

**Pastors Information Meeting  
Mercy Medical Center, 10am  
March 20, 2012**

**Vision:**

For churches in the Greater Fort Smith Region to unite behind a common Biblical cause—protecting our children from abuse.

**What we are asking:**

Use one Sunday (preferably April 22) to show the Biblical imperative to protect children as a natural response to the Gospel

Review and update all child protection processes in your church

Partner with sister churches to train volunteers and members to recognize abuse

Encourage your people to attend the Child Protection Day

**Resources:**

Jackie Hamilton  
Hamilton House  
[calljackie@aol.com](mailto:calljackie@aol.com)  
479.783.1002

Kris Deason  
Fort Smith Police  
[deason@fortsmithpd.org](mailto:deason@fortsmithpd.org)  
479.434.4911

National Child Abuse Hotline  
1-800-4-A-Child  
1-800-422-4453

Arkansas Hotline  
1.800.482.5964

**Reminder:**

Clergy are mandated reporters of child abuse or neglect.  
[http://www.arkansas.gov/reportARchildabuse/mandated\\_reporter.html](http://www.arkansas.gov/reportARchildabuse/mandated_reporter.html)

## **Step-Up Sunday**

### **April 22, 2012**

#### **Things you might do:**

- Distribute Step Up, Speak Out Flyer
- Show Garrett Lewis's Video
- Have a testimony of a church member who has survived abuse
- Provide Resources for Congregation of Support Groups, Websites, Hot lines, etc.
- Discuss child abuse within the sermon (see sample sermon)

#### **Statistics (from [www.childhelp.org](http://www.childhelp.org))**

- **A report of child abuse is made every ten seconds**
- **More than five children die every day** as a result of child abuse.
- **Approximately 80% of children that die from abuse are under the age of 4.**
- **It is estimated that between 50-60% of child fatalities due to maltreatment are not recorded as such on death certificates.**
- **More than 90% of juvenile sexual abuse victims know their perpetrator in some way.**
- **Child abuse occurs at every socioeconomic level, across ethnic and cultural lines, within all religions and at all levels of education.**
- **About 30% of abused and neglected children will later abuse their own children, continuing the horrible cycle of abuse.**
- **About 80% of 21 year olds that were abused as children met criteria for at least one psychological disorder.**
- **The estimated annual cost of child abuse and neglect in the United States for 2008 is \$124 billion.**

(Suggestion: Statistics are easy to manipulate. They can be used to inform or overwhelm. Use them carefully. Tell enough of them to identify the problem, but not too many where people may be overwhelmed to apathy.)

## What Not to Say to an Individual

Hurtful reactions toward a victim may be intentional (victim blaming), or they may arise from ineffective attempts to show compassion by people who mean well but are uninformed. Below is a list of things not to say because they shame, blame, or doubt the victim:

- “I know how you feel.”
- “I understand.”
- “You’re lucky that \_\_\_\_\_ didn’t happen.”
- “It’ll take some time, but you’ll get over it.”
- “Why don’t you tell me more details about what happened?”
- “Don’t worry, it’s going to be all right.”
- “Try to be strong.”
- “Out of tragedies good things happen.”
- “Time heals all wounds.”
- “It was God’s will.”
- “You need to forgive and move on.”
- “Calm down and try to relax.”
- “You should get on with your life.”

## What to Say to an Individual

Below is a list of things to say that would support and encourage a victim:

- “I’m sorry this happened to you.”
- “I believe you.”
- “Thank you for telling me.”
- “How can I help?”
- “I’m glad you’re talking with me.”
- “I’m glad you’re safe now.”
- “It wasn’t your fault.”
- “Your reaction is not an uncommon response.”
- “It’s understandable you’re feeling that way.”
- “You’re not going crazy. These are normal reactions following an assault.”
- “Things may not ever be the same, but they can get better.”
- “It’s OK to cry.”

*This post is excerpted from the Justin and Lindsey Holcombs’ book, Rid of My Disgrace.*



## **Myths about Child Sexual Abuse**

Social acceptance of myths silences victims and encourages public denial about the true nature of this silent epidemic. Accurate information is key when confronting and preventing child abuse.

### **1. Myth: He looks normal and acts normal, so he can't be a child molester. (Only boogeymen are child molesters.)**

A common and dangerous public assumption is that a person who looks normal and acts normal simply cannot be a child molester. Sex offenders are knowledgeable about the importance of their public image, and can hide their private behaviors from their friends, neighbors, colleagues, and even their own family members.

