

Sexual Abuse impacts the whole family

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As an advocate for survivors of sexual violence I have always understood that sexual violence took more than the innocence of a child or the voice away from an adult. Sexual assault also affects the loved ones surrounding the survivor. Parent after parent has walked through my center's doors hoping and praying for a way to take the pain away from their child or to let their child know how much they wanted to protect them.

When I began four years ago as an advocate for the Riverview Center in Galena, I had no idea how it would change my life. I simply wanted to help people. Yet, every time a mother called to talk with me, I heard my mother voice. Every time I worked with a male survivor, I saw my brother's face. Every time I saw a father cry, I saw my dad's eyes.

In June 1996, my family was told that the priest at our parish in Dubuque, Iowa had been sexual abusing at least 12 minor boys, and one of those boys was my brother. He was 14 at the time.

My family learned of the abuse the day after my brother's 8th grade graduation.

I had returned home from Iowa State University a couple of weeks earlier. My mom had been calling me at school and asking what to do with my brother. He had been acting out and just did not seem like the same kid. His teachers used to praise him for his generosity and willingness to help others who were struggling, yet that child seemed to have disappeared. As I sat through the

graduation mass, I wondered what was happening to him. I was scared for him, and I wanted him to be happy.

The offending priest said mass during the graduation ceremony. I had noticed a family in tears as the students walked up the aisle at the beginning of mass, but I thought it was the emotion of the moment. Later I learned the truth.

The morning after the graduation ceremony, my mom was pacing back and forth past the doorway of the bathroom I was in. Finally, I called her in to ask what she wanted to say to me. She took a deep breath, and fumbling over her words, she told me about getting a call, meeting with the parents who were crying in church the night before and learning that our priest had molested my brother and 11 other boys. I was holding a blow dryer. I wanted to throw it. I fell into her arms, and we sobbed. I consider that day to be the day that changed all of our lives forever - a life defining moment.

I now understood why those parents were crying during mass. They knew what the priest had done to their son and 11 other boys, but no one else knew yet. I had known the victims since my brother was in kindergarten. They came over for play dates, sleepovers and birthday parties. I babysat most of them, and I felt like a big sister to them as well.

I suppose my mom and dad knew the difficulties ahead, but they kept it from me. The victims were interviewed and an investigation began. All at once, articles were splashed across the front page of the newspaper, the abuse was the breaking news on every television station, and news reporters would stand

outside the school waiting for students, parents, and teachers to walk by to ask if they knew who the victims were.

A meeting was held in the church for concerned parents of the parish. Everyone wanted answers. The betrayal of trust was almost too enormous to comprehend. The Monsignor was nervous he would be blamed. Our parish was divided between those who believed the children, and those who thought they were lying.

The Dubuque Archdiocese did not offer any support through this time. There were no apologies, no condolences and no prayers. For my family, this was the hardest to accept. We had been members of this church our whole lives. We celebrated weddings, baptisms, first communions and graduations there. My siblings and I attended the grade school for our entire elementary education. How could it be that the Catholic Church was not there to support us?

I was furious. My mom would stay in her room and cry, sometimes all day. My dad wanted to hide. His optimistic attitude would fail some days and I would see tears well up in his eyes.

Parents of the victims would congregate at my parents' home to support one another. The parents wanted the priest punished and held accountable. There were discussions of suing the Archdiocese. Law enforcement provided weekly updates on the case. I was obsessed with understanding what had happened, why it happened, and who failed my brother and our family.

My parents had to tell their parents _ all devote Catholics. My grandmother vowed never to go to church again unless the perpetrator was

convicted. Extended family members, neighbors, and friends of the family needed to know. My parents did not want them to find out any other way. But the telling and re-telling of the story added to the trauma.

By January 1997, the situation in my family was getting worse. The trial was scheduled for February. My brother had started his freshman year at the Catholic high school in town, but switched to a public school at the semester break. He could not handle the religious aspects of the Catholic school. My brother was suffering. He became suicidal. After talking to our psychologist, my brother was committed to the psychiatric ward in the hospital. I had never experienced anything like that before. Every night my family would go to the hospital to support my brother. We prayed he would be safe and that he would never need in-patient care again. That prayer did not come true. A few weeks later he was committed again on the advice of our family psychologist.

I hated the priest. How could he put our family and others through this much pain? My brother had been in treatment twice and the trial still was ahead. What would testifying do to my brother and my parents?

I had never experienced a sentencing before, and I had no idea what to expect. I had wanted to give a victim impact statement, but due to the number of victims, only one person from each family was allowed to speak. My mom had incredible strength and spoke for my brother and our family. Many others, including the boy of the parents who cried during graduation, shared their stories of hurt and betrayal. Still today I am in awe of the courage it takes for survivors to speak about their experience.

I looked around the courtroom and was shocked by those supporting the priest. During a break, a woman from the parish had gone to comfort the priest. She did not believe the children. She did not have any sons. Perhaps the biggest slap in the face was the testimony given by the Archdiocese on behalf of the perpetrator.

A week before the trial started, the priest pled guilty to eight counts of lascivious acts and four counts of assault with intent to commit sexual abuse. He was in prison from April 1997 to May 2001 before being paroled and transferred to a treatment facility in Maryland, a place where many priests who are offenders receive treatment.

