

Appendix E – Marie’s Case Study

Institutional Sexual Abuse Incident

Marie was 10 years old and living with her family in a ‘faith’ community when she first sexually abused by the community elder. This abuse continued on a weekly basis and over a three-year period. She said that just prior to her 14th birthday, her family suddenly moved some 800 kilometres away.

Life according to Marie was ‘hell’ for the next 18 years. Described by her family as the ‘black sheep’ [she had two other sisters] Marie struggled. She was disruptive at school, prone to fits of anger and started drinking and using drugs. She was being seen by counsellors, psychologists and at age 20, admitted to a psychiatric ward. She joined AA and had a number of relationships.

After Marie first disclosed to her mother at age 26 things do not improve. She felt even further isolated [emotionally] from her family. Just prior to her 28th birthday in 2000 Marie watched an ABC documentary Facing The Demons and made contact with Terry O’Connell, the NSW police officer who facilitated the meeting involving the family and friends of Michael Marslew, a 17 year old student who was murdered in a robbery at a Pizza Hut. Two of the four offenders and families also participated.

Marie wrote to say that she had been sexually abused and wanted to have a ‘meeting’ with the person responsible. Terry agreed to meet with Marie to explore how he might help. At this meeting Terry asked Marie two questions. The first ‘what does a good day look like for you?’ Marie replied, “I am not sure what a good day looks like because every time I begin to feel good about myself, my history kicks in.”

Marie was then asked, “What does a bad day look like?” Marie replied, “Every day. I wake up feeling depressed, anxious, disgusted and worst of all I feel a deep sense of shame and humiliation.” Marie was asked to explain how she dealt with her shame. She replied, “I withdraw. I attack myself. I am into big time avoidance and I get angry with others.”

Marie was then asked was she actually did when she experienced these emotions. Marie said, “When I withdraw I isolate myself from everyone. I shut down and don’t talk. When I attack myself, I feel disgusted about who I am. I feel that I am responsible for why I was abused. Avoidance - well that was about drugs and alcohol. It is my way of numbing my pain. Getting angry with others – this is when I lose it and just explode.”

Terry then handed Marie the Real Justice Facilitator’s handbook opened at page 27. This page contained the Compass of Shame, developed by Professor Don Nathanson. Each pole of this compass had the exact words that Marie had described when asked about how she handled her shame. The only exception, being ‘attack others’ rather than as Marie described ‘angry at others’. Marie looked closely at diagram for a brief moment and then began to

sob. 'Do you mean that I am normal?' she inquired in an anguished tone. 'Why did it take until now to understand that? I was in psy wards and have been treated by psychiatrists, psychologists and counsellors but they never talked about this stuff.'

Marie was asked to list the things she now wanted. Marie nominated two things: confront her perpetrator and reconnect with her family. Marie realised that if she complained to the police there was no likelihood of being able to confront her perpetrator. Her family was a more realistic option. Terry agreed to facilitate a meeting with her family or at least talk with her parents. It was agreed that Marie would talk with her parents. Marie was excited when her parents agreed.

Terry met separately with Marie's mum and dad. Each was asked the same questions:

- What was it like when Marie asked you to meet me?
- What did you think when Marie told you she had been sexually abused?
- What impact has this had on Marie, yourself and your family?
- What has been the hardest thing about what has happened?
- What would you like to see come from our conversations?

Terry then met with Marie's sisters [together] and used the same questions. Like their parents, her sisters were highly emotional for most of the conversation. As a family they were desperate to help 'take away' some of Marie's pain if that was possible.

A meeting involving Marie and her family was arranged. Nick, Marie's boyfriend [she met him at AA] came as a support person. Terry facilitated the meeting that lasted nearly two hours but continued for several hours after Terry left. The same questions were used in the meeting beginning with Marie's father, mothers and sisters. Marie was then invited to talk about what it was like listening to her family, what she found most helpful. Marie said that she never understood the pain they had experienced but was comforted that they finally understood what she was dealing with. Marie was then asked what she hoped would come out of the meeting, she said she just needed to 'connect' with them as they were the most important people in her life. Nick who was very emotional said that it was great that Marie had finally 'arrived'.

At this point, Terry decided to leave as he was no longer required. Marie and her family then ate and talked into the night. Their lives were changed. Marie was no longer defined by what happened to her. After the meeting Terry arranged for a police contact if at some stage in the future she wanted to lodge a complaint. This happened about 12 months after the meeting. The perpetrator was charged but not convicted because of the lack of corroborating evidence. In Marie's word, "The court process helped bring this to an end."

Marie married Nick. They have two children and life is good. Marie went to university and successfully completed her studies.