

## FROM ONE HAND TO ANOTHER: THE STORY OF A SEXUALLY ABUSED CHILD'S STRENGTH AND COURAGE

*The story of Martha is one that taught me strength and courage and to value my social work education. Martha was an 11 year old child who was sexually abused by her stepfather from age 6 to 11. Martha's strength and courage to tell her story has been rewarding for both Martha and myself. Her courage allowed her to unlock years of pain and secrets. This was my first sexual abuse case as a Child Protective Services Investigator. I hope that her story will empower other practitioners to gain the strength and courage to fight for the rights of children and encourage parents to put their children first.*

**BY Venessa A. Brown**

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### THE INITIAL INTERVIEW WITH MARTHA

Martha was eleven and the oldest of two children. She lived with her mother and stepfather. Everyone described her as a loner, who was very shy, somewhat friendly, and performing poorly in school. When I first met Martha, the room she was sitting in felt cold. She sat there with tears streaming down her face and intense pain in her eyes. I remember introducing myself, and telling her that I was there to help her and for her to not be afraid. She was silent and appeared distant emotionally and physically. As I moved near her, I tried to assure her that it was okay. I asked her to put her hands in my hands. I have no idea where that came from but it seemed to be the best thing to do at the time. I hoped that she would feel strength from me and feel that I genuinely wanted to help her. I felt that whatever had happened to this child must have been devastating, because her tears never stopped. She put her hands in mine and laid her head on my shoulder and continued to cry. Her hands were so cold. As her hands warmed up, she moved a little closer to me and it appeared as if she was begin-

ning to trust me. I knew that something was hurting her, and I felt helpless because she wouldn't or couldn't talk about it.

Martha squeezed my hands very tightly as if to say, "Please help me, and I hope I can trust you." I think one of the most important messages to get across to children who have been sexually abused is that it is not their fault. It is also very important to explain to them that you cannot keep a secret that could put them in harm. I tried to convey this message to Martha. I know that it was very painful for her to tell her story.



Martha was filled with all kinds of fears. She was afraid that I wouldn't see her as a little girl. She was afraid that I would think badly of her, and she was ashamed. Most of all she was afraid of losing her family and

### CORRECTION

In Vol.3,#1(1997) Diane Beuerle, author of "My Storyteller," credentials were listed incorrectly. Ms Beuerle, MS, NP is a Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner in private practice, Corona del Mar CA.

getting the only father she knew in trouble. Although she had a lot of fears, she wanted the abuse to stop. What Martha did not know was that I had a lot of fears too. I was afraid that this case was too much for me to handle. I was afraid that I was not qualified. I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to help her, and I was afraid of my own emotions. Most of all, I was afraid that I would somehow mess this case up and that could cause even more harm to Martha.

### MARTHA'S STORY

With tears rolling down her face, Martha told a story of abuse that, to a young practitioner like me, was almost unbelievable. To the best of my memory, her initial story went something like this:

"I was sitting at my desk and was thinking about what was going to happen when I got home from school. Daddy is going to 'get me' and he said he's going to 'get me' worse than before. When mama and my little brother left home this morning, Daddy made me give him some 'bootie' and told me that he was going to finish when I got home from school. Daddy started to mess with me when I was a little girl. Daddy puts his thing in me and touches me and it hurts. He promised me and Mama that he was not going to mess with me anymore."

While telling her story, my stomach was in knots, and with everything in my power I fought back the tears. I was so angry, afraid, upset, and devastated. Although the issue of sexual abuse was not a new phenomenon to me, it was merely some-

thing I had read in a book, heard in the news, and studied in social work classes. Until now I had no face to put with this phenomenon.

The initial interview continued. When I learned that Martha's mother was aware of the alleged abuse and had failed to protect her, I was almost overwhelmed by my own feelings. I started to think about what if my mother had not protected me. I thought Moms were the protectors of their children. Surely this mother does not know of the abuse, I thought. However, Martha was very detailed in her story, and it was obvious that this was painful for her to talk about. I could tell that Martha was feeling that she was betraying her family. She would tell what had happened and then say something very caring about her parents. Sexual abuse cases are difficult. Children will still love and want to be with abusive parents. I reminded myself that in these cases you must never assume or lead the victim. The social worker should only seek clarification from the child. Listening to Martha repeat the details of her story for clarification was very hard for me, because I really didn't want to hear it all over again. It only made me more angry.

After my initial interview with Martha, I notified my supervisor and contacted the police department. When I spoke with my supervisor, I told her all my fears. She listened, but assured me that I could handle the situation. I remember saying to her, "This case is for an experienced social worker," and she replied, "Venessa, Martha wouldn't be

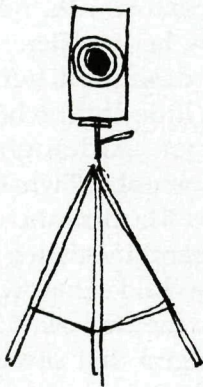
comfortable telling her story to anyone else now, she needs you." After our conversation I remember putting my feelings aside and thinking of Martha's welfare. At that point I felt confident in my ability to handle the situation.

