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McEntee: Men remember abuse to get past the pain

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Editor's note:

This column includes explicit descriptions of sexual abuse.

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Blaine's brother began sexually abusing him when he was 3. Kurt was the same age when his father first raped him. Joe was 12 and in a military hospital when two wounded Marines, home from Vietnam, took turns with him. Dave's dad sexually brutalized him, in the process breaking his ribs, fingers and jaw.

All were warned never to tell a soul. And for decades, they didn't. They couldn't.

I met these men and others at the Salt Lake Rape Recovery Center after their group therapy with psychotherapist Jim Struve. Once deathly afraid to acknowledge their abuse, each has found his own way to healing and a life without shame.

Their stories have a common theme: They were subject to violent men who used their strength and power — at home and in public — to dominate and torment them.

Some mothers allowed the abuse, sometimes to protect themselves, sometimes so they could join in. Some tried to protect their sons or tell someone in authority, only to be told they must be crazy or lying.

To these men, all those elements conspired to leave them mute, often with psychological disorders such as depression, PTSD or dissociative disorders. Many married and had kids and buried themselves in their professions. Many drank or used drugs or both to disguise their pain.

Blaine, for example, was 3 years old when his older brother started in on him; it continued with him and his sisters until he was 18. He tried to tell his parents, but they wouldn't listen, especially after his brother went on his LDS mission.

It was only when his brother abused his adopted children that he was tried, convicted and sentenced to nine years



Peg McEntee

to life in prison.

To this day, Blaine said, neither he nor his sisters have ever had justice.

Joe's father was a military man, and the household was a hive of physical abuse. "I don't know if he ever sexually abused me, but he would hit, slap and kick me. He wanted me to be a man."

At 12, Joe's appendix ruptured, and he was admitted to the San Diego Naval Hospital. That's when the Marines started taking him into bathroom stalls.

Nine years later, chronic rectal problems led him to have surgery. He married and became a pastor, but despite a lingering sense of shame, his denial left him unable to accept that he had been raped.

He began to feel like he was outside his body, a "physical, emotional sensation, feeling like the odd man out so many times.

"Three years ago, my life imploded, and since I've lost my vocation. My marriage has ended. It wasn't until three years ago that I finally said, 'this is killing me,' and I started on the road to recovery."

It's a common thread among these men: denial despite smothering shame and, when they couldn't deny the facts any longer, a profound fear of telling anyone what had been done to them.

Kurt said he suffered violent physical and sexual abuse that left him with scars and deaf in one ear. It lasted until he was 10.

"My mother wasn't violent," he said, "she was just sneaky. And complicit. And she would watch. I think she decided at one point that it had to stop. She was abused too, beat up by my father."

She went to her Mormon leaders, Kurt said, but "all they did was give him a higher calling in the church, and that was going to cure it. They did nothing for the rest of the family."

That was 30 years ago, and until he gathered the strength to seek help, Kurt remained "disconnected from the world, from humanity. I knew I was carrying around this horrible experience, thinking I was the only person it had ever happened to."

Dave said his father, who once threw a claw hammer into his head, was a violent, angry man who abused his wife and all his children.

Dave said he'd come to his bedroom, crush him with his body, and rape him anally and orally, sometimes making Dave beg him to do it.

His mother knew. "It was so disturbing to me that she'd prep me for him," Dave said.

His brother died at 12, and Dave's father told him he was responsible — and for many years Dave believed him. Earlier this year, his younger brother took his own life, he said. "He didn't get the help he needed for his sexual abuse."

Dave's father died about eight years ago, and just two years ago, a neighbor who had known the truth about the older brother for decades told Dave it wasn't his fault.

"They were terrified of my father, and no one would do or say anything," Dave said. "I'd lived with that guilt and shame for 39 years, believing I'd killed my bother."

By that time, Dave had begun therapy that continues today. As with the other men, it's been at once terrifying and illuminating. With the help of therapists like Struve, they are healing themselves.

Peg McEntee is a news columnist. Reach her at pegmcentee@sltrib.com.

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MaleSurvivor hosts Dare to Dream program on Wednesday

MaleSurvivor (www.malesurvivor.org), a nonprofit organization dedicated to overcoming sexual victimization of boys and men, holds its Dare to Dream program Wednesday from 6:30 to 9 p.m. at the Episcopal Church's Wasatch Retreat & Conference Center, 75 S. 200 East, Salt Lake City. On April 20, at the same time and place, MaleSurvivor hosts Joining Hands in Healing, an interactive dialogue with male survivors, their loved ones and audience members.

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Note to readers

Over time, Peg McEntee has met with male survivors of child sexual abuse who gather at the Salt Lake Rape Recovery Center for group therapy. Most of the men, and their psychotherapist Jim Struve, told their stories openly, and often tearfully. She will report on the issue in four columns between today and April 10.

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