

The Real Legacy of Child Sexual Abuse

Written by Ginny Grimsley

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A 'Stain' for a Football Program is a Life Sentence
for Victims, Author Says

While media and collegiate officials debated how best to handle the Penn State child-rape scandal, including the systemic cover-up by university leaders, others want the public to know just how such abuse ruins lives.

"I've heard commentators say things like, 'What's done is done,' or 'There's no one left to go after,' or 'Why punish the students and the athletes? – It's time to heal,' " says child advocate Linda O'Dochartaigh, whose novel Peregrine (www.lavanderkatbooks.com), details the stark aftermath of child sex abuse. "If they were the victims, or their children were, I don't think those sports analysts would be so quick to forgive and forget."

To hear supporters of the university's football program is surprisingly reminiscent of those who defend abusers, she says.

Penn State's board could do the noble thing and make it easy on themselves by self imposing the "death penalty" option – temporarily shutting down the embattled football program, she says.

"As terrible as the initial abuse is for children, the volume of lifelong negative consequences is usually worse," O'Dochartaigh says. "Children who suffer sexual abuse often hear the voice of their abuser in their minds for the rest of their lives, telling them they're bad, they're ugly, they're worthless. These children are often sentenced to a lifetime of relationships in which they

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are victims.”

O'Dochartaigh reviews the lasting scars of child sexual abuse:

- **Trouble handling emotions:** One of the surest signs of well-being is the ability to handle adversity in stride; to keep emotions in check. “For victims of sexual abuse, a lasting legacy is the opposite of well-being,” she says. Victims may have trouble expressing emotions, which are then bottled up, often leading to sporadic bouts of depression, anger and anxiety. Many turn to drugs and alcohol to numb their pain.

- **A core sense of worthlessness or being damaged:** The physical side of sexual abuse is just one aspect; what haunts victims is the voice of the abuser, constantly reinforcing a lack of personal value. As time passes and children mature into adults, victims often do not invest in themselves. With a deep sense of being damaged, they often feel incapable or unworthy of higher-paying jobs, for example.

- **Difficulty in relationships and lack of trust:** Most child abuse comes from authority figures who are close to the victim – family members, family friends, church leaders, teachers, etc. Children who cannot feel secure within their own family, the most fundamental of relationships, may develop deep-seeded trust issues. Relationships are frequently doomed because victims trash good relationships, fearing their partner will ultimately try to control or hurt them, or they'll bond with an abusive person because they do not know what a good relationship entails.

“When I hear the ‘yeah, but’ argument from people defending those who allow sexual abuse to continue, whether its’ at Penn State or in the Catholic Church, I realize we have to do more to raise awareness about how sexual abuse can ruin lives,” says O'Dochartaigh.

About Linda O'Dochartaigh

Linda O'Dochartaigh has worked in health care is an advocate for victims of child abuse and

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domestic violence. She wants survivors to know that an enriched, stable and happy life is available to them. O'Dochartaigh is the mother of three grown children and is raising four adopted grandchildren.