Sex offenders use a number of strategies which allow them to gain access to children while hiding their true actions. Many perpetrators seek out volunteer or employment positions that place adults in close proximity to children. Some child molesters appear to be charming, socially responsible, caring, compassionate, morally sound, and sincere. Parents and other responsible adults trust these individuals. This leads to continued access to child victims.

### **2. Myth: Only Men Sexually Abuse Children.**

While male perpetrators tend to be the majority of reported cases of abuse, women are also capable of child sexual assault. Reports of female perpetrators are on the rise, and female offenders have been reported in cases of abuse involving both male and female children.

### **3. Myth: Child molesters target any and all children nearby.**

Just because a child is in the proximity of a sex offender, this does not mean that the child will automatically become a target or a victim. This may seem obvious,

but some people believe that if a perpetrator didn't abuse a certain child to whom he had nearby, then the children who do make an outcry of abuse must be lying. Sex offenders carefully select and groom their targeted victims, employing an outline or plan to get a particular child alone. Not every child fits the mold of what a pedophile is looking for. There is a process of obtaining a child's friendship or trust, and in some cases, the parent's friendship or trust, as well. Once trust has been obtained, the child is more vulnerable, both emotionally and physically.

#### **4. Myth: Abused children always tell! (My kids know they're supposed to tell!)**

Children often fail to disclose their abuse. This is frequently used as purported evidence that a victim's story isn't plausible. Children who have been victims of sexual assault often have extreme difficulty in disclosing their victimization. In Texas, one in four girls and one in six boys will be a victim of sexual abuse before his or her 18th birthday, but it is estimated that only one in ten will make an outcry of abuse. It is very common that if a child does make a disclosure, it will not be immediate. Children take time to process, understand what has occurred and realize that they should tell.

A number of factors affect a child's ability to tell his or her story. The age of the child can be a factor, along with a family relationship to the perpetrator, or continuous sexual abuse over a long period of time. Sex offenders will emotionally victimize a child to prevent the truth from being uncovered. A perpetrator can convince a child that the child is to blame him or herself for the bad act. A perpetrator may threaten physical harm to a family member, friend, parent, household pet, or the victim directly. A perpetrator can make a child feel that a disclosure would 'ruin' the family. Boy children may be reluctant to make an outcry because of the social stigma attached to abuse by another male. Children experience fear, embarrassment, guilt, and shame. These feelings are enough to prevent a child from making an allegation of sexual abuse.

#### **5. Myth: The Victim is Always a Girl.**

Just as women can be sex offenders, boys may be victims of abuse. Unfortunately, child sexual abuse with male victims is underreported due to social and cultural attitudes: boys are taught to fight back and not let others see vulnerability. Boys are aware at an early age of the social stigma attached to sexual assault by another male, and fear appearing weak to others. All of these attitudes make male child victims less likely to tell of their abuse.

#### **6. Myth: Child victims of sexual abuse will have physical signs of the abuse.**

Frequently, an absence of physical evidence is often used as support that a perpetrator must be innocent of an alleged sexual assault. The truth is that abnormal genital findings are rare, even in cases where abuse has been factually proven by other forms of evidence. Many acts leave no physical trace. Injuries resulting from sexual abuse tend to heal very quickly, and many times, exams of child victims do not take place on the same day as the alleged act of abuse.

## **7. Myth: Stranger Danger**

85% of all reported cases of child molestation involve a child and a known perpetrator. It is not the stranger in the park carrying out most cases of sexual abuse – it is the people you have in your home. The people most likely to abuse a child are the ones with the most opportunity, most access, and most trust. Abusers can be parents, step-parents, uncles, aunts, step-siblings, babysitters, tutors, and family friends.

## **8. Myth: Sexual victimization as a child will inevitably result in the child growing up to become a sex offender.**

Early childhood sexual victimization does not automatically lead to sexually aggressive behaviors.

This is a particularly important fact to understand because a misunderstanding can create a terrible stigma for a child who has been sexually abused. While past sexual victimization can *increase the likelihood* of sexually aggressive behavior, most children who were sexually victimized never perpetrate against others. Multiple factors contribute to the development of sexually offensive behaviors. These include not only a history of sexual victimization, but also exposure to domestic violence or other violent behaviors. Research by Jane Gilgun, Judith Becker and John Hunter has indicated that if a child discloses an incident of abuse early and is believed and supported by other close people in their lives, they have a much higher likelihood to not become perpetrators as adults.

