

Living in the shadows of incest

One woman's battle to survive child abuse, drugs and mental illness

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FACT: There are as many as 80,000 cases of child molestation reported every year, and many more that go unreported, according to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. The organization states that the cases may go unreported because the child may fear the perpetrator, or the consequences of reporting the abuse. The child may also feel ashamed, guilty, embarrassed, and dirty and as if something is “wrong” with him or her. Some children feel a sense of loyalty toward the abuser, especially if the person is a relative, authority figure or a close family friend.

In a 1991 Sorensen and Snow study, researchers reviewed 630 cases of children that had allegedly been sexually abused from 1985 through 1989. One hundred sixteen of them had been confirmed. Seventy-nine percent of the children in the study had initially denied any abuse and were hesitant to disclose information and 75 percent of those children only did so accidentally. Twenty-two percent eventually withdrew their statements.

According to the Survivors Healing Center in California, 50 percent of the women who reported being raped in 1992 were under the age of 18; 19 percent were under the age of 12. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services conducted a study in 1993, which indicated that one out of three girls and one out of every six boys experienced sexual abuse before age 18.

PART I

Marian Jefferson, 37, recalls when she became a devastating member of those statistics after being molested at age 8.

Jefferson, her mother and younger sister lived with her grandmother, who was once retired, but re-entered the work force to help care for them. One day, her mother left her and her 6-year-old sister at home alone, while her cousin; Darron Dwayne Taylor, 12, mowed their lawn, which was part of his summer job. They were told not to open the door for anyone, but Taylor banged on the door saying that he was hot and thirsty. Jefferson tried calling her mother, but was not able to reach her.

“And I thought, well, it’s just a glass of water. And so I let him in and I went back to my room. I heard noises in the bedroom next to me, which is where my sister was, and when I opened the door, I saw her naked on the bed with him,” Jefferson stated. “I begged and pleaded with him to leave her alone and he said ‘Fine, but you will have to take her

place.” She was too young to fully understand what she had agreed to, but she knew she was the only one that could save her little sister. The younger sister was directed to go to Jefferson’s room.

It was on her sister’s bed that he began to rape her. Jefferson endured, what she described as excruciating pain that seemed to last a lifetime. She said that she had begged her cousin to stop and even tried fighting him. He became angry and grabbed her hands, placed them over her head and placed a pillow over her face to quiet her down. At times, she said, he would hit her throughout her body, avoiding her face in case she bruised, in order to control her fighting and whining.

When he finally finished, she laid in a pool of her own blood. He ran a bath and placed her in the tub. He then washed the linen and placed it back on the bed. Afterward, Taylor placed her back in bed and gave her Tylenol from the medicine cabinet.

Thinking back on the meticulous manner in which he cleaned to cover up his actions, she felt he must have done this at least a few times before her.

According to a 1988 study conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health, Jefferson was probably correct. It states that the “typical child sex offender molests an average of 117 children, most of who do not report the offence.”

When her mother returned home, having no idea what her young daughter had just gone through, she called her lazy for having been in bed all day. But Jefferson’s little body had endured such trauma, that it hurt for her to move at all.

Jefferson said that after that day, her cousin continued to make periodical visits to have sex with her. He would force his way into the house, in the beginning. Eventually, she allowed him to enter, knowing that he’d find a way in anyway. With her parents divorced and her shaky relationship with her mother, it soon became the only attention that she received. Jefferson continued to have sex with Taylor until she was 16-years-old. However, he continued to pursue her even after he was married and after his divorce.

The aftermath

“My saving grace was being admitting to Arts Magnet High School for the performing arts, because I was gone all the time,” Jefferson said. She was 14-years-old and her schedule would sometimes have her at school as early as 5 a.m. and as late as 11 p.m. Her only regret was that it would leave her sister wide open for continued sexual abuse.

