're your own audience, I would recommend that you give that a try.

Matt Duhamel: Is there anything else that you wanted to add before I let you go?

Janice Bellucci: Yeah. Actually, there's one bullet point that we haven't covered yet, and that is that I do encourage people to talk about their steps toward rehabilitation. Many people don't understand that there is rehabilitation and that there are any steps. Without going into a lot of detail, talk about the fact that you've gone to counseling. Even if you don't think highly of the quality of the counseling that you're getting, some of that being required by law, the fact is you've gone to counseling. You've done this, you've done that. You've lived with 100 parole conditions for three years successfully, including in California on not being able to drink alcohol.

Janice Bellucci: A lot of people don't have any idea that there are steps that can be taken to rehabilitate yourself. Another one of my board members is, I'd say, a poster child for rehabilitation in that after he went to prison for his sex offense and he came out and he's like, "You know what, that's not who I really am." He figured that out, that what he did is not who he was, and he said, "I'm going to change my life." He did. He got a formal education. He started out with an associates degree from community college. He went on to get his bachelor's and his master's degree all in counseling.

Janice Bellucci: He knew that many people on the sex offenders registry have an alcohol or drug problem, so he got that certificate as well so he could help people who have alcohol and drug problems. He actually got a certificate of rehabilitation in our state, which means he no longer has to register. It took him a good 10 years to get through that process. People don't understand sometimes how long you've been on the registry and all the steps you've taken to make yourself a different person, or maybe to realize the true person that you were, and, again, certainly for somebody with a drug or alcohol problem.

Janice Bellucci: By the way, the people you're meeting with often know somebody who has a drug or alcohol problem and sometimes they have their own drug or alcohol problem. You can basically hit a chord of compassion there with them.

Matt Duhamel: Well, thank you so much Janice for taking time out of your busy schedule to be with us today, and to give us some great advice on how to tell your story when you've been affected by the sex offender registry.

Janice Bellucci: Well, thank you Matt for this opportunity, and I encourage everyone to show up, stand up, and speak up.

Matt Duhamel: If you'd like more information about the Alliance for Constitutional Sex Offense Laws, you can go to their website. It's all4consolaws.org, and I can spell that out for you. A-L-L-4-C-O-N-S-O-L-A-W-S.org. If you'd like more information about Women Against Registry, the website is womenagainstregistry.org. I've been your host, Matt Duhamel, and join me next time on the podcast.