## **9. Myth: Child Sexual Abuse is a cultural or socioeconomic problem.**

It is frequently believed that abuse is a problem plaguing only certain families or people with a certain level of family income and education. Sometimes people believe that incest only happens in lower class and/or rural families. Sexual abuse crosses all socio-economic, neighborhood, race and class barriers. It happens in large and small families; in cities and in rural areas; in wealthy and lower income neighborhoods; and in homes, schools, churches, and businesses.

# **Behavioral and Physical Signs of Possible Sexual Abuse**

## **1. Symptoms of anxiety**

These include unexplained sleep disturbances (sweats, terrors, nightmares); showing a new or unusual fear of certain people, places or locations; having unexplained periods of panic or alarm.

## **2. Abnormal sexual behaviors or symptoms**

These behaviors and symptoms include excessive masturbation; leaving 'clues' that appear to intentionally invite discussion of sexual issues; complaining of pain while using the toilet, or exhibiting symptoms of a sexually transmitted disease such as an offensive odor; resistance to removal of clothing at appropriate times (bath, bed, toilet, diaper change); any symptom indicating evidence of physical traumas to the genital or anal area; engaging in persistent sexual play with friends, toys or pets; initiating sophisticated sexual behaviors, language, or knowledge; asking an unusual amount of questions about human sexuality.

## **3. Changes in personality or mood:**

Changes include unusually aggressive behavior toward family members, friends, toys, and pets; indicating a sudden reluctance to be alone with a certain person; withdrawing from previously enjoyable activities, like school including changes in academic performance.

## **4. General behavioral changes**

These can include beginning to wet the bed, experiencing a loss of appetite or other changes in eating habits, including trouble swallowing; developing frequent unexplained health problems; regression to behaviors too young for the stage of development previously achieved; engaging in self-mutilations, such as sticking themselves with pins or cutting themselves.

## **5. Changes in beliefs or discussions**

These changes can include refusal to talk about a secret shared with an adult or an older child; discussions about a new, older friend; suddenly thinks of self or body as dirty, repulsive, or bad.

**Physical signs of sexual abuse are rare. If you see the signs, bring your child to a doctor or call the police.**

Sample Sermon  
Kevin Thompson, Community Bible Church

Title: Step Up and Speak Out

Text: Proverbs 31.8

Series: none

Date: April 22, 2012

Idea: The gospel gives voice to the voiceless.

### Invisible Children

(this introduction assumes future events which may or may not happen)

KONY 2012. Two months ago Joseph Kony was an unknown name to most Americans. For over 25 years he has been a war lord terrorizing Uganda, Sudan, and the Congo. As a part of his terror he has stolen 30,000 children from their homes, selling the girls into sex slavery and forcing the boys to become members of his army. Often one of the acts he requires of his captives is for them to kill their parents.

Appalled by his acts and the world's apathy, a group of people formed a group called Invisible Children. Their goal was to have Kony captured and his atrocities stopped. Their plan was to make Kony famous, as famous as anyone in the world. To do this they have made a movie which has gone viral on Facebook and as many of you know on Friday night they placed posters and signs across the country that simply stated KONY 2012. They want this year, 2012, to be the year that Kony is stopped.

It is amazing to watch a tragedy that has gone on for so long unnoticed, suddenly take center stage. It is fascinating to consider these invisible children as now being seen. It is hopeful to consider the world uniting around an important issue and possibly bringing it to an end.

### Silent Children

All of this is happening half a world away, but there is another group of children. We might call these children the silent children. They are not invisible to us because we see them. They are in our schools and churches. They play on our kids tee-ball team. They are our nieces and nephews, sons and daughters.

They are silent because they carry a secret. They haven't been stolen from their homes. They haven't been sold into sex slavery or forced into the military of a tyrant. Yet their innocence has been stolen. Their sense of security and safety has been ripped from them.

They have been physically and/or sexually abused.

It is their secret and far too often they are silent.

### Proverbs

In the Book of Proverbs the wise father is giving instructions to his son. Some of his words are his own, some are simply wise words he has collected from others. He is teaching his son how to be a God fearing man and in verse 8 of chapter 31 he instructs his son:

“Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute” (Proverbs 31.8, ESV).



They say “silence is golden” and in many situations it is. Most of sin is probably the result of the wrong words spoken at the wrong time with wrong attitudes and the wrong motives. If you and I could learn to hold our tongues in the right time we would be much better off.

Yet there are times in which silence is not golden. There are times in which silence is anything but golden; it’s actually sinful. The father of Proverbs 31 points out one of those situations.

“Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute.”

This Proverb echoes a common Biblical theme in which God’s people are called to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves, to give voice to the voiceless.

It was the intent of the Old Testament Law to protect those who couldn’t protect themselves.

It was the pattern of the Old Testament prophet to speak for the hopeless and helpless.

It was the life of Jesus that illustrated God’s heart for the poor and disenfranchised.

It was the announcement of the New Testament that God’s Kingdom would come from the outskirts of society.

It was the testimony of Revelation that a day would come in which justice would reign.

The Book of Proverbs falls in line with all of Scripture. Using proverbial language, the fool stays silent, but the wise speak for those who are destitute.

#### Destitute

This word “destitute” is sometimes translated “deprived.” The NLT says “those that are crushed.” The concept is someone being kept from what is rightfully theirs; what they are entitled to.

Humanity is not entitled to much. There are not many things that we can say we have a definite right to. Our country is found on a few entitlements—the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

While there are not many things that we are entitled to, we would all agree that children are entitled to their childhood. They have a right to innocence, the period of development and maturity, the awe and wonder that is childhood. Anytime that is taken, it is injustice. Any time they are deprived of childhood, they are destitute.

The Bible says we should speak on their behalf. We should shout the injustice. We should give voice to one who has no voice. We should open our mouths for the mute.

#### The Power of a Voice

This past year we have seen what happens when injustice is given a voice, the voiceless are spoken for. In 2009, a boy had the courage to tell his parents that Jerry Sandusky had been sexually assaulting him for several years. The boy’s parents told the police who opened an investigation. It was a long process, but finally in 2011 a grand jury indicted Sandusky on 40 counts of sex crimes. Since then more charges have been added as more boys have come forward.

Because one boy told the truth and one family reported it, someone who had been secretly abusing children for years was revealed. The Sandusky story gave courage to some students at Syracuse who had been abused by an assistant coach. People all across the nation have found courage to tell their story and stop abusers.

An amazing thing has happened over the past two decades—child abuse and neglect have declined. According to a government study between 1993 and 2006 the rate dropped 38% and it has continued to drop over the past five years. Its tremendous news, but the question is ‘why has it dropped?’ If we know the reasons then we can possibly eradicate child abuse and neglect.

In part, it has dropped because of better mental health. Using medications and teaching skills to control anger has kept many potential abusers from abusing.

The main reason for the drop is a change in public perception and action. What use to be a family secret has been brought to light. Where people use to turn their eye away from abuse, they have now turned it on to abuse. Where victims use to suffer in silence, they have now been given a voice.

In just two decades more has been done to stop child abuse then all of human history because victims and advocates have stepped up and spoken out. We’ve seen it in sports, in religious institutions, and all throughout society where men and women have said, “enough is enough. This is wrong and its time for it to stop.”

As the secret has been told, other secrets have been revealed and abusers have been stopped.

Let’s put into context the importance of one voice. Most sexual abuse happens at home, primarily from a parent or step-parent. Some of these people are pedophiles, some are not. The average pedophile has 150 victims in his life. If that pedophile can be stopped after the first event, 149 other victims would never be victims. It only takes one voice—one victim having the courage and safety to speak, one adult having the awareness that something is wrong and being willing to speak. It only takes one person.

The sad news is that on average it takes 7 adults knowing about abuse before one of those adults will speak. We saw it in the situations at Penn State and Syracuse where adults knew what was happening, but did not speak, did not push to protect the children.

Notice what the Proverb tells us: “Open your mouth.”

#### Our Home

According to the Hamilton House there were over 2500 investigated cases of child abuse in Crawford and Sebastian County last year. On average nationally, 80% of investigations do not turn up enough evidence of abuse—either abuse didn’t happen or there simply isn’t enough evidence to prove it. If we are average, that means we had around 500 individual cases of child abuse last year in two counties. Consider that: every day of the week a new case of child abuse, and two on the weekend days—Monday a new case, Tuesday a new case, Wednesday a new case, Thursday a new case, Friday a new case, Saturday two new cases, and Sunday two new cases.

The number of cases is probably far higher than this. While 80% of reported cases lack substantial finding, it is estimated that for every 1 person who says they were abused, 6 others suffer in silence. For every one person you know who will admit they were abused, six others are overwhelmed by guilt and shame and simply won’t speak.

The fact is that we don’t know how much this goes on in our region; we simply know that it goes on too much. Even in the mist of abuse declining, the numbers are too high, the suffering is too great, and something must be done.

