

Rape, Incest Survivor Speaks Out

April is National Sexual Assault Awareness month, as well as National Child Abuse Prevention month in recognition of the pervasiveness of sexual assault nationwide. Sexual violence, including child sexual abuse, spans all ages, genders, races, ethnicities and economic backgrounds. According to a Child Maltreatment report from the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Children's Bureau, 60,956 cases of child sexual abuse were reported in the United States in 2013.

On top of the guilt and shame that abuse can bring, most victims know their attackers, which can lead them to be silent about their traumatic experience. Staying silent, however, does not lead to healing, according to Shannon Deitz, abuse survivor and founder of Hopeful Hearts Ministry.

What has inspired you to reach out to others?

I am a survivor of rape and incest. The years I kept the facts of these traumas within me led me down some dark paths that were filled with bad decisions based on my lack of worth and self-esteem. I want to educate and reach out to other survivors before they get entangled in that dark path and make decisions that can affect them for the rest of their life, adding to the trauma of what has been done or said to them in the past.

Your book, *Exposed: Inexcusable Him*, is a no-holds-barred accounting of your personal self-destructive journey and how, with God's help, you triumphed. Why do you feel it is important for you to share your story?

When I began to live my life in the freedom of being a survivor, no longer tethered to chains of negativity, pessimism and insecurity, I realized how much I longed to see

others free from these same chains. I knew the only way to reach others was to tell my story in its truth and entirety. What helped in my healing process was to hear other stories similar to mine and to witness their successful triumph and victory overcoming their past. I began to realize if they could do it, I could too. By writing *Exposed*, I wanted to share both the stumbling and the victories so that others could relate and recognize that they could also be victorious.

How has sharing your story with others helped you in your journey to healing?

The more you share the truth about your experience, the easier it is to accept it and move past it in order to embrace your present and future. By sharing my story I find that it gives me strength and fortifies the healing process. What has been “done” to me is a part of who I am, but it doesn’t define who I am. In fact, I’ve come to the place where I can thank God for every aspect of my life, the dark and ugly moments, along with the joyous times, because He has brought good from it all and allowed me to recognize that I am stronger because of it.

Low self-esteem, especially among teens, has become a national epidemic. What do you want someone struggling with feelings of low self-worth to understand?

My instinct is to respond, “You are worthy! You are unique and there is no one else in this world just like you and this world needs you and the skills and talents YOU have because each one of us has been given a specific purpose to use these talents and gifts and no one can replace you.”

But I have been in a place that I have felt extreme unworthiness and insecurity. I know that if I heard someone say that I’d doubt what those talents were, because I wasn’t like everyone else. To that I say, “Would being like everyone else make you happy? Would going against who you are, what sparks interest and joy inside of you just to get others’

attention, bring you joy? Most likely not.”

In this day of social media, self-worth is defined by the number of followers we have on Instagram or how many “likes” they give to your posts. It is important to realize that those are numbers and most of those people have so many numbers because they “follow” and “like” everyone just to get more numbers. When it comes down to knowing you, who knows you best?

You, my friend, are worthy of life and others would be so lucky to know you, who you really are and share in the talents you’ve been given.

What is your goal with Hopeful Hearts Ministry and what motivated you to start it?

Hopeful Hearts Ministry strives to help those who have suffered abuse not just survive, but thrive. When I was called into speaking on a national and international level on various topics regarding faith, the most popular message I gave, the one that resonated best with audiences at least, was when I spoke of my own personal journey, the abuse I incurred and how I overcame the stigma of shame attached.

As the years progressed and my voice became stronger, God led me to more and more opportunities to work with survivors of all ages, especially those in my generation and generations ahead of me who were taught to keep skeletons in the closet. It became clear that there was a desperate need to empower all survivors to have a voice, to educate the world on what abuse is, to teach others how to listen to those who have suffered abuse, and to learn how to stop the generational cycle of abuse. In 2012 a dear friend of mine said to me, “Why don’t you start a nonprofit? Think what more you could do.” Hence, Hopeful Hearts Ministry was formed.

Every dollar earned from the book *Exposed*, the Hopeful Hearts Charm, speaking engagements, retreats, etc. goes toward the

Hopeful Hearts Ministry. We are a 501 c3 national nonprofit.

Tell us about the 'I Have a Voice' project and the feedback you have received from viewers.

In 2013, I realized the importance of a survivor speaking truth and being heard. I decided to create the I Have a Voice YouTube video series, revealing 5 emotionally-charged personal stories of survivors of abuse. This hope-filled project consists of intensely moving interrelated videos, all with a collective purpose to help victims to overcome their past and be empowered to move forward. Men and women have responded as a result of the videos, expressing their gratitude in knowing they are not alone. They are empowered to move forward in their lives. Since 2013 we have added 2 more I Have a Voice Videos.

*Used with permission from **Shannon Dietz**, founder of Hopeful Hearts Ministry.*