

NEWS

Norwich woman writes book telling of ordeals of her children and 14 others

July 29, 2007

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For the Norwich Bulletin

"Who is this child living in my house?"

This is the question Claire Silva has been asking herself since the night in February 2003 when she learned her 13-year-old stepson had been sexually abusing her sons, ages 5 and 2.

This disclosure by her oldest son at the age of 5 led Silva and her family on a journey of fear, blame, despair and, eventually, healing, after she fought back by putting her story in print and giving survivors a voice.

In "A Child's Heart Speaks: Surviving Sexual Abuse," Silva, who has worked for 16 years in social work and is the executive director of Bethsaida Community in Norwich, tells her story and the stories of 14 other survivors from across the country.

"When I found out what happened to my sons, I was traumatized. I didn't know where to turn," Silva said. "There was nowhere. No support groups, no counselors that really knew how to deal with this, no books that spoke to what I needed."

It was only in talking to real people Silva discovered other souls who understood.

"I realized survivors themselves are a huge resource," she said. "When I found no support and started confiding in friends, that's when I realized adult survivors were the way to find healing."

Silva's purpose in writing the book was two-fold -- she also wanted parents to know, despite the well-intentioned teachings children receive, directing them to tell an adult if anyone touches them inappropriately, chances are most children won't do that.

"Kids won't talk because the perpetrator has brainwashed them," Silva said. "But when their parent asks them a direct question, they feel they have to answer."

After receiving clues from her older son, Silva finally confronted her stepson and learned of more than two years of physical and sexual abuse, much of it perpetuated as she and her husband slept mere feet away in another room.

The boy had come to live with them from another country at age 9 and was later discovered to have suffered from abuse as well. He was 11 when he began abusing her sons, Silva said. After discovering the child also had been stealing from friends, neighbors and even teachers as well as physically abusing her children, Silva finally asked the right question.

"Parents are not getting the tools they need and our story is proof of that," she said. "I warned and educated my children about sexual abuse and expected them to tell me if anyone ever touched them. I had no idea that perpetrators are masters in manipulating a child's fears against them."

Silva said her stepson also threatened her boys with terrors such as killer bees, monsters, vampires and rabid cats, all designed to teach them silence.

"They could not tell," she said. "He studied what they were afraid of and fed them tales of these larger than life beings that would kill them if they cried."

Her family was lucky -- though the perpetrator only spent one night in a juvenile detention center, he was removed from the home. Still, her children have a long road ahead.

"This is something that stays with you for the rest of your life," she said.

Stacy Cristo, a holistic psychotherapist in Cranston, R.I., works with survivors and said it's common for the abused to live their lives using strategies such as dissociation to cope.

"It's generally very challenging for these individuals to live with their whole self. They have learned to sacrifice parts of themselves as a way to survive," Cristo said. "If someone dissociates through a traumatic event, that strategy tends to follow them throughout their lives."

Healing often depends on the handling of the trauma.

"In a healthy family unit, the parents do something about the abuse," Cristo said. "This person will grow up healthier than someone who is doubted."

Silva said she spent a lot of time blaming herself as a parent and a social worker, but had to find peace and comfort in her success in getting the perpetrator away from her children.

"Parents need to see juveniles as potential perpetrators," she said. "It is the role of adults to look for the signs and know how to ask the right questions."

Silva hopes her two sons will continue to heal and help spread the word about sexual abuse.

Her oldest son, identified only as Joey, is now 10 and already has begun to speak out.

"I realized telling my story may help other people," he said. "The book teaches parents to look out for signs their child is being sexually abused and it helps survivors have a voice. Then they are no longer trapped with a perpetrator."
