

# Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

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Volume 14  
Issue 2 *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action*

Article 1

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July 2010

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### Recommended Citation

Rutherford, Ken (2010) "Peer-to-Peer Support Vital to Survivors," *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action* : Vol. 14 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol14/iss2/1>

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# Peer-to-Peer Support Vital to Survivors

by Kenneth R. Rutherford [ Center for International Stabilization and Recovery ]

**L**andmine victims suffer not only from physical trauma, but also from intense emotional, psychological and social difficulties. As a landmine survivor and person with a disability myself, I know the challenges of recovery firsthand. On a personal level, I feel I can better communicate challenges with other landmine survivors and people with disabilities rather than my doctors, family and friends; peer-to-peer support helped me face the difficulties I encountered following the loss of my legs.

## Landmine Survivors Network

In order to help landmine victims and their families cope with and overcome similar struggles, I teamed with fellow landmine survivor Jerry White to create the Landmine Survivors Network in 1996. We founded LSN to help survivors encourage and assist one another via a



Being injured by a landmine is traumatic for anyone, but it becomes a lifelong problem when the victim is a child.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHARLOTTE OESTERVANG

peer-to-peer support system, which increases the likelihood of societal reintegration for victims. These programs involve connecting recent landmine victims with survivors who have had time to reflect, convalesce and reintegrate themselves as productive, contributing members of society. Recent victims share their stories, have their emotions validated, receive

practical advice and, through their interaction with fellow survivors, realize that successful recuperation is possible.

In 2008, LSN became Survivor Corps, broadening its mission of helping landmine victims to all survivors of violence, while maintaining the system of peer support. In addition, as survivors can offer unrivaled perspectives into war's devastating effects, SC has worked to encourage recent victims to use their self-confidence and empowerment to help break worldwide cycles of violence. For example, in Colombia, Survivor Corps has been training community leaders and volunteers in peer-to-peer support techniques. SC has facilitated a leading network of Colombian families who experienced family loss through kidnapping, disappearances and executions; the network is designed to memorialize their loved ones' lives and facilitate family and community healing.

Among its programs that are designed to curb the spread of armed conflict, SC has developed a series of community-building programs and advocacy campaigns to help repair lives fractured by war. These programs allow former enemy combatants and other survivor groups to come together, creating an increased sense of forgiveness, peer validation and societal reintegration, while simultaneously furthering the reach of peaceful development exercises.

## Survivor Corps Closing Doors

Before the year's end, SC will close its doors, constituting a great loss to the landmine-action community. With the emergence of thousands of new landmine and ERW victims each year, however, the need for victim assistance and peer-to-peer support is as great as ever. Though landmine casualties are declining, the thousands of survivors require enduring and elastic health care, prosthetics, education, and emotional and financial support.



The author and Jerry White, cofounders of LSN, helped guide Diana, Princess of Wales, on her final humanitarian trip to Bosnia to meet a range of landmine survivors and their families. Her high-profile visit brought media attention to the importance of victim assistance and helped LSN reach out to people who might not normally listen to what it had to say. 9 August 1997, Bosnia.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SURVIVOR CORPS

Recognizing this fact, in the wake of its closing, SC will transfer its peer-support resources to the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery located at James Madison University.

#### CISR Ready for the Mission

In February of this year, I joined the JMU's staff as the Director of CISR. Pulling from my experience at LSN/SC, and with support from CISR's experienced staff, I am confident in our ability to successfully continue the effective activities started by LSN/SC. CISR has a long history of providing creative and prescient programming and initiatives to the humanitarian-demining community, and its outreach and engagement with war-affected and post-conflict communities is well-known.

The Center's location on the JMU campus is also particularly felicitous, giving it the opportunity to tap world-class professors and thought leaders for collaboration and innovation. Two such leaders, trau-

ma-recovery specialists Drs. Lennie Echterling and Anne Stewart of JMU's graduate psychology department, have partnered with CISR to develop programs in Jordan and elsewhere. Their work with CISR stands apart as particularly important and pioneering for survivors and their communities. They will expand their work with the Center to incorporate its new peer-to-peer direction.

As a survivor and LSN cofounder, I was worried about the future of the peer-to-peer support for survivors. With encouragement from JMU and the Survivor Corps board of directors and staff, the CISR staff decided that peer-to-peer support provided a natural synergy to our current activities and fits within our Center's goal to support individuals and organizations in post-conflict regions. We are preparing to accept the SC peer-to-peer resources in order to continue this important legacy. CISR is seeking support from the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. State Department's Of-

fice of Political-Military Affairs to assist with this peer-to-peer knowledge transfer. CISR looks forward to the opportunity of preserving and expanding the peer-to-peer support expertise and programming started by LSN more than a decade ago.

As we move forward, CISR will focus on the psychosocial rehabilitation of survivors of violent conflict. CISR is well-poised to assume leadership in this field, having conducted research and programming on a range of survivor-related issues. CISR is honored to continue LSN/SC's program of peer-to-peer support and is committed to ensuring that peer-support programs around the world continue helping survivors as they recover from their trauma, reintegrate into society and rebuild their communities. ♣



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