### MARTHA'S MEDICAL EXAMINATION

Given the nature of the case and the fact that Martha stated that the abuse had just occurred that morning, the detective and I took Martha directly to the hospital where she was examined for sexual abuse. There Martha stood in the examining room, with tears coming down her small frail face and a firm grip on her clothing. She was afraid to remove them for fear of what the doctor would think. However, Dr. James was a very gentle man. He looked at Martha with tears in his eyes and assured her that she would be okay. He carefully explained every step of the examination process. I went over to the bed, grabbed her hands, looked in her eyes, and reminded her of how much strength and courage she had to have to come this far.

This was a very hard moment and in a lot of ways I needed Martha to be strong for me. I needed her to be strong because my own emotions were too close to the surface that I was afraid I would not be strong enough for her. It was if I was watching her being violated. The examination was so painful for Martha that I became angry at what happened to her. However, it was that anger that changed my feelings of powerlessness and gave me the strength to give to Martha.

With her hands in mine, we made it through the medical examination. I must admit that it was at this point that I could no longer fight the tears. I cried but quickly regained control of my emotions. Martha's examination revealed that she had been penetrated. The doctor found semen in her vagina. This evidence validated our case for sexual abuse.

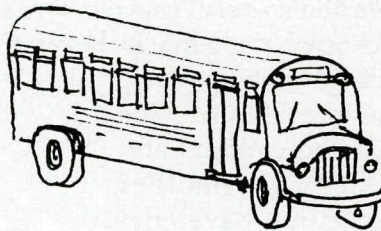


## THE VIDEOTAPING

Later, the police detective and I had Martha's story videotaped. We interviewed her for the second time at a place called the "Georgia Center." The center looked like a home with lots of bright colors, toys, and anatomically correct dolls. When Martha walked into the house, her face lit up. It was obvious that she felt safe, but was still scared. While the detective set up the equipment, Martha and I went into the taping room and talked more about her family. She talked about how much she favored her little brother who was almost a year old. "I love him, but Mamma won't let me play with him that much," she said. "Mama says that I'm too big and that I should be

playing with kids my own age. But I don't like to play with the kids at school because they think that I am different." Martha's constant reminder of the fact that her brother looked just like her raised a red flag for me. But I wasn't sure what she was trying to tell me. It just seemed strange. I didn't pressure her to tell me more, because I thought maybe what she was trying to say would come out in the videotaped interview.

Before we started the videotape, Martha came over and grabbed my hands, placed her hands inside mine, and started to talk. To be honest, holding Martha's hands were just as comforting for me as it may have been for her. I felt that what little strength we both had could be shared with each other. I held on to her hands and she cried as she repeated her story, this time in much more detail. It appeared as if she felt relieved to finally release her secret.



Her story continued: "Everyday when I get off the bus, Daddy is waiting to meet me, and he waves at the bus driver. Everybody thinks my daddy is nice and Mama said that we should be happy to have him in our lives because she doesn't make enough money to support us and he gives us the things that we need. Daddy is nice to me except when he puts

his 'thing' in me. I told mama the first time he touched me, and mama told me that he was trying to get to know me. But it didn't feel like it was supposed to happen, and I always feel ashamed and I don't know why Daddy wants to touch me this way."

After the first time, Martha said she never told her mother again because her mother told her not to run away from the only father she had. When I asked her if there were other times he had, "put his thing in her," she said, "a lot of times." Martha said that her daddy touched her at age nine when they lived in Oklahoma. She said "He hurt me real bad, and something bad happened." Martha remembers something happening to her stomach, and she and daddy having to go to the hospital. She said, "I think I had a baby, but I never saw it, but I heard something cry." Martha also remembers her mother being in the hospital having her brother the same day she had surgery.

At this point I was angry because I began to suspect what was going on. After Martha's "surgery" they moved, and her Mama told her never to discuss what had happened.

After finishing the interview, I remember as if it were yesterday, how Martha's teacher initially described her as being in a catatonic state, nonverbal and rocking rapidly. That the only time Martha spoke was when they offered to call her mother, but she seemed terrified by the offer.

Finally telling this awful secret really changed Martha because after the interview she was not the same. Although the world

she once knew was in shambles, she had a smile.

Neither of us knew what the future would hold. Releasing her secret changed both of our lives. For Martha, the life and family she once knew would never be the same. Martha was placed in a foster home. When children disclose sexual abuse and the alleged perpetrator remains in the home, sexual abuse protocol requires children to be removed from the home, especially if the other parent knows of the abuse and has failed to protect the child. For me, my life changed because the way I saw the world and the direction of my career would be very different. We continued our investigation.

