


EXPOSING CHILD ABUSE | A gentle path to harsh truth

# A PLACE TO TELL



Sunflower House provides a comfort zone where children can open up about life's most frightening, painful moments.

By LEE HILL KAVANAUGH | THE KANSAS CITY STAR

**M**inutes before their father's sentencing, his three adult daughters waited in the corridor of a Wyandotte County courtroom, Division 5.

Their eyes swollen, makeup cried off, the women wrapped their arms around each other. They grieved, but not for their father and his fate.

One held crumpled papers in her hand.

"I'm not sure I'll be strong enough to read this in court," she said. After days of finding words to describe her pain, she had typed a victim impact statement confronting her father for his sexual abuse against her years ago. But his sickness reached much deeper in their family.

The second paper was handwritten in the broad cursive loops of a 10-year-old — where words screamed in bold letters when emotion turned profane.

It was composed by the second generation of victimhood, the convicted man's granddaughter.

The child who told. The one who stopped

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# SUNFLOWER: A gentle path to reveal painful truths



DAVID ELLITT / THE KANSAS CITY STAR

After a child goes through an interview at Sunflower House in Shawnee, sometimes revealing things that an adult said never to tell, the final step is for the child to pick out a teddy bear to keep. But the child doesn't even know about the bears until the interview is over.



DAVID ELLITT / THE KANSAS CITY STAR

When a child is interviewed at Sunflower House in Shawnee, a police officer like Detective Vickie Fogarty of Bonner Springs watches from another room.

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the man's decades-long spree of satisfying his urges with children, but not until after she attempted suicide twice and drew pictures of monsters visiting her bed.

Her details of the abuse — revealed at Sunflower House — led to her grandfather confessing everything, including how he'd "loved" her at least 20 times last year.

Every day, a child endures the unwelcome touch of a predator. Nationally, statistics indicate it happens to one in four girls, one in six boys. But abuse experts know many more go unreported.

Reasons for the silence include shame or disbelief or fear. In most cases, the crime is committed by someone the child knows, loves and trusts. A relative. A teacher. A minister. A coach.

Often the pedophile threatens to kill them if they tell. Or threatens that no one would believe them. Or that they'd be sent away. Our secret, he whispers.

But Sunflower House is a place in the metro area where children can tell.

Because telling is a sacred act by those who believe in Santa Claus and tooth fairies and unicorns. Children who know monsters really do lurk in their bedrooms. Not under the bed — but on it.

Telling a grown-up is often the most difficult thing a child can do.

But it is the only way to make monsters go away.

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Learning of a child's sexual abuse hurls families into an emotional abyss, especially in the first weeks of the disclosure.

When the grandmother was told of her husband's crimes, she retched. He's "dead to us now," one daughter said.

As her words echoed in the empty hallway, the elevator door opened and a familiar woman walked out: Bonner Springs Police Detective Vickie Fogarty, 17 years in the sex crimes unit.

She took the initial report from the little girl, listened to her story at Sunflower House, questioned and arrested the grandfather. He confessed everything.

Police officers aren't required to be in court for a sentencing. But Fogarty always is when it's a case she worked. It feels personal. To support the families, the 52-year-old mom and grandmother composes an impact statement: a summary of what the abuser told her juxtaposed with what childhood is supposed to be.

Her passion was born from her own family's encounter with child sexual abuse. She's seen the wreckage it causes.

Fogarty likes judgment day. "Are you ready? ... I think he's gonna get it," she said, then whispered:

"Please let it be life ... please let it be life."

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Coffee in hand, a dad sat in a busy McDonald's off of Interstate 435, watching little spirals of steam. Nearby, a mom and her two girls ordered Happy Meals. The dad glanced at them.

He likes to see happy moments, he said, often going to watch a buddy's children play T-ball. It reminds him that kids still have fun. Eight years ago, his family did, too.

But everything changed one day when a detective called: *We believe your daughter was sexually abused by her stepfather. She's in protective custody...*

She visited Sunflower House the next day.

"I was in shock ... I berated myself for not seeing the signs ... I didn't protect my little girl."

She would beg to stay with him when the weekend visitations were over. Just age-appropriate drama, he thought. He knew she didn't like his ex-wife's new husband.

"When I saw her, I told her I was so sorry. I told her I loved her. I hugged her so hard."

For three years his daughter told adults that her stepfather was bad. Her mother didn't believe her. A teacher did.

"I asked her, 'Why didn't you tell me what he was doing?' Because she was afraid her six-

foot-four, 320-pound father would kill him, he said.

