

SECRET SURVIVORS WHEN LESLIE WILLIAMS COUNTS HIMSELF AMONG THE ABUSED, THE REST FIND IT HARDER TO ESCAPE THE SHAME

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Jim shrank back as his stocky mother strode toward him. She had caught him sucking his fingers, and she was going to hurt him again. "Well, you obviously want to be treated like a baby," she said.

She threw him onto the bed, pinned him down, opened her dress and thrust a breast into his mouth. Jim was 7 years old.

Forty-one years later, as he lay in bed, frozen with panic, the buried memory finally pierced his consciousness. He wanted to stop it. He wanted to scream.

He wanted to kill her.

In all his life, he had never felt such fury. He was terrified that if he walked onto the street, he might hurt someone. Anyone.

For a week, he stayed in his apartment, pacing back and forth, trying to read but too distracted to focus on the words. He stared out the window; he cursed; he cried.

Then, to his surprise, he felt a deep calm. An inner voice reminded him that, no matter how he had suffered, he could never take revenge on another human being.

He went out and bought groceries.

Jim is now a 61-year-old professor at a college in Michigan. That incident, in 1979, was the first time he remembered any of the sexual abuse that filled his childhood. It was also the beginning of a painful healing process.

"I'm still dealing with this in my 60s," says Jim, who has been in therapy for about 18 months for his problems as an abused child. "I'm basically dealing with who I am and who I've been one day at a time."

When serial killer Leslie Williams traced his rape and murder rampage to a brutal childhood, he brought to light a group of men with a problem not often discussed: men who were sexually abused as children.

Williams has admitted raping and murdering four teens and assaulting several others. Yet, by counting himself among their ranks, Williams further stigmatized male **survivors** of sexual abuse, laying another brick upon the wall of secrecy that surrounds them.

Jim says he identifies with Williams' victims, but feels sad for Williams.

"I can understand the rage he feels," Jim says. "I could never express it like that . . . but I know how painful his life is."

Jim says his abuse didn't lead to violence because "there's a part of me that hurts when someone else hurts."

It's true that a sexually abused boy has a higher chance of growing up to be a Leslie Williams than does a child from a healthy background, says James Fox, dean of the College of Criminal Justice at Northeastern University in Boston.

But only a handful of the millions who have been abused ever will, says Fox, a national authority on serial killers.

"The odds are infinitesimal," he says. "People who have been sexually abused by their parents are victims. . . . We should be compassionate and concerned about helping them." Experts estimate anywhere from one in six to one in 10 American men were sexually abused during childhood; that figure for women is one in four.

Most abused boys grow up to be people with seemingly normal lives, experts say. They are lawyers, doctors, teachers, social workers, clerks, factory workers, security guards.

The vast majority are never violent to others. However, many nearly destroy themselves.

They become addicted to drugs and alcohol, pursue sex compulsively or reject it altogether, wake up with nightmares, drag through their days in a fog of depression, or shoulder an invisible burden of guilt and shame.

Jim, who recently spoke on condition that his real name and identity be kept private, says the memory of his mother assaulting him unlocked the door to dozens of blocked memories of sexual and physical abuse that started when he was 3 and continued until he was 13.

These are his childhood recollections. They are not necessarily typical of men abused as children, but they reflect the emotional pain common to victims of abuse.

Rage and confusion

He was the youngest of three children, raised by fundamentalist Christian parents in a depressed industrial town. His father, a carpenter, was away most of the time, trying to scratch out a living. His mother, a pious woman who believed you had to break a child's spirit to keep him in line, raised the children.

Both parents believed that sex was a sin, even for a married couple, unless the goal was to produce a child. Yet Jim's father would become sexually excited when they took baths together; Jim says his father encouraged him to play with the elder's genitals. Jim's mother would sometimes stroke the little boy's penis with her hand when he was in the bath.

Jim's mother, who never lost her temper in public, often became violent at home. Because her family was working-class, she was not accepted by the other women in the neighborhood and took out her anger on her children.

At the slightest hint of disobedience, she would whip Jim with a thick leather strap, sometimes in the face, or tie the little boy's hands and leave him on the floor. She also got him to "play girls" with her, encouraging him to parade around in her dresses and wigs and once sending him to school with his fingernails painted red.

