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Key benefit from grim Sandusky sex abuse case: Awareness

Iowan, himself a victim as a child, hopes adults will be more mindful of predators

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Written by DANIEL P. FINNEY AND TIMOTHY MEINCH

Child rape survivor Larry Wohlgeomuth is a realist.

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He believes the conviction of former Penn State University assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky on a slew of child sexual abuse charges is unlikely to have sweeping impact on American culture.

But Wohlgeomuth hopes, at least, that the story will inspire people to listen to children and be mindful of predators.

"Awareness is the biggest thing we can hope for," said Wohlgeomuth, 58, an Ankeny man who says he was raped by a male family member beginning at age 3. "Maybe people will wonder about adults who want to spend a lot of time alone with children and want to take them off places."

Tips, warning signs

Following are some characteristics of a sexual predator.

- Misses or ignores social cues about others' personal or sexual limits and boundaries.
- Often has a "special" child friend, maybe a different one from year to year.
- Spends most of his or her spare time with children and shows little interest in spending time with someone the same age.
- Encourages silence and secrets in children.
- Makes others uncomfortable by ignoring social, emotional or physical boundaries or limits.
- Refuses to let a child set any of his or

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Last week, Sandusky was convicted of 45 of 48 charges in a child sexual abuse case that shed light on years of abuse. Penn State's administration, fellow coaches and boosters of the university's storied football program ignored evidence in earlier years of some of Sandusky's crimes.

The case has already made a difference in Iowa law. It helped inspire Iowa legislators to pass a new law requiring the state's public, private and community colleges and universities to have policies and procedures in place to cope with child sexual abuse allegations.

Lawmakers also added protection for whistle-blowers who report child sexual abuse, in part because at least one janitor said he was aware of Sandusky's abuses but feared losing his job if he reported the incident.

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"We're hoping the whistle-blower piece (of the law) assists with that and reassures someone that they will keep their job if they come forward," said Rep. Joel Fry, R-Osceola.



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The state is also reviewing its sexual offender registry to make sure it is up to date and effective, Fry said.

Stephen Scott, executive director of Prevent Child Abuse Iowa and chairman of the Iowa Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Task Force, credited the Sandusky case with building support for task force work that eventually led to the new law.

"I think Iowa got a little bit ahead of things" because of the Sandusky case, Scott said. "What happened here is we had this task force already set up, and we were already heading down the road. Sandusky happened, and it gave us a huge amount of visibility.

"All of a sudden, the task force was something the people paid attention to," Scott said. "We got exactly the legislation we wanted, and it sailed through early in the session. We didn't get any money, but then again, hardly anybody got any money."

Males far less likely to report sex abuse

Iowa sexual abuse survivor advocates hope Sandusky's conviction will help male abuse victims talk to someone about their experiences, particularly since several of Sandusky's victims, now in their mid-20s, testified in open court.

"I think the courage of these young men coming forward may help other men come forward who have been reluctant to do so or embarrassed or ashamed," said Beth Barnhill, executive director of the Iowa Coalition Against Sexual Assault.

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Males are far less likely to report being victims of sexual abuse than females, and almost all research in the field of sexual abuse relates to female victims.

The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, revealed approximately one in 71 men (1.4 percent) reported being victims of rape, and more than one in five men (22 percent) said they'd experienced sexual violence other than rape during their lifetime.

Barnhill said males should come forward to talk and gain psychological and emotional support, even in cases where the criminal justice system will not or cannot be involved, which is often the case in Iowa because of a 10-year statute of limitations.

Barnhill and her colleagues are lobbying the Legislature to lengthen the time for prosecution of such cases.

"We have been working on that for a long time and will continue to work on it," she said.

Ideally, advocates would like the statute of limitations removed,

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Barnhill said.

After abuse came years of struggles

Wohlgemuth, who grew up in Topeka, Kan., suppressed the memories of abuse by an older male relative for decades. The relative raped him beginning at age 3, he says. To ensure his silence, the relative held his head under a drill press and pushed the spinning bit down until it was inches from his skull.

"He said if I ever told anyone, he would fill my head full of holes," Wohlgemuth said.

At age 5, Wohlgemuth told his mother about the abuse. The family cut off all contact with the relative for more than a year.

But eventually, Wohlgemuth's cash-strapped parents needed a loan. The only place they could get it was from the estranged family members. A condition of the loan was that the children visit as they did before.

The terror was so much for Wohlgemuth that he buried the memories deep in his psyche for decades. In ensuing years, he became an alcoholic and struggled with uncontrolled rage. His marriage fell apart under the strain of what doctors later diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder.

After years of therapy, including experimental treatments, Wohlgemuth mostly made his peace with his past. He wrote a book about his experiences called "Larry Tells Stories," and he speaks to groups about surviving child sexual abuse.

He wants the Sandusky case to inspire people to come forward and tell their stories of abuse. He wants people to believe children when they say they've been hurt, even by someone as famous and revered as Sandusky.

"The state of our society is that we defer to adults at all times, and we just don't listen," he said. "This went on for years because people didn't want to believe one of their heroes was doing this...."

"Will there be big changes? There will be some changes at Penn State, I suppose, but there will still be people at Penn State football games in the fall like nothing happened."

— Register staff writer Jeff Eckhoff contributed to this story.

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