His fist clenched.

"She was probably right ... He still owes me 90 days in intensive care."

Parents often struggle more in the aftermath of child sexual abuse than the little ones do, said child advocacy experts. They hurt for the loss of their children's innocence and trust. They berate themselves as bad parents because they didn't prevent the abuse, or even consider it a possibility.

Often, the parent is the last person to know. It's too difficult for a child to disclose to them. More commonly, a child tells a teacher or a counselor or a best friend, who tells an adult. In both Kansas and Missouri, several professions are legally mandated to report any mention of abuse. Sometimes, a tip is hotlined from an anonymous source.

But once the disclosure is made, a police officer or a social worker will talk to the child to ensure safety. Parents are notified. And very quickly, a referral is made to go to a place where a team of professionals comes together to help the child.

A place, said the dad, "that takes the gloom out of the darkness of it all." A smile appeared. "It's the one bright spot in this whole thing."

And yeah, he added, he really, really loves sunflowers.

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On 65th Street in Shawnee, a small sign hangs just before a long winding driveway. A minimalist line drawing, it depicts a bright red house protecting a sunflower with its wreath of yellow petals.

Inside the building, skylights spill sunshine. A massive stone fireplace stretches to the ceiling and, depending on the weather, a fire crackles in its hearth. Regardless of season, a Christmas tree is wrapped with sunflowers and vines.

Even a decade ago, a child might be interviewed at the police station or in the back of a police cruiser. Sometimes it would be at her school with the principal and counselors and her parents all listening, horrified and angry.

Children often had to retell their stories again and again to teachers, police, prosecutors, social workers. Many times the adults were untrained in how to pull out the facts, possibly asking leading questions, diluting or exaggerating truth, unaware that they were encouraging the child to say whatever to please them.

"All of those interviews were good, but nobody did an excellent job," Sheryl Lidtke said diplomatically. As a deputy district attorney for Wyandotte County, Lidtke has prosecuted child sexual abuse cases for 22 years.

"Sometime in the late '90s the ground-breaking concept evolved to bring all the partners together to the child. A one-stop shop, so to speak."

In 1996, police, social workers and prosecutors in Johnson and Wyandotte counties began trying to make it easier on the children and to improve their evidence. Lidtke recalled one meeting attended by 22 police chiefs, representatives of two sheriff's departments and two top administrators from the Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services.

"Oh, there were turf wars, power struggles, but the driving force was that everyone wanted to help the children," she said. And after months of discussions and agreements and "aha! moments," the non-profit Sunflower Children's Center became the first child advocacy center in Kansas.

It opened in the basement of the University of Kansas Medical Center. As referrals increased, it moved to an office building and finally to its current location in Shawnee.

(On the Missouri side is the Child Protection Center, at 31st and Broadway, and the Children's Advocacy Center, part of Synergy Services on Parvin Road.)

All tours at Sunflower House lead to the tiny room with pale yellow walls. There's a couch and a chair, an alphabet poster of cartoon animals. A camera concealed in a corner records every word and stammer and tear.

The parents sign the consent form, agreeing they will never see the interview. They also learn that it does not replace live testimony in court before a jury if the case goes that far.

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Some children don't want to tell their stories when they visit, and that's OK, said Cheryl Smith, one of the facility's three forensic interviewers. "Sunflower House doesn't exist to make a child talk."

Their forensic interviews are not "outcome" based, she said.

Smith has worked with abused children for 19 years. "I think I've heard just about everything, but then a child will tell me something else."

She's trained to listen deep to every word and nuance and ask open-ended questions, ones that don't lead the little witnesses.

To avoid bias, the interviewers know very little about the children they meet. That helps Smith genuinely learn about the child's likes and dislikes. The interview with the stranger, some children tell parents, was like talking to a friend who didn't judge.

Some want to sit on her lap and cuddle. Not allowed. She will get up and move to the couch, giving the child the chair. One wanted to sit on the floor, so Smith joined him there, and after a while, his story came out.

Victims may cry and shake as they describe a horror, yet she cannot offer soothing words, pat their back or do anything other than offer tissues. She simply waits, hoping the quiet will comfort.

Some of the images Smith hears are jarring.

Like the girl with a new stepfather, a man so kind and handsome — until bedtime. And he locks the door behind him as he explores the little girl's body with his body...

There's the favorite uncle, whose relatives knew he had urges, but not that his "teasing" with the nieces, nephews and even close friends' children involved flashlights, screwdrivers and positions...