"I felt humiliated," Jim says. "It left me with the most severe rage."

Lonely for a father figure, Jim found solace as a tot with a young man with a drinking problem who was renting an upstairs room from the family. They soon developed a **secret** friendship in which the man would touch Jim when he climbed into his lap. The man taught the little boy to suck his penis. The abuse continued until the man moved out about six months later.

Shortly after, Jim was sexually abused by a male neighbor who threatened his life and warned him not to tell.

Multiple abuse left Jim a confused little boy. The physical closeness with his father and the boarder filled a well of loneliness inside. Only as an adult did he recognize what he once thought was the love of his father and the boarder as a form of abuse.

"It was this warm, happy feeling," Jim says. "But it left me with no sense of boundaries and no sense of myself."

That lack of identity grew worse as the abuse continued. Trying to escape his mother's beatings, Jim found five separate selves emerging: a little boy who trusted everyone; a calculating smooth-talker who could negotiate the bodily limits of where his mother could whip him; a girl who tried to pacify her mother's whims; a gay young man distrustful of all women, and the self that encompasses all the others. He has held onto the personas throughout his adult life but hopes eventually to weave them into a single, comfortable identity.

"Each of them, in a different way, was to protect me," Jim says. "The girl was a way of placating mother and being one with her. . . . The gay male was partly a way of coping" with his father's sexual excitement with him.

He also became deeply religious. Until his freshman year in college, he lived a fundamentalist Christian life, breaking up playground fights as a boy in an effort to be like Jesus. "I could not tolerate violence of any kind," Jim says.

A web of guilt and silence

"In our society, you don't think of men as victims," says Stephen Grubman-Black, an associate professor at the University of Rhode Island and an authority on male adult **survivors** of sexual abuse. "That makes it very difficult for boys and men to come forward and say, 'I was hurt.' "

Typically, the abuser is a man: father, older brother, uncle, clergyman, teacher, scout leader. About one in five male abuse victims is abused by a woman, including mothers, sisters, aunts and babysitters. The abuser is usually in a position of trust and authority.

Often, rather than forcing himself on the child, the abuser coaxes the victim into sexual acts.

Boys are abused in as many ways as girls: from exhibitionism and photographing them in suggestive poses, to mutual fondling, oral sex and penetration.

Eager to please the adult he loves, the boy does what he is prodded to do. He may even feel some sexual pleasure. Just as it often stifles female victims, the illusion that he cooperated -- combined with an abuser's threats or entreaties to keep the **secret** -- traps the boy in a web of guilt and silence.

Male victims of male abusers face an additional fear of being considered gay.

"There's a real high level of homophobia in our society, and victims are part of that whole culture," Grubman-Black says. "If the victim sees himself as having been somehow attractive to another male, he may feel there was something" about him that caused the abuse.

"It becomes easier for the perpetrator to say, 'Nothing happened. You enjoyed it.' And people don't see it as a power thing; they see it as a sexual thing," he says.

Men have fewer places to turn for help than do abused women, and they are often reluctant to seek it.

"Women find it easier to speak up about what happened to them, while men are more apt to be isolated with their memories," says Jon George, an Ann Arbor clinical social worker who runs support groups for male and female survivors.

Fox and other experts say **survivors** may be unable to experience emotions or may explode in unexplained fits of anger. Some run from their feelings and become workaholics, driven to impress superiors but never confident of their achievements. Others are paralyzed by their pain and stay underachievers, drifting from job to job. And while most **survivors** don't repeat the violence with their own children, some are so afraid of hurting their kids, they won't even hug them.

What's troubling the hearts of these men is often the same. Because sex was used as a tool of power and domination, **survivors** of abuse often can't enjoy sex as an expression of love. Because they were betrayed by adults charged with protecting them, they fear intimate bonds of love and friendship.

"These people learn the lesson not to trust others and carry it with them the rest of their lives," George says.

Double life led to despair

As he grew up, Jim found himself attracted to other men. Though he believes his abuse had little to do with those feelings, he felt so guilty and ashamed that he stayed celibate until he was 24 years old and engaged to his future wife. They stayed married for 23 years, raising four children.

But the marriage was not happy. Jim says she was an angry woman who would scream or insult him in front of company over trifling mistakes like not setting the table correctly.