### MARTHA'S MOTHER'S STORY

One of the most difficult parts of this case was my initial interview with Martha's mother at the police station after Martha had been taken into protective custody. Her mother appeared intellectually limited, shy, and very dependent. When I first confronted the mother about her daughter, she dropped her head and screamed, "Where is my daughter?" I assured her that Martha was safe. She said, "We have a wonderful family; what is the problem, we just moved here and we don't know anyone." The mother was very nervous and refused to talk anymore without her husband. After her husband arrived at the police station, both denied all allegations and demanded to see Martha. I thought, "How could you demand to see this child after what has hap-

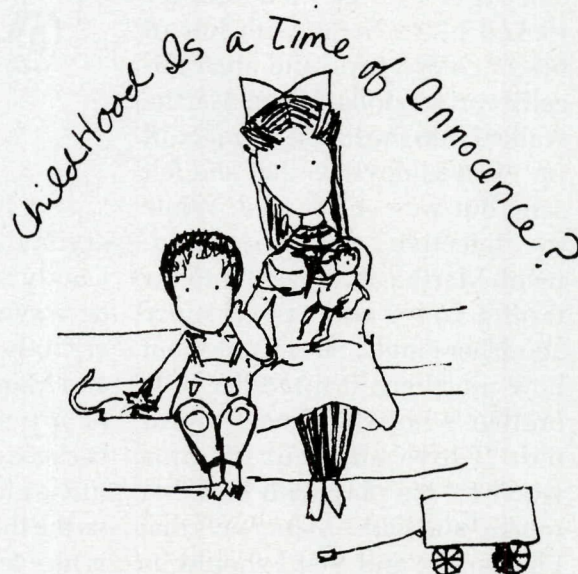
pened to her?" When I first saw the father, I looked at him with disgust. However, he was in such denial that he didn't even notice me. On the other hand, when I saw the mother and father together, I felt sorry for the mother. When I looked into her eyes it was clear to me she was in a lot of pain. Her affect was of sadness, fear and dependency. She appeared ashamed, hurt and helpless. It was obvious that she felt powerless because after her husband arrived she allowed him to do all the talking. After our initial interview with the parents, the stepfather was arrested and charged with aggravated child molestation.

About 18 days after my initial interview, the mother contacted me. She was worried about Martha. She described Martha as a good girl who had been through a lot and would not lie, but she was not sure why Martha would say such things. Martha's mother married her husband when Martha was six years old, and she acknowledged that he began fondling her shortly after he moved in. He wanted children and Martha's mother could not have anymore. After a few years she learned that Martha, shortly before she turned 9, was pregnant. The baby was aborted. According to the mother the family survived, but the abuse continued and Martha was pregnant again at age 10. They decided to raise the child as their own.

They told Martha that Mom was pregnant and that she was sick. The stepfather had promised that he would not bother Martha again, because he had a son. Martha was okay, and their secret was safe. So they moved to start over again.

Martha's mother had a very difficult childhood. She was raised by her mother and stepfather. She was sexually abused by her stepfather and never protected by her mother. Martha's mother described herself as a helpless little child who "turned out okay." Although she appeared sorry about what had happened to Martha, she defended her husband by stating, "He just wanted a child of his own and felt this was the best way." She acknowledged that she loved her husband very much and would see him through this, and that one day their family would be back together.

According to James and Nasjleti (1983), Martha's mother could be classified as The Passive Child-Woman Mother. This



woman assumes an attitude of helplessness and apathy when confronted by any form of conflict. In relationships, she usually chooses authoritarian and abusive men. She embodies the victim role. Mothers of incest victims often report inadequate parenting in their own childhood. Passive child-woman mothers are likely to have been physically abused or emotionally deprived. A significant number of these women report incest or molestation in childhood. They describe the relationships with their mothers as poor, and memories elicit feelings of anger and pain. The children grow up assuming that abuse was part of what women had to live with. These women embody the term "learned helplessness." I think that Martha's mother never really felt for Martha because in her eyes she had survived and so could Martha.

### GRATEFUL

Martha's mother was arrested for her knowledge of and contribution to the abuse, and she never stopped supporting her husband even after his conviction. Martha and her brother [her son] remained in foster care. Although Martha was not ready to become a mother, she had a strong bond with her brother. It was difficult for Martha to learn that he was her son, but it was a relief knowing that she had not imagined having a baby.

About four years ago, I received a letter from Martha. She had finished her first year in college and was studying to become a social worker. Memories of Martha have been with me since

the first moments I met her, and it's been her strength and courage that strengthen me.

This case challenged me both personally and professionally. When I reflect on my 10 years as a direct services practitioner, I would have to say this was the case that laid the foundation for my success as a Protective Services Investigator. It was this case that confirmed the value of an advance degree in social work. I also realized how important it was to be committed to the welfare of children. I think of the many children who, due to my ability to adequately assess sexual abuse cases, were given an opportunity to unlock the horrible secrets in their lives. More than anything, they touched my life and they taught me courage and strength. Today, I am grateful for having had an opportunity to work on behalf of children.

The social work profession is sometimes a thankless profession in a lot of ways. However, it was the look in Martha's eyes and the touch of her hands that said "thank you." □

### REFERENCES

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