

Surviving the shadows of incest

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

By **ROBYN H. JIMENEZ**

The Dallas Examiner



Fact: Child abuse is a national epidemic. And though neglect and physical abuse can be devastating, molestation - in many cases - may be more traumatic. One reason is that the incident includes touching a part or parts of the body that are considered to be private. And even children as young as 2-years-old instinctively know when certain touches are inappropriate or “feel wrong.” Another reason is the shame that follows the child that hinders the victim from receiving the proper counseling that is necessary to overcome this trauma.

Children who experience sexual molestation may experience depression, anxiety, eating disorders, unexplainable physical pain, sleep disorders and many other symptoms that may lead to lowered school performance, acting out sexually or aggressively, withdrawing from friends, family and activities, nightmares, alcohol and/or drug abuse and other self-destructive behaviors and eventually suicide or attempts of suicide. These symptoms may follow the child until they received professional treatment, even into adulthood. Something Marian Jefferson would soon discover for herself.

PART II

Jefferson graduated from Booker T. Washington High School in 1988 and went away to college to study music at Jackson State University. She found herself having to adapt to college life while trying to deal with her traumatic past of sexual abuse as a child, her promiscuous teen years and her mother's unsure future.

Her mother had been admitted to the hospital for treatment and observation several times, since being diagnosed with end stage renal failure. However, she always made sure to be home on the holidays that Jefferson would be home.

Even after leaving for college, she would continue to suffer with the pain of her abuse. During one of her trips home, 18-year-old Jefferson reported the sexual abuse to Taylor's wife. His wife immediately confronted him on the phone. Taylor didn't deny the abuse but nothing was said or done about the incidents.

A year later, she returned to find that her mother's health was declining. She learned that her mother had not properly planed for her younger sister to be taken care of in the event she was not able to do so herself. Since a judge had already found that their grandmother was too advanced in age to be able to care for the teen, at 19-years-old, Jefferson dropped out of school to care for her sister and mother. Marian found work as a singer, usually out of town. The family's caseworker told her that it was inappropriate work and if she

couldn't provide for her 16-year-old in another way, then she needed to pack her younger sister's things that day and they would come and get her. Jefferson talked to her fiancé, who immediately came to visit her mother and it was decided that the couple would marry. With his stable income, the caseworker found the couple to be acceptable guardians.

Later that year, Jefferson noticed that her mother's fingertips and toes had turned purple. She suggested to her mother that it looked like gangrene. Her mother said that the doctors told her the discoloration was due to years of smoking. Yet, after it began to spread, the doctors reclassified it as gangrene, confirming Jefferson's concerns. Just before Thanksgiving, her mother had to make the decision to have her toes amputated and later her fingertips. But by the time she had the second surgery, there were spots of discoloration on her arms and legs. The doctors informed them that the condition had spread and would eventually take her limbs. Her mother began to have mini-strokes, hallucinations and trouble keeping her food down.

Finally, her mother's doctor informed them that they had done all that they could do for her. Seeing her mother in such misery, Jefferson asked her mother why she was still holding on. Her mother began to sing I'm still holding on, by Luther Barns. She let her mother know that if she did decide to leave, she and her sister would be okay.

Jefferson remembers sitting by her mother's bedside one night in January 1990 and her mother telling her that she felt like someone was pulling a blanket over her face. Jefferson, feeling that her mother may have been anxious with her in the room, offered to go home and freshen up. Her mother said that was probably a good idea, because she hadn't been home to bathe in a few days. When she returned home, she told her husband that her mother would not make it through the night and he should go to the hospital with her. Jefferson, having not rested well in days, took a short nap.

The phone rang. Her cousin, Taylor's mother, called to inform her that she had received a call from the hospital saying that her mother's heart had stopped. It wasn't the first time. She had been revived before. However, when they arrived, the chaplain informed them that she didn't even try to fight this time. Jefferson's mother was not revived.

The darkness before the dawn

Later that year, the Jefferson became pregnant with the couple's first child, but issues within her birth family overshadowed the experience. She had received news that her grandmother was diagnosed with colon cancer. At the same time, Jefferson found herself dealing with a sexually active teenager - her little sister.

Her daughter was born by cesarean section in September and three months later, in late December, her husband went into active duty. Jefferson said the combination of events made the year very traumatic and stressful. She began to feel anger and resentment and found it increasingly difficult to cope.

In 1992, her husband returned home due to Jefferson's declining mental status. She tried to confide in him, but he was not able to comfort her and did not provide the support she needed.