Smith will ask children details, like the color of the walls of the room they were in, where they were on the bedspread, whether they wore clothes, whether there were fluids.

She can't use proper anatomy terms unless the child uses that term. She mimics back whatever word is used for genitals, whether it's a you-know-what, private parts, pee-pee or thumb.

Children don't have the verbal skills to talk about sex. Before the interview is over, she'll show the child a drawing of either a naked girl or a naked boy and ask where on the drawing the private part is.

"Most children don't tell the whole story," said Smith. "There are some details they may never tell."

Sunflower's forensic interviewers listen to more than just sexual abuse. They interview children who have been physically

battered, who have witnessed violence or who have been involved with an Internet predator.

Monitoring the interview from the closed-circuit camera, others watch and listen for corroborating details useful in the next interview — often the one at the police station with the accused.

A red light may blink on the camera, a signal that an observer has a question or wants the interviewer to pull out more information. They consider a child's excuses, or whether the child seems vague.

Contrary to stereotypes, false accusations from children are rare.

Defense attorneys also will watch the recording, looking for places where a child's story — and Smith's interviewing techniques — can be questioned. In trial under cross-examination, the pressure is intense, she admitted. She testified more than a dozen times last year.

"They want to know if I believe the child or not," she said. "My job is not to judge."

When the forensic interview is over, the child is brought back to the lobby. A social worker and police officer will inform the parents about what they heard, what will happen next and what therapy resources are available. (Sunflower House doesn't yet offer in-house therapy, a future goal they have.)

Sometimes, a medical exam is needed to make sure the child is free of sexually transmitted diseases. Sunflower

House has a special room for this, too, but also coordinates with area hospitals.

Most exams show no physical evidence of sexual abuse. Parents are told that doesn't mean the child is being dishonest.

After all of that, the child has one more stop: the Teddy Bear Room.

The room is loaded with brand-new bears and stuffed animals of all shapes and sizes, as well as games and books. Children can choose whatever toy they want. Sometimes two.

"The teddy bear room is everyone's favorite spot in the whole building," said Michelle Herman, the president and CEO of Sunflower. "Coming in here makes you smile no matter what kind of day you had."

Sunflower employees emphasize that the children don't know about the room until after all of the forensic work is completed.

One dad said that his daughter's bear is still the "most precious possession she owns. That bear knows everything..."

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Back in Division 5, the prosecutor asked the judge for a life sentence for the grandfather.

The defense attorney asked for 11.4 years, noting his client would be 80 then. The defendant has confessed to spare his family, was filled with remorse, and by then wouldn't be a threat to anyone, he said.

The judge nodded, then asked to hear the impact statements.

Detective Fogarty read her statement, looking over at the small man in black and white jail stripes. "You told me you liked it, and that she did, too," she read. "She was 10 years old ... She was terrified."

Next, the adult daughter, so afraid before court began, found her courage. She stood up. She told how her father taught them to hate their bodies and not trust men. Her voice grew angry as she read the 10-year-old's words.

"I never want to see your ugly face again," the little girl wrote. "I am safe now because you are out of my life..."

The mother glared at the man whose DNA she shared. Lowering her papers and speaking from her heart:

"My daughter is my hero. I was too scared of you to tell when I was little and you did this to me..."

"There are no words to explain how this has impacted all of us." Turning to the judge, she warned: "If you let him out, he will hurt somebody. He is good at being nice."

Her voice broke, and she sat down, crying. Her sisters silently parted her back.

The judge, Michael Grosko, has heard cases for 35 years. Peering over his glasses, he looked hard at the grandfather, who now seemed tiny and fragile. Grosko said he'd read every page, every word in his criminal file.

"What you have done is sick," he said. "More than that, sir, it is disgusting. Any offense against children offends the consciousness of the community and should not be tolerated ... I find this shocking."

He took his glasses off, folded his hands into a triangle and paused.

"Some people say that a life sentence given to a man your age is really a death sentence."

"Well-l-l-l-l," and he looked once more at the man, "so be it."

Two life sentences. Served one after the other. A crack from his gavel, court was over, and the judge hurried out.

A police officer directed her prisoner to a door. He stared at his daughters. All those years of memories. All those secrets.

The grandfather walked tiny steps, shuffling because of shackled feet. His daughters turned their heads away to an opposite wall. No one wanted to meet his gaze.

When directly across from them, he spoke: "Sorry," he said, almost in a whisper. He took a few more steps before stopping once more, this time looking at Fogarty. "Sorry," he said. She smiled.

The room was quiet, except for the swish of his feet, until the door locked behind him with a click.

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