

Sexual assault victims in 'desperate' need of help

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By NORMAN NELSON

For the first time since 1983, Halton has seen a decline in the reporting of sexual abuse of children, and this worries Paul Bennett, executive director of the Halton Sexual Abuse

Program.

Speaking at an all-day forum on sexual assault in Oakville on Friday, he called it "alarming" and urged that "we go back to square one and redouble our energies."

While Halton has come along way in helping out victims and families, he said if the community thinks "they can go back to sleep... it's a false assumption."

The well attended conference, run by the Halton Rape Crisis Centre, featured many front line troops in the fight against sexual abuse of women and children, including therapists and other medical professionals.

But the strongest message came from a casualty of the war — a victim of rape — who has gone on to lend a powerful voice against sexual assault.

Breaking the silence

In "breaking the silence" of her own experience, Ann-Marie Wicksted — now the executive director of the Barrie and District Rape Crisis Centre — was able to convey at least an idea of the horror.

And sadly, for her, the nightmare of rape did not end when she awoke in hospital a few hours later, but was dragged out by a less than sympathetic society.

Her ordeal began about a decade ago as she signed off late in her job as a night shift nursing supervisor. The parking lot was unlit. "It wasn't an issue then."

As she turned the ignition key of her car, she felt a cold metal object against her head. It was a gun. A man in the back seat told her to "drive."

At the time she thought it was a practical joke, because she played them on friends all the time.

She learned otherwise as she was ordered to the rural outskirts of Barrie. She noticed how dark it got.

The man, she recalled, wanted to kill her and then decided if he was going to do that, he might as well rape her.

"I started to pray he would kill me first." He rambled on about how

women had hurt him.

When she regained consciousness in a secluded field, he was raping her. He wouldn't stop. Later she awoke alone in the field, but sensed him nearby. "I ran and ran and ran. It seemed like forever."

Her next clear memory is of being in a hospital knowing "that something horrendously awful had happened."

Poor treatment

She recalled that her treatment as a victim left much to be desired.

She wanted to go back to work, but because the attacker was still on the loose her employers felt patients would be at risk. They asked her to resign. She refused. She said they fired her.

Police, meanwhile, were delving into her past, asking questions about running away from home when she

was 15 and possible use of marijuana when she was 16. Later they probed her sexual fantasies.

"The questions had nothing to do with what happened."

Finally, she woke up one night, inspired. "I said, wait a minute, I'm not putting up with this. I didn't do anything wrong."

It ultimately led to her forming a rape crisis centre, which she is still involved with as the executive director.

In that position, she is now called upon to provide help and support to other victims of rape.

Have things changed?

One listener wanted to know whether things have changed over the past decade. "It depends which day I'm there (in court)," she sighed.

The other keynote address was given by Oakville resident Rix Rogers, who headed the Oakville YMCA for 30 years. When he retired, he was asked by the federal government to look into the issue of sexual abuse of children.

A typical middle class suburbanite, the findings shocked him.

He crossed the country talking to counsellors, government officials, victim service groups. And most of all he listened to the anguished plea of "adult survivors. They desperately need help. They need to tell someone..."

Unfortunately, he said, help is not easily accessible in a system overly concerned with "rules, regulations, pomp and ceremony."

He said the sickness of sexual abuse — which he termed "abhorrent, brutal and dehumanizing" — will not be cured until society, and men in particular, change their attitudes towards women and children.

Conference chairperson Bev Le-Francois, executive director of Halton Rape Crisis Centre, said the conference came about as the result of the "concern and sadness felt by the staff at the rape crisis centre over the pain, suffering and anguish suffered by women and children who have been sexually assaulted..."

"The silence has been broken on sexual abuse. Men and women can work together for a kinder, gentler society."





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