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McEntee: Healing is possible for victims of child sexual abuse

By Peg McEntee

Tribune Columnist

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Editor's note:

This column includes explicit descriptions of sexual abuse.

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In his dreams, Randy would relive being a little boy in bed, pulling his blankets over his lap as a dark shadow of a man comes into his room. When he awoke, he'd be choking.

As a boy, Randy would dissociate when his father came in. He would make a humming sound in his mind and focus "in the middle of my brain.

"I'll always remember this: When it was over, I'd turn on my side, and it was like clockwork, the train would pass through our town. I would hear the train's whistle, telling me it was over, and I was safe."

Randy's physical sexual abuse ended when he was 12, although his dad would grab at him and make remarks. Randy finished school, went on an LDS mission, earned his bachelor's degree, married and had two daughters.

Like so many men abused as children, he spent his younger life wanting his family to look perfect so no one would know the horror he and his mother, who abused him physically, endured.

Randy's mother finally broke down mentally, "just checked out of life," he said, and spent the rest of her days in an institution.

As a grown man, it became ever more difficult to pretend to be normal. Randy couldn't abide having his daughters touch his face. "I told them, 'Do not touch Daddy's face.' That was the trigger: If I was to be touched or slapped, it would send me into a rage. I didn't want to do that to my daughters."

Finally, sex with his wife became impossible — her very touch hurt him physically.

So, in his mid-30s, they parted, and Randy went into therapy. "That's when my journey began," he said.



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Since then, like many of the men in Jim Struve's therapy group, Randy remains in individual therapy as well attending weekend retreats and events such as the upcoming Dare to Dream and Joining Hands in Healing in Salt Lake City.

It has been a multi-state campaign aimed in part at educating the public on the sheer number of men and women living with the effects of child sexual abuse.

According to MaleSurvivor.org, a national nonprofit organization, an estimated one in six men were abused as children (and one in four for women). Most men never speak about it, having been taught they should bear emotional and physical pain without complaining.

For some men, their abuse can lead to sexual orientation confusion, sexual dysfunction and difficulty believing it is even possible to combine sex with love.

There are other myths about child sexual abusers, one being that many are gay. In truth, sexual orientation means nothing.

Men and women who use children for sexual gratification are pedophiles, period. They are criminals under state and federal law. They come from every social, educational, professional and financial strata. Many may abuse their sons and daughters, nieces and nephews, grandchildren, their children's friends and children who are strangers to them.

The sexual violations, as these men have attested, also violate a child's expectation of trust and safety. The physical and psychological damage can last for decades.

When Randy and many of the men began therapy, they asked questions: What's going on in my life? Why am I feeling so disconnected, and why am I feeling outside of my body? Why can't I have normal human relations with family and friends?

Over the years — he's 53 now — Randy has come to terms not only with his memories and fears, but also with his same-sex attraction. Besides therapy, he's been involved in Journey to Manhood, a program for men like him and others who are married and still want to be.

For his part, Randy has chosen never to marry again, and he doesn't date.

Nothing in his recovery has come easily. But years ago, his two daughters rallied around him, and he treasures his "huge community of friends and family, children and grandchildren.

"The healing is available. I can do this," he said. "And I want someone else to feel this, the happiness I never had growing up."

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

Correction: In my April 3 column, I wrote that the sexual abuse Blaine endured ended when he was 18. Blaine was 8 when it stopped.

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MaleSurvivor to host Dare to Dream program Wednesday

P MaleSurvivor (www.malesurvivor.org), a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping boys and men overcome sexual victimization, will hold 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, MaleSurvivor hosts Joining Hands in Healing, an interactive dialogue with male survivors, their loved ones and audience members. Co-hosts include the Salt Lake Rape Recover Center and the Utah Coalition Against Sexual Assault.

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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: The first appeared on Sunday and can be found at sltrib.com/mcentee. The series will continue through Sunday.

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