We can infer from this passage that the fool stays silent when others are oppressed, but the wise “open their mouth for the mute, for the rights of the destitute.”

Few things reveal the character of a society than how they treat the oppressed.

As a man I can easily say that few things reveal the nature of the heart of a man than how he treats women and children.

This truth is illustrated in the Book of Judges.

#### The Book of Judges

At the end of the Book of Judges there are three chapters written as an appendix to the book designed to illustrate the wickedness of the nation of Israel. It might be the most gruesome chapters in the Bible.

In chapter 19 some strangers are staying at a man's house when some drunken townspeople come to the home and desire to rape the male guest. While trying to protect his house guest, the owner of the house offers his own virgin daughter and the stranger's wife to the men and he allows them to rape them instead. The story includes the rape of a girl and the rape and murder of a woman all to protect a man.

The chapter begins with the setting "in those days, when there was no king in Israel." It's a story meant to illustrate what happens when sin was wild. It the fulfillment of Judges 17.6 which says, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." In chapter 17 the moral restraints of God are lost and the human heart is left to its own devices. Just two chapters later it results in the rape and murder of women and children.

Few things illustrate the condition of the human heart, specifically the male heart, than how we treat women and children. Sinful man is willing to trade women and children for their own safety, while Jesus is always willing to give his life for women and children.

While this man was saying take the children, Jesus said let the children come to me.

While these men said it doesn't matter what we do to the children, Jesus said whatever you have done to the least of these you have done to me.

While most men use their resources and laws to protect the strong, God gave the Old Testament law to protect the hurting, the helpless, the outcast, the widow and orphan.

One of the results of sin is that the weak become oppressed and abused at the hands of the strong. Yet one of the results of the gospel is that the strong use their strength for the weak.

#### Open Your Mouth

How can we open our mouths for the destitute? In the case of child abuse we can speak.

We can tell our stories. Few things are more powerful than the story of someone who has been abused and has the courage to tell their story. Physical and sexual abuse flourish in silence, they can die from sound. One story told can inspire another victim to speak; it can inspire another advocate to reach out; it can change a culture from apathy to activism. By telling our stories we can erode away the shame and secrecy. Without the shame and secrecy, abuse might still occur but it will become increasingly rare.

We can love our kids. Most abuse happens at home from a parent, step-parent or family member. Parental addiction puts a child at great risk for abuse. By seeking help from our addictions, we are protecting our children. We can love our kids and empower them to know what is right and wrong. We can create open lines of communication in case they are uncomfortable with something they can tell us. We can watch what our

kids are doing, where they are going, who is showing interest in them and always having a healthy skepticism about others.

We can make up our minds that if we suspect, we will report. This is easier for me than you. As a pastor I am legally obligated to report any physical or sexual abuse I suspect in the life of a child. It's not my job to investigate. It's not my job to convict. It's not my job to be certain. It is my job, if I reasonably believe that abuse could be happening, to call the protective services hotline and let them know of my concerns. The authorities take it from there. What I legally have to do, we all should willfully choose to do. If we suspect child abuse, we must determine we will report it to the proper authorities. It is easier to decide now what we will do than to wait until we are put in the situation. If you fear a child is being abused, call the hotline. If you need help or you aren't certain, call a staff member of the church and we will help you do what needs to be done.

The text calls us to open our mouths.

Why would it call us to do so? What does the wisdom of God know that we do not?

The temptation is not to speak. Human tendency is to stay quiet. For hundreds of years people have turned their head away from abuse. They have said it's not their business. They have said it's not going on. They have said good people can't do bad things. For as long as can be known, people have kept silent.

This text confronts human tendency. We are tempted to stay quiet, but this text calls us to speak. Why?

We are called to speak because God knows that sin flourishes in darkness and silence, but it dies in the light and sound.

Sin flourishes in silence. It goes unchecked. It multiplies. It allows a person to appear one way in public but another way in private. It causes a victim to feel unknown, unheard, and unseen. Sin flourishes in silence.

Light and sound can break the power of sin. God didn't ignore Adam and Eve in the Garden, he exposed their sin. He called it for what it is. Even as they hid from his presence, he called them into the light.

By revealing their sin, Adam and Eve were given the opportunity to heal. It's not a guarantee of healing. Just naming a sin doesn't mean it will die. Just naming a sin doesn't guarantee it will be stopped. Yet revealing a sin gives an opportunity for healing.

