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York County woman, sexually abused as a child, creates a way to help others like her

Turning Point, scheduled to open in November, expects to offer various therapies.

By KATE HARMON Daily Record/Sunday News

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Kristen Woolley, right, was sexually abused for a few years of her childhood. Her struggle with recovery prompted her to start a nonprofit aimed at helping women just like her. It will involve counseling, art therapy, group work and more. She's worked on the house by hand as much as possible, such as with her son Ethan, 14, left, to keep the costs down. (YORK DAILY RECORD/SUNDAY NEWS--JASON PLOTKIN)

York, PA -

Kristen Woolley felt like she couldn't tell her family or friends.

Knowing that a family friend was sexually assaulting her from age 10 to 12 might break her already-stressed mind and what would she do if her classmates found out?

So the Windsor Township woman buried the pain, the shame, and the confusion.

When she was 17, she disclosed the abuse to a mandated reporter who didn't report it.

So she buried it again.

A few years later, an attorney told her too much time had passed for her to file charges. That wasn't the right, but she thought it was.

Finally, at 23, a doctor encouraged her to tell her mother.

Her mother was shocked.

Ten days later, Woolley saw her mother again, and she disclosed that she, too, was abused as a child.

Ten days after that, Woolley's mother died.



LOCAL. Kristen Woolley was sexually abused for a few years of her childhood. Her struggle with recovery prompted her to start a nonprofit aimed at helping women just like her. It will involve counseling, art therapy, group work and more. (YORK DAILY RECORD/SUNDAY NEWS--JASON PLOTKIN)

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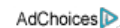
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"I thought I really did break my mom," Woolley said.

Years passed, bringing with them a husband, a nursing degree, a master's in social work, two children.

And somewhere along the way, a dream: To create a safe place where women like her could come and not have to bury that shame.

"Sexual abuse is so silent," she said. "I wanted to create a place where they can come in and not have to speak. They just know."

'A unique niche'

For years, Woolley has been talking to Deb Harrison of the York County Children's Advocacy Center -- where she serves on the board of directors -- about her dream.

In the York area, there are therapists experienced in trauma, and there are victim resource centers. Woolley wanted to "make sure she's meeting a unique niche," Harrison said.

Woolley's nonprofit will focus only on women who are victims of childhood sexual abuse. It will offer hands-on therapy and group discussions.

"I think you can see the power of someone who has come out of that experience and is motivated in that way to make life better for others," Harrison said.

There aren't a lot of resources, Harrison said, adding that in her experience many of those places have waiting lists.

"There's no end to the work that can be done," she said.

In her conversations with other medical professionals, Harrison said, she has heard there are people revealing information about their own abuse much later in life.

"They've closed the door on it and they don't think it's affecting them," she said.

The cost to society for not addressing abuse when it happens is profound, she added.

While the CAC deals primarily with children, Harrison said they'll often see that abuse is generational and they try to respond to the need for referrals.

"I think she'll be very very busy at her center related to the fact that the generations of women she'll be seeing were part of an era where this simply wasn't talked about," Harrison said.

Healing is possible

When she finally focused on recovery, Woolley recalls seeing a poem by Terri St. Cloud called "It's not your fault."

"I realized intellectually it wasn't my fault, but in my heart I didn't feel it," she said.

But it wasn't until she was tucking her then 10-year-old son in bed one night that it hit home. Looking at him, she realized just how small he was -- and how small she was when her abuse started.

Through her process, she saw a lot of work by a St. Cloud, who also had a poem called "The healing began."

It began: "feeling dirty, ashamed and damaged, she hid her story, not knowing that the woman next to her also hid hers."

That was the beginning of an idea that would follow her through her recovery, and into a nonprofit she'd fund with money her mother left her after her death.

Turning Point is a nonprofit based out of a home she owns on East Market Street in Springettsbury Township.

She's doing most of the work at the home by hand -- with help from her 10- and 14-year-old sons who help her paint -- to keep costs down.

And in November, she plans on opening Turning Point.

Woolley wants women to know that transformation from victim to survivor is possible. And it's liberating.

"She can say it, and she's not only still standing, but she's flourishing," said Joan Bitzer, her mentor and a local psychologist.

Woolley will run the center and have three other therapists on hand. Instead of using insurance for sessions, there are set prices she said she based on what exactly of an insurance payment goes directly to providers. Donors can choose to sponsor a therapy for clients.

The nonprofit will offer only outpatient therapy -- journaling, group and individual counseling, art and sand tray therapy. It will also offer legal advocacy and work with the county's Victim Witness Program.

The experiential therapies Woolley plans to offer are different, too, Bitzer said. Not a lot of facilities have all of the options together.

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Kristen Woolley has applied personal touches to Turning Point's building on East Market Street in Springettsbury Township. (YORK DAILY RECORD/SUNDAY NEWS--JASON PLOTKIN)

"It's an opportunity to get to some of the deeper emotions that are too hard to talk about at first," she said.

On top of that, Bitzer said she thinks the fact that Woolley's openness about personal experience will benefit clients since she knows what they're going through.

Bitzer added she doesn't think all therapists need to have the experience, but that it may be meaningful for someone going into therapy for the first time.

"I can identify with feeling it's your fault, feeling dirty," Woolley said. "It's not pretty to go back in time and heal, but it's possible."

And she wants women coming in to her center to know she knows what it's like to feel dirty and to feel like it's your fault.

"If one woman can walk in here and when she leaves, she leaves her shame at the door, then my abuse is worth it," Woolley said.

About Turning Point

Turning Point will host open house events to show off the new nonprofit for women who were sexually abused as children.

The events are at 5 p.m. on Oct. 18, and noon Oct. 19. The center is located at 2100 E. Market St., Springettsbury Township.

RSVP by Oct. 11 by calling (717) 755-8876 or emailing board@turningpointyork.com.

For more about Turning Point, visit turningpointyork.com.

Statute of limitations

When Kristen Woolley disclosed her childhood sexual abuse, an attorney told her it was too late for her to file charges. The attorney was wrong, but since then the statute of limitations has been changed.

For cases involving child victims who turned 18 on or after Aug. 27, 2002, the commonwealth has until the victim's 50th birthday to file criminal charges for abuse that occurred before the age of 18.

The statute for sexual offenses committed against minors applies to the charges of: rape, statutory sexual assault, aggravated indecent assault, indecent assault, indecent exposure, incest, endangering the welfare of children, corruption of minors, sexual abuse of children and sexual exploitation of children.

--The Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape, pcar.org.

By the numbers

--- 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men were sexually abused before the age of 18.

--- There are more than 42 million adult survivors of child sexual abuse in the U.S.

--- 73 percent of child victims do not tell anyone about the abuse for at least a year. 45 percent of victims do not tell anyone for at least 5 years.

--- Nearly 70 percent of all reported sexual assault occur to children ages 17 and under

Source: Darkness to Light, visit darkness2light.org.

Sexual abuse resources

Victim Assistance Center (717) 854-3131 or (800) 422-3204

Report child sex abuse by calling Childline at 1-800-932-0313.

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