

There but Not There - Interview with Participant

1. What has been the greatest challenge in dealing with the unresponsiveness of the Catholic church to the abuse in your family?

The greatest challenge actually remained the same over many years. It was the deliberate “blindness” of those within my faith community who might have served as a resource, a comfort, a friend, or a shelter when things were very bad within my household. My mother sought the counsel of our parish priest several times that I remember when I was living at home and each time she was sent home with the advice to “be a better wife, make better food, etc.” The responsibility for changing my father’s abusive behaviour was always laid at the feet of my mother. And then as the five children got older some of that responsibility was laid at our feet – don’t bother your father, don’t upset your father, don’t, don’t, don’t. Where were the faith leaders in our Catholic community; where were the women who sat in the pews next to us; where were my mother’s lifelong Catholic friends when we were all being subjected to daily abuse – both physical and verbal? No one within our faith community ever offered a listening ear or a comforting shoulder. We all had the feeling of “you made your bed, now you lie in it” as if it was our fault that we were being abused. I left my home at the earliest opportunity by marrying my high school boyfriend. And what advice did we get as teenagers marrying too young from the same parish priest – “don’t use birth control as it is a sin.” The church abandoned us in our distress and yet we were supposed to continue attending and supporting this very same faith community.

2. What has been the biggest opportunity?

Growing up in a church community did give me an understanding about faith as a possible source of hope and healing. Whereas healing was not possible when I was a child or a young woman it came later with the quiet whisperings of faith found all around me – in the love of my husband, in the close ties to my siblings, in the mother who I adored. I do find support amongst many Christian friends who have put their arms around me in comfort. I do find hope in the examples of other Christian families where love shines. I do find comfort in listening to Christian music as it speaks to my soul. Because of my faith upbringing I knew a different way was possible and I continue to seek it out.

3. What is the most important message that you want to give to Canadians who see the photo essay?

I cannot emphasize strongly enough that we need to stand with our loved ones, friends, acquaintances, neighbours and even strangers when they are suffering. A hug during a difficult time, a quiet word of comfort, a place to stay when needed, a spot at the family dining table, a simple smile on your face – there are myriad ways to help those, both young and old, who are in situations of abuse. Every faith community must overcome denial and face the issue of violence in the family context. Every faith community needs to reach out to those whose lives are devastated by abuse.