There seems to be a Biblical truth: You can't heal from what's not revealed. Hidden sin is like a hidden virus, it can continue to attack unnoticed. Yet once the virus is named, treatment can be chosen, and the patient has a chance to survive. So it is with sin. Once it is exposed, once it is seen for what it is, there is a chance for healing. Not a guarantee, but a chance.

God tells us to speak, because it is the loving thing to do.

It is loving toward the victim—recognizing their pain and suffering.

It is loving to society—protecting future victims.

It is loving to the perpetrator—giving them a chance to recognize their actions and get help.

God tells us to speak, because God spoke to us and for us.

He spoke to us in the midst of our own sin—all have fallen short of the glory of God.

He spoke for us in the midst of a fallen world—while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.

Because God spoke to us and for us, he now calls on all of us to speak to and for others.

#### Not in Fort Smith.

So today we speak. We stand up and speak out saying “Not in Fort Smith.” Not any longer. For too long abuse has been part of our community. For too long it has gone hidden. For too long we have been like everyone and everywhere else. But no longer. We can’t control the world, we can’t control other communities, but we can change things in Fort Smith.

And so we say:

Abuse might be common in other places, but not in Fort Smith.

It might be common place for sinful men to protect themselves by selling women and children, but not in Fort Smith.

It might be normal around the nation for it to take 7 adults to know the plight of a child before 1 will speak, but not in Fort Smith.

It won’t be ignored...not in Fort Smith.

It won’t be denied... not in Fort Smith.

It won’t be excused...not in Fort Smith.

It won’t be accepted...not in Fort Smith.

From this day forward, let it be known to all persons, we will call out sin. We will not accept abuse.

We will listen to the victims. We will care for the victims. We will support the victims.

We will not tolerate the abusers. We will prosecute the abusers. We will ensure the abusers cannot abuse again.

This town is full of silent children. They are in our schools, on our kids ball teams, in our churches. They suffer in silence, they are mute. They are oppressed and destitute. To those who have experienced the grace of God, whose names have been called by God and whose eyes have been opened in faith, “Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute” (Proverbs 31.8, ESV).

## Garrett Lewis Testimony

Childhood sexual abuse. Saying the very words are difficult. I couldn't say them for years and still today I feel a knotting sensation in my stomach. Yet it's when we take the darkness and expose it to light that we're truly liberated and set free. It's not something that's isolated, it's society's dirty secret. In my family alone one cousin was molested by a family friend, another was forced to perform sex acts on her friends dad at a sleepover, My Mom was physically abused by her step mother, 2 of my cousins (both sisters) were sexually abused in foster care, another was sexually abused by his step-dad. These are 5 different families in 4 different states. Here's my journey. I never thought I'd be able to say the things I'm about to say; and in some respects saying it... is acknowledging it and the realization that it actually happened is hard to believe. Yet it's in these moments, when we're able to speak about child abuse that we're most powerful. I've overcome, I've confronted, & I've conquered.

My story starts at the age of 6, I had just enrolled in kindergarten and was excited about going to school. I rode the bus to and from school and had to walk thru a wooded vacant lot to get home. This is where a neighbor would "befriend me" It's also where he would later manipulate, molest and rape me. The abuse continued for a year until my parents moved out of state. I never told them, I was told not to tell. I was afraid of what they'd think.

1st grade past, then 2nd, 3rd, 4th & 5th. I was an out of control child in grade school. I was overweight, had few friends, hated my life, and hated my family. So much so that I tried to commit suicide at the age of 12, by locking myself in the bathroom and emptying out 2 spray cans of Lysol until I passed out. Needless to say I wasn't successful and looking back, I picked a really bizarre -but clean- way to end my life.

I didn't like my mom much growing up, apparently, I walked out of the woods one day with my pants down and mom yelled out: "we don't do that outside, get inside if you're gonna do that." She thought I was just peeing on a tree and had no idea what had just taken place. One night watching TV in the downstairs den, there was a storyline about a child who had been touched inappropriately. Mom told me and my 2 sisters if anyone ever touched us that we should tell her immediately. I told her that we need to go upstairs and talk. I remember the look in her face and how much it hurt me to see my mom upset. She tried to cry alone in the bedroom, but I could still see that her eyes were swollen. The next day, she took me out of school to see a counselor much of which I still don't remember. After counseling, I never brought it up again & nothing was ever said about it.

