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## Our Kitchen Table: Keeping an Open Dialogue about Sexual Abuse

By Michael Hoffman

Recently, on the 6:00 pm national newscast over several nights, the story of brave women confronting Dr. Larry Nassar in court affected me deeply. Dr. Nassar, the former USA Gymnastics team doctor, was convicted of sexually abusing over one hundred female victims while he served as a doctor for the athletes. During the time when the survivors were confronting Dr. Nassar in court (and it was being broadcast), my 20-year-old daughter was home from college. My wife, my daughter and I listened to the stories in silence. These courageous women recounted a culture of silence, with adults who didn't heed the warning signs, parents whose trust was betrayed, painful physical and emotional trauma, and a litany of tragic consequences of how all of that has affected their lives—both as children and as they have grown into adulthood.



The story is all too familiar for me. As an abuse survivor, my abuse was facilitated by a man who groomed me—and my parents—into trusting him, much like Dr. Nassar did. A culture of silence was the norm as no one dared to speak up. None of the other priests, staff, or other adults heeded any of the warning signs for many years. As a result, I was sexually abused and left with emotional scars, which have broken my heart and caused significant anxiety and stress in my life.

While still listening in silence to the newscast, I gazed at my daughter, hoping, wishing, praying—that nothing like that would ever happen to her. When the story finished, my daughter opened up, asking aloud why someone didn't help those girls. She felt that nurses, coaches, parents, other medical staff, or other school staff could have, and should have, seen that something was wrong and intervened. She went on to say how wrong it was for those bad things to happen to all of those girls. She asked aloud, how could this happen?

At our kitchen table, I answered her excellent question by briefly recounting my experience of how this happened in my life. She listened. Our conversation expanded to how we all communicate and relate to our family and friends. My wife, my daughter and I talked about how actually listening, hearing and believing people and responding to them in a compassionate way can really help someone. We went on to agree that it is healthy to tell one's story to trustworthy adults, no matter what happened. At our kitchen table, this experience helped me to reconcile myself to my own story, and how that continues to affect me and my family today.

We don't have to be survivors to communicate to people about the experience of child sexual abuse. Any adult can address the stories that occur in the news and use them as talking points with youth (or other adults) to either start, or continue, the conversation about abuse, about how we are here to help, about how we're willing to listen. In this way, we embrace a culture of hope and healing.

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## What is Your Opinion?

How will you celebrate Mother's Day?

- Celebrating motherhood!
- By spending time with my own mother, or an important mother in my life.
- By praying for mothers.
- More than one of the above.
- Something else, or I'm not sure.

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