The pattern repeated itself throughout their marriage. Jim believes he allowed his wife's temper to express the anger he never could. But her fury threatened him. That fear, plus the attraction he had always felt for men, drove him to a double life that further tore the fabric of his marriage.

Over a few years, he slept with hundreds of men, guys he picked up on the street or in a bar rest room. He also had longer relationships with other men, telling his wife his **secret** after hiding it about 10 years.

For years, he thought about suicide, and once actually threw his car into a skid but pulled it out before crashing.

The anonymous sex always started with excitement and anticipation and ended in despair. For Jim, sex with men was a haven from an angry and intimidating woman. He learned early on that pleasing other men was a way to get love and acceptance. "Sex blocked the pain," he says, but he never found the intimacy he yearned for. "It was like, is that all there is?" Jim said. "It wasn't what I wanted."

After his marriage broke up in 1979, Jim spent the summer in his friend's Boston apartment. It was that summer that the memory of his mother's actions started him down the road to his past. To ensure that his recollections were accurate, he called relatives to verify wallpaper patterns, bedspreads, floor tiles -- the details of where the abuse took place. He entered therapy for male **survivors** in January 1991. Before that, he had seen other therapists but never specifically because of his childhood sexual abuse. Several months later, the counseling triggered new, painful memories of abuse by men in his life.

His past left more than a few scars. Disappointments at work that would simply anger others -- being passed over for a promotion or raise -- have caused him agony and left him feeling "raped." He has had to fight his lifelong distrust of women. About a year ago, Jim, who considers himself bisexual, became involved romantically with a woman with whom he had been friends for 20 years. He describes the relationship as "committed."

In many ways, he has found himself through teaching.

From the time a Boy Scout camp director called him a "natural teacher," through his days tutoring other students in high school English, to today, Jim loves to watch his students' faces light up when they catch on to an idea.

Jim believes a life of service is a kind of divine bargain for his own survival. He takes pride in doing what his mother would not do for him: encouraging young people to express their personalities and flower on their own. When a student makes a new or creative statement, Jim feels like a proud parent.

His past also has left him with an empathy for people in pain. A former civil rights activist, he now works with people who have AIDS, sometimes devoting his day to a single patient. "I just feel an immediate identity with people who are experiencing injustice," he says. "I can put myself in their shoes very easily."

Plunging back into his past has often been a devastating experience, but Jim is philosophical about the path his life has taken.

"I like to think of myself as a bonsai tree," he said. "Twisted and stunted in some ways, but interesting and, in some ways, beautiful."

HELP FOR CHILD ABUSE VICTIMS

Here are some resources for adults who are coming to terms with abuse they suffered as children:

Sexual Abuse **Survivors** Anonymous Hot Line

Information on sexual abuse **survivors** meetings. Self-help groups are based on 12-step program. Call 882-9646 anytime.

Renaissance Hot Line

Information on in-patient programs for rape and incest victims; nationwide referrals. Call 1-800-551-0008 anytime.

Incest **Survivors** Anonymous World Service Organization

Information on resources and support groups. Write to: PO Box 5613, Long Beach, Calif. 90815-0613.

Community Services of Oakland

Starting two new groups in July for Adults Molested as Children (AMAC). Sessions conducted by social worker. Contact Nancy Perry at 542-5860, 9-5 weekdays. Fee.

VOICES -- Victims Of Incest/Sexual Abuse Caring Education Surviving

Evaluation by therapist. Operated through Catholic Social Services of Wayne County. Call 965-3242, 9-4:30 weekdays.

HAVEN -- Help Against Violent Encounters Now

Shelter for victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse; Oakland County rape crisis counseling center; individual and group counseling for **survivors** of sexual abuse. Fee based on ability to pay. Call 334-1274. Open to non-Oakland County residents.

Adults Molested As Children (AMAC)

Weekly counseling support groups for adult **survivors** of sexual abuse. \$10 per session. Part of Lutheran Social Services of Michigan. Call 968-2169.

"Abused Boys: The Neglected Victims of Sexual Abuse" by Mic Hunter (Fawcett Columbine, \$10).

" **Secret Scars**, a Guide for **Survivors** of Child Sexual Abuse" by Cynthia Crosson Tower (Penguin, \$7.95).

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