Flash forward a few years to puberty & I began to realize what had occurred. I was mad as hell. I felt like I was living two separate lives. The Garrett at school, who played football, was popular, outgoing, on the student council. And then the Garrett on the inside who was miserable. Constantly questioning my sexuality, living in a state of paranoia, worrying I had AIDS, thinking of committing suicide.

I learned early in adolescence that the busier I was; the less my mind would drift, think, or wonder. I started working 40 hours a week at age 14 and continued throughout high school. I dated a few girls, but relationships were never intimate or sexual and although I had many friends, I felt like no one really knew the real me. Deep down I felt like I was defective or that something was wrong with me.

The first person I told was Ashley, my wife. I told her vaguely that something happened to me when I was a kid, but I didn't want to talk about it. I felt like she should know that I was abused as a child before we got married. I told her I really didn't want to talk about it and she left it at that. The secrecy was making me miserable inside and I felt like no one on Earth understood what I was going through. I became increasingly paranoid that the whole world was evil and sexual predators were everywhere. I would follow Ashley to and from work, circling the parking lot looking for suspicious vehicles. My anxiety was extremely high. I decided to go to the Dr & see if I could get something to calm me down. I told the doctor I'd been abused and I suspected that this was the reason I felt so anxious about evil people everywhere. I was referred to a psychologist, and I thought: "I'm not crazy there's no way I'm going to a shrink" so I threw the appointment in the trash and decided I could deal with it. After all, I'd been living with this secret for years.

It was around this time that I started drinking alcohol heavily. I'm not talking a few beers either; we're talking full blown passed out on the pool table drunk. My coworkers would take me home at 4am. During my phase of heavy drinking, Ashley and I were engaged and married. In fact, I spent most of our wedding night hugging the toilet and was so hung over the next day; I could barely go on our honeymoon. My late night drinking and partying with friends was starting to put a strain on our relationship. It started to become a serious problem and I would later find out that she thought the problem was so severe we'd end up divorced. She retaliated though. One day she say that I'd spent nearly \$100 at a bar doing shots with friends, she took it upon herself to go on a \$100 shopping spree and said she's buy clothes with the exact amount of money I was spending at the bar. Well, after a while, the alcohol became more trouble...and costly than it was worth so I decided to quit drinking. It was a temporary escape from reality, but in the end, it just made things worse.

My attention then turned to losing weight. I was pushing 265 due to all the alcohol and poor eating habits. I convinced myself that if I lost weight I would be happy and feel good about myself. I ate right, exercised, and even followed some goofy Dr Phil tips and dropped my weight to 195 in about 6 months. That's almost 70 pounds in a very short amount of time. Viewers started e-mailing me and asking me how I lost the weight so I posted a story on our website. Next thing you know I'm in LA taping a Dr Phil show. I was fit, healthy, had killer 6pack abs. But I was miserable. I had changed the outside, but was still the same sad and hurting person on the inside.

I knew I need to change the way I looked at life, but I wasn't sure how. I thought maybe church would help. I went a little in high school and got saved every summer at the Baptist church...they gave out free pizza. I found being on TV and trying to find a church home is next to impossible. I wanted to keep to myself, and I didn't want the attention.

Every time someone would walk up behind me and put their hand on my shoulder I would just about have a panic attack. Everywhere I went I heard “what’s the weather like”, “why are you here”, or “shouldn’t you be at work?” All nice people who meant well, but having the same conversation 1000 times a day gets old. I never really liked church anyway, nothing but a bunch of hypocrites. My mom was a strong woman of faith and growing up and it drove me crazy. “The lord this, or the lord that” Just leave me alone. Little did I know the seeds of faith that had been planted in my heart. I gave up on church, but my mom never gave up on me. I found out later that she’d been praying for me for years.

One day she gave me a book called the “Faith or George Bush” It talked about his alcoholism and how living your life according to scripture could change your life. He went to a non denominational Bible study called Community Bible Study. I thought I’d go to one of these classes to learn more about the Bible and who this Jesus guy was. After all, I figured if Bush could do it, how hard could it be? The only CBS class was a women’s day class where the average age was somewhere around 50 or 60. Here I was uncomfortable in church and now I’m supposed to hang out with 40 grandmas. Nice huh. I figured if anything, the potlucks would be wonderful. So I decided to go...I could always quit. Besides I was just there to learn about the Bible not to worship or shake hands or walk around with those cheesy church smiles. But there’s something I didn’t know about God’s word. It never returns void and it always fulfills its purpose.

