

## Victims of child abuse never forget - the trauma stays with them forever

This is one in a series of articles which will inform readers on issues surrounding violence against women and children. Family violence, whether physical, sexual, verbal, psychological or economic, eventually affects every member of the family. Whether it is direct or indirect, the result is the same. Victims must have community help not only for support when they recognize their need but also to help them identify the abuse to which they are being subjected.

By JACIE B. PALMER  
Herald Special

This past week in the Tuesday edition of the Toronto Sun there were two headlines which peaked my interest. The first one read: "Molested girl, man 20, gets 1 days in jail." This account told of a man who'd sexually assaulted a 14-year-old last January and received two years probation and must undergo psychiatric treatment.

The headline directly above it was "Judge Rips Church Sex Choirmaster" and told of a man who'd victimized a 14-year-old girl 20 years ago. He received six months probation and must do community service work. In reference to the latter, Mme. Justice Patricia German said, in part, that the abuser had taken advantage of her youth and innocence and that "She's had to pay the penalty of that over the years and has had a great deal of stress and unhappiness."

This woman is now in her 30's and still pays the price for the events which occurred during her life over 20 years ago.

Those two 14-year-olds were molested by men. Those men,

they will never be able to forget; those men, they may never be able to truly forgive. Both these women's lives have been altered at a very early age and at a time when they should have been having fun with kids their own age. Instead, they had their sexuality stolen from them and their lives unmercifully torn apart.

My heart goes out to both of these women. Sexual abuse is devastating and the decision handed down by Mme. Justice Patricia German accurately reflects her concern for the indignity the victim continues to endure. She has recognized that the trauma of 20 years ago is continuing to have an affect on the functioning of this woman today. We can only wonder how the other young girl so recently traumatized will fare in the long-term.

Yet we must recognize that for every charge going before the courts there are many that never make it to the police much less the court system. Many women want their personal tragedies hidden in their own homes. Young girls who've been assaulted may never receive appropriate counselling. Sexual assault is most often inflicted by a father, step-father or a friend of the family. Parents may not be able to handle the sexual assault and may blame themselves for not being there for their daughter or may deny the occurrence of the assault. All of this can mean a young girl's scars will not have an opportunity to heal.

And what of these abusive men? Will they recognize they made an error in judgement and committed a crime? Will they

recognize their deviant behavior for what it is? Will they accept the help they've received? Will they realize the devastation they've meted out on the women they've violated?

A man who recognizes and accepts his responsibility in an assault can obtain help and successfully be rehabilitated. Unfortunately, all too often, he does not. He sees the woman as invoking his behavior - as in "asking for it." He is wrong. A woman does not want, deserve or ask to be assaulted. She gains no satisfaction from being assaulted. Our society has changed in the past 20 years. Now we recognize all forms of abuse and the impact on victims. Policing has improved. Victims' complaints are taken more seriously and acted upon. The court system is slowly changing.

Male abusers should be convicted. They should be required to obtain counselling. They should be monitored for the long-term to ensure appropriate changes in behavior occurs. In the situations documented above the court system has helped these women through convictions but we as members of the larger community must continue to support these women so they may integrate back into society as mentally healthy human beings.

When we see a woman or child in a potentially abusive situation we must intervene to ensure the victim is all right. We can do that by calling the police, by calling an appropriate agency such as the Children's Aid Society or by being a good friend and neighbor and opening our home in friendship to victims.

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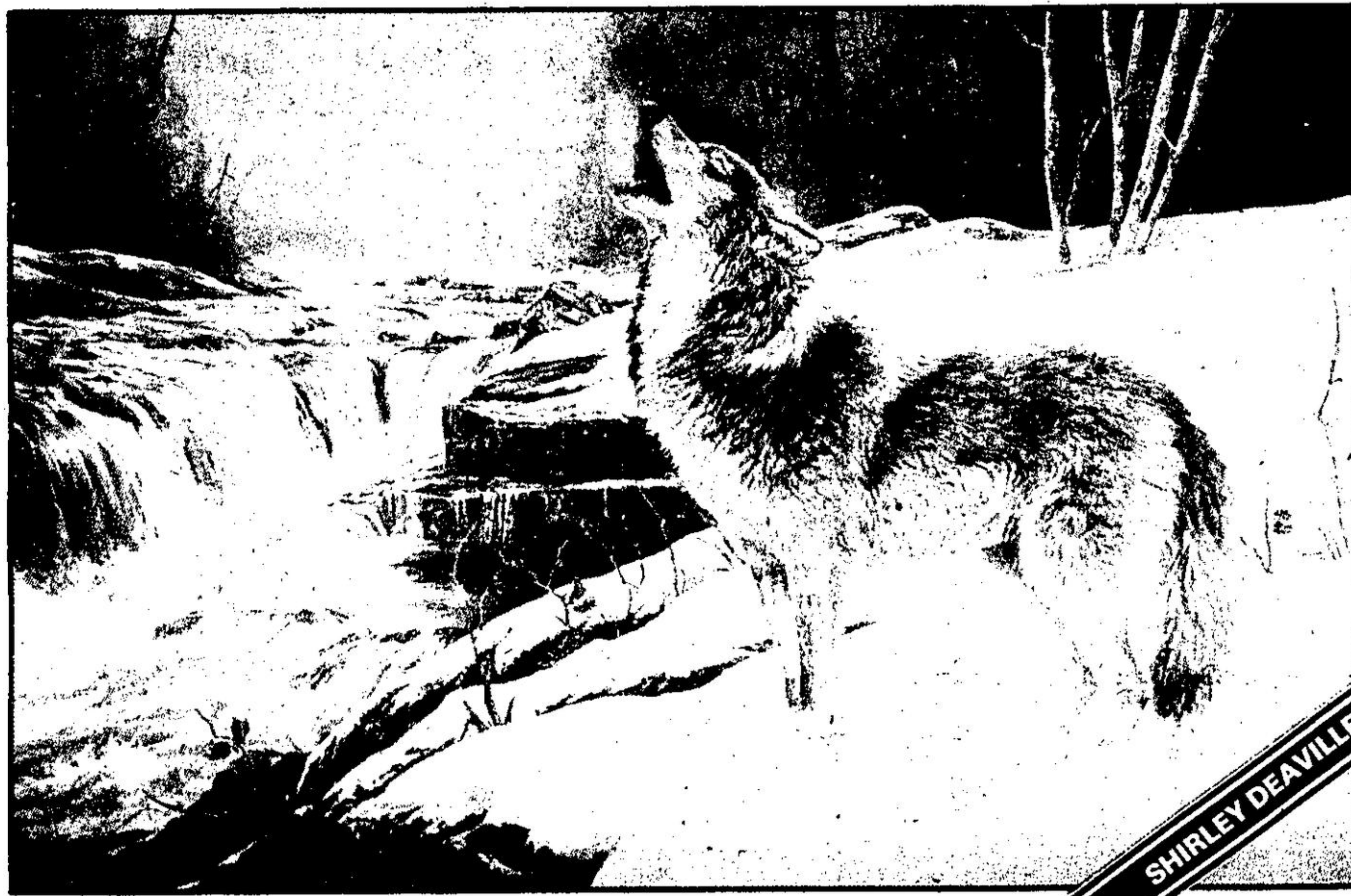
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