

SUPPORT GROUP SEEKS TO HELP SURVIVORS OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE

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Chris Kirby was terrified.

He knew it was the right thing to do, but he just couldn't bring himself to walk through the doors. He had put it off for months. There was no shortage of reasons not to go, and he always managed to find one.

But avoiding it was not helping him. He had been doing that for 40 years and he'd become pretty good at it. At first it was because he thought this had never happened to anyone else. Even once he came to the realization that there were others, he hid it from those closest to him.

Now he had made the trip to Toronto. He made the commitment to tell his deepest secret to a room full of strangers.

"That first step is incredibly difficult," Kirby says.

Two hours later, he emerged from The Gate-

house. Nobody had made him tell his secret. But he had found a group of people who could understand what he was going through, because like Kirby, they had been sexually abused when they were children.

On the drive home, he couldn't stop talking about what he had experienced.

"It was like a weight had been lifted," said his wife, Jodi Stansfield. "No matter how much I support him, there are things I can't relate to."

"And the only way you would be able to is if you had been through it too," Kirby said, "so I'm happy she can't."

It's been four years since Kirby first attended The Gatehouse. He benefitted so much from meetings that he eventually went through training in order to facilitate the discussions that took place each week.

"I don't think it's an exaggeration to say it saved my life," Kirby says.

Knowing how going to The Gatehouse helped him, Kirby is now hoping to help others. He and Stansfield have established a not-for-profit organization, The Ironwood Project, to help survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

Kirby said Ironwood will provide peer support and provide a safe environment for survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Ironwood will host weekly meetings where participants can share their struggles and challenges in a peer-based discussion to provide help in understanding and overcoming those obstacles.

There will be an itinerary of what will be discussed each week, but Kirby said from his experience at The Gatehouse, sometimes the conversation naturally flows in another direction.

"We're not counsellors, we're not therapists. We can connect them with those resources if they



Nikola Novak photo

Chris Kirby, along with his wife Jodi Stansfield, is starting The Ironwood Project. The peer support group to help survivors of childhood sexual abuse will hold its first meeting in February.

want," he said. "It's just a safe place to talk with other people who know what you're going through. Every survivor is different, but there is a commonality."

Confidentiality is an important part of The Ironwood Project, so times and locations of meetings are not disclosed. Anyone interested in attending is

asked to contact the theironwoodproject@gmail.com.

Kirby has four initial meetings scheduled beginning in February, at which point he and Stansfield will evaluate and plan future meetings.

Kirby said he's not sure what to expect in terms of attendance, though he's certain there are many

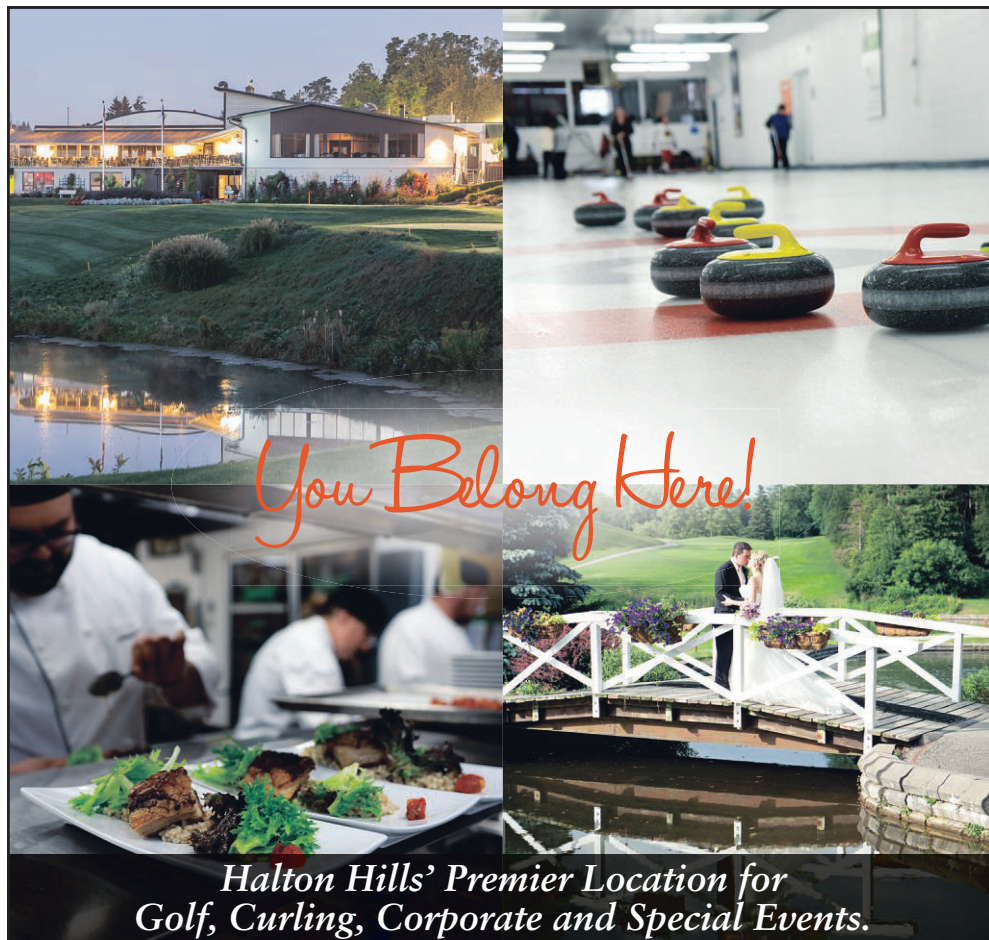
people who could benefit from having a safe environment to discuss issues with their peers. Statistics show that one in three women and one in six men will experience some form of sexual abuse in their lifetime.

"If I go and sit there for two hours and if one person shows up and it's me and that one person talking, that's good. I know what that means," he said. "Part of me hopes the room is packed. Part of me hopes it's not. The math is the math, though. There are people who need it."

After watching Kirby struggle to seek help for himself, Stansfield said it is incredible to see her husband now be so willing to help others.

"I'm proud of him, how brave he is to be the face for this," Stansfield said, "how he is trying to make something positive out of something so horrible."

For more information, visit <http://www.theironwoodproject.ca/>.



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