I’d always considered myself a Christian, but looking back I suppose I had God in my head, but not in my heart. As I learned more about what it means to be an authentic Christian, I began to pray every other night, Just that God would help me understand him and help me find my purpose in life. After praying, I would lay awake at night thinking. I couldn’t figure out why I was so miserable. I’d achieved everything I ever wanted in life, a wonderful wife, a college degree, the career I’d always wanted, I was physically fit yet still unhappy. My thoughts would often drift to the sexual abuse, and then I would become furious, eventually falling asleep in the wee morning hours.

I decided it was time to go back to the doctor and see if I could get anything to help me sleep. I never mentioned the abuse just that I was stressed out at work. I was prescribed a little blue pill about the size of a sunflower kernel called Ambien, and it was supposed to help me sleep better. After a few days of taking the pill I realized that I had been sleep walking and waking up with amnesia. Not remembering anything I’d done the night before. Weird I thought... but at least I was sleeping and wasn’t conscious enough to remember walking around. One night I took the medication and went to bed, falling asleep thinking about my childhood. When I woke up in the morning I found a piece of paper on the nightstand which described - in detail – the sexual abuse. Things like the colored bracelets I would get after it was over, how bad it hurt, the coloring book drawings that I saw on the ground as the abuse was taking place. I remembered nothing about writing this but the instant I read it, I could remember everything that had happened to me, and I knew that it was true. I didn’t tell Ashley, even though I was on the verge of a full blown psychotic meltdown. The next night I took Ambien again, only this time I woke up sobbing and woke Ashley up to tell her about being abused. I could recall about



2 or 3 instances vividly and talked to her about them until 4 in the morning. The next day, I barely remembered it. The scariest thing for me was that "I didn't know what I didn't know" AND I didn't know when I would remember it next.

I went back to the doctor and told him about the abuse, he referred me to a psychologist, this time I thought I really was going crazy so I decided to go. I slowly revealed the abuse to the therapist and he helped me understand what was going on inside my mind. More importantly, that I wasn't going crazy and that I wasn't alone in my experiences. In a strange twist, my psychologist had extensively studied the psycho active effects of sleeping medications and memory. Or as the cheesy saying goes: "it's not odd, it's God."

I was still having severe anxiety though and panic attacks. Once while watching Law & Order, the suspects name was the same as the person who had abused me. The memory occurred right in the middle of the show. I quietly got up and left the living room, walked into the bedroom and closed the door. I had a panic attack so severe I thought I was going to die. First washing & scrubbing myself in the shower, then lying in bed while my heart raced and breathing was erratic. I would also repeat the numbers of the address where the abuse took place in my head over and over and over again. "Mini" panic attacks continued, do did the obsession with the numbers of the street address and the obsessive thoughts that I had AIDS or was somehow gay. But I continued going to therapy. I learned that I had post-traumatic stress disorder, and a form of obsessive compulsive disorder.

At one counseling session, my psychologist hooked me up to a machine similar to a polygraph which measured internal stress. I would talk about things and learn to push the needle back into the "calm or low stress" category. The conversation shifted to God when he asked me if I was a spiritual person. I could tell that the machine was registering "calm" and for the first time I realized what that empty hole was in my heart, and I knew how to fill it.

That night I hit my knees and started praying & kneeling on the floor next to my bed, I forgave the person who hurt me and decided now was the time to stop being bitter about it and start getting better. I asked God to show me who he really was and to have mercy on me for sinning against Him. Although I had been baptized young, and 'saved' numerous times in high school, I believe that night I had truly committed myself to Jesus. I told God he could have all of me, you know one of God's favorite things to do is to take someone that's broken & hurting and restore them, heal them, and use them for His purpose.

The words of Jesus in the book of Matthew particularly resonated with me: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." I finally had rest for my soul. The scripture was saying, come to me... not to alcohol, or to career goals, or to losing weight.

I want to encourage those of you still harboring hate or resentment in your heart to forgive. Don't let it destroy you like it almost did me. Forgiveness isn't natural, especially for something as horrible as child abuse. It's not natural, no - it's supernatural. God's strength was made perfect in my weakness. I was a slave to myself, trying to solve all life's problems on my own strength; it wasn't until I fully surrendered myself to Christ that I really experienced the freedom of walking in the light.

I wish I could tell you that everything is perfectly fine now and I'm just this happy go lucky Christian. The truth is: I'm still in therapy. I'm still healing. I'm still growing in my walk with Christ.

I don't know why God waits so long, or why bad things happen. But I do know that God is good & that God is love.

By: Garrett Lewis