At the sentencing, news reporters were allowed inside the courtroom with strict instructions not to videotape the victims. Instead, the 5 o'clock news showed my mother giving her victim impact statement with the subtitle "Mother of the Victim." That night a friend of mine called to ask me what was going on. She had seen my mother on the news. She was away at college, and I had chosen not to tell her of the abuse. I rambled on and on trying to make up an excuse, but there was no excuse. Confidentiality had been broken. The County Attorney immediately called the news station and complained, but it was too late. The damage was complete. I was amazed at the lack of respect for my family and the victims. What had felt like a victory that afternoon in the Courthouse was ruined by the reporter's lack of compassion.

Family and friends suffer along with the survivor. They feel the guilt and pain. My mother may never forgive herself for allowing my brother to be an alter

boy. My aunt felt awful that the priest officiated at her wedding two months before the abuse was disclosed. My brother was an alter boy for her wedding celebration.

The aftershocks of my brother's abuse continue to be felt.

Four years after the disclosure, my brother went off to college, and he shared that our grandmother was secretly sending him money to entice him to go back to the church and to attend mass. He tore up every check she sent him. The last time my grandmother and my brother were together in our church was for her funeral mass.

My brother continues to struggle with the aftereffects of being abused. In Jan. 2002, he attempted suicide for the third time. My parents took him to the hospital and he was kept there for in-patient treatment.

The sister of one of the victims has not set foot inside a church since she learned of the priest's abuse of her brother. In August 2003, their grandmother passed away, and she refused to attend the funeral mass, because she would not go inside the church.

In August 2003, my great aunt, a Catholic sister, invited my parents to the convent to meet with her. She has given her life to the Catholic Church and believed that the church would take care of the victims of abuse. Faced with the reality that this was not true for my family, she had suffered in silence for 7 ½ years. But now, at the age of 86, she could no longer suffer in silence about her feelings on the Church she donated 68 years of service to.

She told my parents that she had an in-person meeting with the Archbishop of the Dubuque Archdiocese. She told him how much pain he caused her and her family. She was hurt that every morning the Archbishop would walk past my grandmother's home on his way to the Archdiocese's office. He knew who my grandmother was, and that her grandson was a victim of clergy abuse, yet he never once stopped to say a single word to her or my grandfather. She told him that what he did was wrong, and he should have supported the children, the survivors of this horrible crime. She told him that my family deserved a written apology and a monetary settlement (which my brother did receive). She held him accountable for his actions. It hurt my mother deeply to know that her aunt had suffered in silence for so long.

I too have suffered in silence. I refused to go to church for several years after the abuse occurred. I refused to get married in our family church because of the bad memories. My brother cannot be a Godparent to my children because he was not confirmed and does not attend mass. I have often cried on the way home from work. When I decided to accept the position as Advocate at Riverview Center, Inc, I did not know how I would change. I was not sure I could handle the stressful position. The first time I entered the courtroom for a sentencing, I flashed back to my brother's sentencing. There have been times that I have prayed to God to let me give up the pain and move on in my life, yet something keeps me doing this job each and every day. I believe that I have been called to help survivors of sexual violence, and I have learned that I cannot save my

brother or my family from their pain. I can, however, save myself. I have learned to move past the pain, and to accept that forgiveness is necessary for me to heal.

When the judge in my brother's case read the sentence out loud, I glared at the priest's family. They looked at me, and I gave them a vicious, smug grin. I wanted them to feel the pain I felt. I realize now that they too were victims. They were suffering along with everyone else. My mother used to say, "As much as I hate being the mother of the victim, I thank God everyday that I am not the mother of the perpetrator."

Recently, I decided to resign from my advocacy position, and I have accepted the role of Prevention Educator at Riverview Center. I have decided to help prevent abuse from happening, instead of intervening immediately after a crisis has occurred. In April, I gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. I also have a two-year old son. On maternity leave, I began to realize that I needed to let go of the pain. I have worked so hard to help others accept the pain and move on, and now it was my turn. I analyzed my behaviors, and I noticed I could not trust anyone with my children. I had an overwhelming sense of fear. My children deserve to have trust, and I need to let them grow into independent individuals. I decided to go into prevention to feel hope.

No matter how much I want to, I cannot erase the past. I cannot change the outcome for my family. We have learned to accept what has happened. I know my brother will never be the same, but I have stopped asking, "why did this happen" and "what if..." Those questions will consume you if given the chance. I accept my brother for all that he is, and I am proud of his accomplishments. Our

family will never be the same, but we are stronger and wiser. We love each other and try not to take each other for granted.

In the past couple of years, light has been shed on the sex scandal of the Catholic Church. I am unable to comprehend the pain caused by the Catholic Church. I am pleased that the Catholic Church wants to change their behavior, and I have witnessed change within our Archdiocese. I am angry, however, that it took so much pain to prompt the change. Our Archdiocese was not willing to address the issue until the sexual abuse scandal spread around the country. It was not enough for 12 young men to suffer.

In August 2002, the Archdiocese established a Review Board to revise the policies and procedures for dealing with sexual abuse of minors and to make sure there is accountability in their procedures. The priest who testified on behalf of the perpetrator at the sentencing was appointed to the Review Board. Our family psychologist, who assisted our family after the abuse, was also asked to be a part of the board. After being appointed to the board, she called my parents to tell them she wanted to be a part of this process for my brother and family. She promised to keep our journey as a family in the back of her mind as she helped develop a "Policy for the Protection of Minors," which became effective July 1, 2003. As part of that policy, the Archdiocese is committed to screening and background checks and trained individuals to provide outreach to survivors. The Archdiocese will also educate on recognizing and responding to sexual abuse.

Throughout this journey, I have remained Catholic. My entire family, with the exception of my brother, attends mass weekly at our church. My brother will never be Catholic again. He will never trust religion again. So for now, I continue to pray for him.