Jefferson described her cousin as a rebellious child, though he was raised by strict, religious parents. She said that he often abused drugs, drank, stayed out late and was sexually active. But they also indulged him. She said that he was the only one that she knew of, who was given a motorcycle at age 15 or 16. But he was also the only teen that she knew of who had been admitted to Charter Hospital for substance abuse.

Jefferson recalled an incident where Taylor assaulted another man with a brick. She said that her mother tried to stop him, but it seemed that Taylor couldn't hear her. She and her sister went with their mother to let her know what was going on.

“Yeah, he broke in here this morning and we had already told him that he can't be here,” said his mother, seemingly removed from the situation. Taylor's parents kicked him out of their house, prior to the incident, due to his behavioral issues.

According to the researchers at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, these might have been signs of previous abuse. But having not met with him, they could not say for sure.

However, in a letter to The Dallas Examiner, Taylor wrote briefly about his, “past experience with child abuse, drug abuse...” and the pain he's caused others, including himself. However, he declined to give details.

According to Dr. William Holmes of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine during an interview with MSNBC News, “When sexually abused boys are not treated, society must later deal with the resulting problems, including crime, suicide, drug use and more sexual abuse.” He also stated that one third of juvenile delinquents and 40 percent of sexual offenders report they were sexually abused as youngsters.

Many studies have found that sexual abuse is passed down from predator to victim. And many times the victim will later become the predator or will raise other victims. They cycle and the symptoms usually continue in secret.

Jefferson's sister suffered from memory loss, not being able to fully recall the incidents, experiencing flashbacks instead. But Jefferson, on the other hand, has full recollection accompanied by flashbacks, restlessness, sleeplessness and moments of anxiety. Additionally, her asthma was exacerbated by the stress.

So far, but yet so close

Jefferson says her mother may have been clued in on her trauma at some point, had she not been dealing with her own bouts of depression and anxiety. Her mother suffered from manic depression, and along with her medication, had become addicted to street drugs. Jefferson said that both of her parents took a variety of illegal drugs and her father sold them on the streets. She recalled helping her father roll the “funny cigarettes” and times when her father would go to 7-Eleven to get straws for drug parties. She witnessed the adults make lines of white powder on the glass coffee table in the living room and snort it through the straws.

Adding to the families' dysfunction, the girl's father was physically and mentally abusive to their mother. She said that she had seen her father beat her mother unmercifully on numerous occasions. There were times when he'd put her head in the toilet or put a knife to her throat. She had also seen him rape and sodomize her mother.

Jefferson said that there were several times when her father would put on his “battle dress uniform,” standard camouflage military attire, and place black shoe polish under his eyes, then come in to the room and cock the gun.

“You didn’t know if he’s going to come in that night and pull the trigger and end everybody’s life, ‘cause that’s what he had been talking about,” Jefferson recalled.

The abuse continued until her mother left him. After a few years in California, they went to live with their grandmother. They would live with her until Jefferson was 12-years-old.

Jefferson began to exhibit disciplinary problems in school due to sleep deprivation and her grades began to suffer. During a “fit of rage,” her father was called to take her to the hospital. A physician prescribed an anxiety medication and thought it might have been brought on by her lack of sleep.

Jefferson said that her mother thought that her actions as a drug addict and neglectful parent had contributed to her anxiety and became resistant to getting the prescription. Instead, the mother offered her a “night cap” to help her sleep. When the alcohol didn’t help, she was offered her mother’s prescription, as well.

As Jefferson’s mother finally reached a point where she felt whole, she was diagnosed with kidney disease after various hospital stays and exploratory surgeries. By that time, she had lost a tremendous amount of weight. This was devastating, emotionally and financially. Jefferson recalls that her mother had about 30 prescriptions. There were times that the electricity was turned off and they had to go back to their grandmother’s until it was back on, though the mother stayed at home in the dark. She recalled times that they went hungry or sat alone at home while their mother was in the hospital, because she didn’t want anyone to know of her diagnosis.

At age 17, Jefferson went away to college to study music. And though she thought that she would finally be free and far away from her abuser and family dysfunction, her battle had only yet begun.