Two years later, her father died in a fire. Jefferson said the medical examiner reported that her father suffered a massive stroke and died before he hit the ground. The examiner also stated that the fire may have been started by a hot plate that he was using to cook his meal when he passed. Jefferson, now 21 and pregnant with her second child, was saddled with the responsibility of having to help the examiner identify her father's body, which was burned beyond recognition.

In 1999, Jefferson began to sink deeper into her depression, until she was unable to properly care for herself or her children.

She asked her husband for help and counseling. Her mother-in-law advised her that if she kept her mind on God, she would receive perfect peace, but Jefferson said, "That's really the point. I can't keep my mind stayed on God. I can't keep my mind stayed on anything other than depression and grief."

Jefferson said that she really had not had the opportunity to grieve the loss of her mother, father... and now her grandmother. She was also grieving the loss of her unborn child that she never told anyone about, from a pregnancy at age 16.

Jefferson remembers sitting by the bedside, not long after that conversation with her mother-in-law, thinking about buying a gun.

She began to flashback to when she was 16-years-old. She took her mother's gun and pointed it at her own head. She remembered her father's instructions of where to point the gun if she were going to shoot someone in the head. Memories of his instructions were reinforced by memories of him playing Russian roulette by himself and sometimes with her mother to torture her. She said that she pulled the trigger, but had forgotten to take the safety off. But before she could take the safety off, she thought of the possibility of her little sister finding her and placed the gun back under the bed. She returned the next day to get the gun, but it was not there.

But now at age 29, there was no gun and she didn't have the money to buy one. Jefferson said that she called her husband and demanded that he get her some help or she would have to just walk away, because if she stayed she would end up hurting her family and herself. Her husband complied with her wishes. However, Jefferson's physician thought she was suffering from sleep deprivation and placed her on sleeping pills.

Frustrated with the lack of support and her ongoing depression, she decided to find out more about her condition and enrolled in junior college, where she began to study psychology. Suddenly, several things that had taken place within her family and with herself began to make sense. After receiving her undergraduate degree, she went on to get her masters degree in counseling.

After completing her studies, Jefferson worked with individuals that struggled with substance abuse, promiscuity and mental illness and realized how those things had impacted her life and the decisions that she had made. However, she said that it was during her employment at Nexus, as a chemical dependency technician, that she was directed by a supervisor to seek the counseling that she so desperately needed. As a result, she was finally able to deal with the various forms of abuse that she had lived through, in a healthy manner.

She's only just begun

Today, Jefferson has two daughters and one son. She told her husband that she would not die without educating them about her family and personal history. Feeling that they may have to deal with those things at some point in their life, she believes that the only way to deal with them is to be up front about it all.

Despite the counseling she has received, Jefferson said that she doesn't consider herself to be fully recovered. She said that recovery is a long process and there are times that she deals with the memories of abuse better than other times.

Taylor was convicted in 1993 on two counts of indecency with a minor, in which he was given 10 years probation, with three years and six months of sexual offenders counseling. He has violated parole at least twice and is currently being held in the Texas Department of Corrections in Pampa.

The Dallas Examiner offered Taylor an opportunity to tell his side of the story in order to help those whose lives have been affected by child abuse. However, in a letter that he wrote to The Dallas Examiner – in which he admitted to the pain that he has caused himself and other after having committed two offenses which placed him in jail, missing a sexual offender's class and a visit to his parole officer and tested positive for drugs during his probation – he declined an interview explaining that he hoped to write a book and be able to leave his children and grandchildren an inheritance.

Jefferson expressed that in doing this, he would be making money “literally off of the blood of others.” She shared her concerns that he did not care about the consequences of his actions and was not serious about rehabilitation.

After hearing that her cousin was due to be released in September of 2006, Jefferson felt inspired to become more active in bringing attention to how the legal system deals with sexual offenders and how much work still needs to be done. Although she encountered roadblocks that may have caused her to become temporarily discouraged, she found support and encouragement from Tuala Williams, the general manager at The Dallas Examiner that gave her the strength to overcome her obstacles and keep going.

So, while fighting the release of her cousin, Jefferson formed Lift Every Voice Family and Community Development Project to increase awareness and prevention of such abuses, as well as to empower those that have been affected by sexual abuse. Her web

site, www.marianjefferson.org, contains more information on the non-profit organization, information on sexual assault and a message board for survivors.

For more information on child abuse, to get help for yourself or a loved one, or to help a child who needs a caring home, visit the Child Welfare Information Gateway at www.childwelfare.gov or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families at www.acf.hhs.gov.