

Sexual abuse victim celebrates 'little victories'

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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

One in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys are subjected to sexual abuse before age 18.

Courtney Greene was abused by her youth pastor, who pleaded guilty and was sentenced to prison.

"As horrible as this is, it's her story and I think it's her calling to tell it and help others with it."

Lebanon's Courtney Greene acknowledges she is still very much a work in progress.

After a period of sexual abuse committed by her youth pastor that stretched over a year when she was a high school teenager, Greene, now 20, is celebrating "little victories" as she continues to put her life back together.

"I didn't know what had happened because no one talks about it," Greene said. "I always thought if someone found out I would be the one in trouble. I firmly believed that."

The Tennessean generally doesn't identify the victims of sexual abuse, but Greene came forward as a survivor wanting to speak out, hoping her story can help the estimated 68 percent of sexual assault victims who never report the crime to police.

"Sexual assault is a crime of secrecy, which results in a lot of shame and self-blame," said Cameron Clark, sexual assault training specialist and clinical therapist at the Sexual Assault Center in Nashville. "We also know sexual assault isn't a crime about sex. It's about power and control."

One in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys are subjected to sexual abuse before age 18 in the United States.

Sex crimes with youth often involve a perpetrator who draws in potential victims by making them feel special, filling needs and building a relationship under a guise of trust, Clark said.

That's what happened with Greene.

'The grooming stage'

Just before Greene started high school, her family began attending Fairview Church in Lebanon. She and her family had recently moved to Wilson County from Florida.

Christopher D. Ross began making advances on Greene in 2009 when she was 14, according to state evidence in what experts described as "the grooming stage."

She remembers extra attention from Ross at youth group events. There were phone calls on Wednesday nights. An invitation to attend a leadership conference just six months after joining the youth group. The only high school student invited on a college whitewater rafting trip, she said.

Ross went to her school at times to eat lunch with Greene and other members of the youth group. He acted appropriately in group settings.

But in private, the abuse intensified.

It escalated into sexual contact from May 2011 to June 2012, when she was 15 and 16, according to evidence in the case. Ross was 40 when sexual contact began.

Greene said she remembers statements that made her feel guilty. Some were subtle. Others more alarming — including one threat that her abuser would kill himself if anyone found out.

“He was a friend of the family,” Greene said. “My friends trusted him.”

She said she was afraid to tell on him.

“He was the problem, but he was also the only one I felt I could go to.”

Greene’s parents — Jeff and Tammy Greene — knew Ross as a confidant to their daughter. Her mother said the family trusted him as an authority figure with the church. Ross had been at the Greenses' home with other church staff, though now Tammy Greene recalls him as extremely uncomfortable.

Eventually, Ross resigned from the church in July 2012, stating in a resignation letter he wanted to take a break from ministry for family reasons, according to the church.

Fairview Church was not aware of the allegations against Ross until his arrest, according to an email from church leadership on Wednesday. The church has new leadership now and requires mandatory background checks for volunteers working with minors. Other updates include policies requiring multiple adults in rooms or on trips with minors.

For Greene, in the midst of the abuse, she spiraled downward physically and emotionally — constant sickness, missed classes, nightmares and an inability to keep food down. And Greene has no memory of a six-month period.

Contact became more sporadic when Ross left the church, but Greene's physical and emotional issues only worsened and doctors were unable to determine a diagnosis.

A mentor was the first person Greene told about the abuse in August 2014.

She told her parents two months later.

“It was a devastating thought we hadn’t protected her and didn’t know this had happened,” Tammy Greene said. “Putting her in a situation we thought was safe and wasn’t makes you feel you did something wrong.”

Courtney Greene pursued her case legally, working with Wilson County Sheriff’s Office Detective Maj. Robert Stafford and Assistant District Attorney Tom Swink, a step many victims don’t follow through with.

Ross, now 45, was sentenced to six years in prison after pleading guilty in the case.

Stafford said the biggest fear he sees in victims is that no one will believe their story.

"This is an issue of embarrassment, and at times can be a hard case to prove," he said. "Even after making the initial report, a person accused of a crime has the right to face their accuser. Then comes the fear of the possibility of having to testify to what occurred to a jury and courtroom of strangers.

"I find (that) even though the victims of sexual assault have done nothing at all wrong, they still in some way feel that they are somehow at fault for what has happened," Stafford said. "These victims just need all the support they can get from everyone involved."

'Little victories'

There are still days a certain smell, sound or situation can trigger Greene's mind back to the abuse and increase her anxiety again. But progress has been noticeable, her mom and friends say.

Greene likes to call her steps forward "little victories."

She is able to ride as a passenger in a vehicle again and not get carsick and panic-stricken. Much of the sexual contact with her abuser occurred in an automobile, she said, and now through counseling she understands the connection her anxiety has to a car or other situations where she feels unable to escape.

"Both of us get triggered by certain things," said a friend of Greene's who said she has a similar story of sexual abuse but did not want to be identified. "This sucked, but what was meant for evil, the Lord will turn to good. The closure she has found makes you want to cry with the way she wants to use her story. She has a story to tell of the Lord making beauty from ashes and to live to help so many girls."

Greene is in college now majoring in psychology. She works a part-time job and volunteers with an organization that allows her to share her story with others.

She journals, often about the random things in life — like a man she witnessed getting frustrated about a long wait at a doctor's office then leaving just before his name was called. She loves target shooting with family. She's taken to interior decorating.

"The light is back in her eyes," said Savannah Stinson, a friend since high school. "As horrible as this is, it's her story and I think it's her calling to tell it and help others with it."

The abuse hasn't shaken Greene's faith, either. The family attends a different church, but neither Greene nor her parents blame Fairview Church for the abuse for which Ross was sentenced to prison.

"A lot of people question how can you be part of a church after this?" Greene said. "Our faith isn't in a church. It's in God.

"I'm not going to operate as a victim who can't do anything," she said. "There is life after trauma that isn't dark. It is not hopeless, but it takes a lot of work to get there. I'm walking through whatever doors

God is opening. Vision gives pain a purpose. Romans 8:28 says (God) is going to work it out for the better, and I trust in that.”

Sexual assault statistics

- There are about 293,000 sexual assaults in the U.S. each year.
- Forty-four percent of sexual assault victims are under age 18.
- Only 12 percent of child sexual abuse is reported to authorities.
- Approximately 4 out of 5 sexual assaults are committed by someone known by the victim. Nearly 3 of 4 adolescents were sexually abused by somebody they knew well.
- Forty-seven percent of rapes are committed by a friend or acquaintance.

Source: The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network; The National Sexual Violence Resource Center

Getting help

Sexual Assault Center

101 French Landing Drive, Nashville

Support line: 615-259-9055, ext. 335

24-hour crisis line: 800-879-1999

Website: www.sacenter.org/heal/where_to_start