

Sexual Assault Center helped victim deal with abuse, bottled up feelings

Treatment reunites him with family

By Andy Humbles · THE TENNESSEAN
December 23, 2010

SEASON TO GIVE I Part of a continuing series

For almost 20 years Rodney Shepard tried to bury the sexual abuse he suffered as a boy, abuse that began at 9 years old.

The abuse manifested itself in addictions, estrangement from his wife and children and ultimately in thoughts of suicide.

"Anger, rage, denial. ... I had kept all that bottled up for 20 years, and everything was connected to that," Shepard said of his reaction to being sexually abused by an older man.

"Everything is twisted inside and you have to take that out piece by piece."

Now Shepard talks about that abuse, which also involved pornography and drugs, seemingly as relaxed as the therapy dog asleep at his feet in an office at the Sexual Assault Center. He's even back with his wife and family.

For about one and a half years, Shepard has been a client of the center — a nonprofit agency in Nashville that counsels and teaches some 800 clients per year who have been sexually abused.

The Tennessean does not publish names of sexual abuse victims unless, like Shepard, they agree to it.

"I brag about this place all the time," Shepard said of the Sexual Assault Center. "There are a lot of fears, especially being a male sexually abused.

"I'm no longer bound by shame and guilt. I feel like I've made the transition from a victim to survivor.

"One of the greatest things is that I can say I love Rodney again," said Shepard, referring to the change in his feeling toward his self-image since

coming to the center.

About half the clients counseled by the Sexual Assault Center are under the age of 18.

About 85 percent of clients are children or adults who were abused when they were children. About 15 percent are rape victims.

"There is a lot of self-blame for any victim, and that includes children," Audra Davis, vice-president of development and education for the Sexual Assault Center.

The center has 12 therapists who hold at least a master's degree. Approaches can differ according to the client.

Eric Fogle, Shepard's therapist, incorporates his dog, Bubba, into sessions.

Another therapist incorporates art. Another is a certified play therapist for children.

Group sessions also can be part of the process for clients with similar circumstances of abuse.

Fogle said that is often very helpful in the counseling process because victims "realize it's happened to other people."

Children with a good support system tend to need less time in counseling, sometimes as little as four months, according to Sexual Assault Center President Tom Tohill.

But many children don't have a strong support system and may have other problems to address.

Sessions for adults generally are longer because they often have developed addictive behaviors "that also have to be dealt with," Tohill said.

Said Fogle, "You don't want to trigger back addictions."

The Sexual Assault Center charges clients on a sliding scale according to income.

"We've always served people regardless of their ability to pay," Tohill said, "but we are seeing more middle-income clients."

Most children are referred by the Department of Children's Services; some come through other organizations.

About 35 percent of the Sexual Assault Center's revenue comes through grant money.

About the same amount is raised through donations and fundraising.

The remaining operating revenue comes from client fees, insurance and educational programs the center conducts for the community.

The Rape and Sexual Abuse Center opened in 1978. About three years ago the name was changed to Sexual Assault Center.

That change coincided with the Center's move to MetroCenter from Lindsley Avenue downtown.

Last year, the center added a therapist to help serve a waiting list of clients, Tohill said.

The center is converting its primary prevention program, Safe@Last, to an online format that will be more cost-effective than the printed form and allow for a broader audience.

Safe@Last teaches students safety tools and skills to act and react to prevent sexual assault and knowledge to reach out to a trusted adult for help.

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Eric Fogle works with his service dog, Bubba, to help people at the Sexual Assault Center.
(GEORGE WALKER IV / THE TENNESSEAN)

HOW TO HELP

To donate to the Sexual Assault Center, visit www.sacenter.org, call 259-9055 or mail to 101 French Landing Drive, Nashville, TN 37228.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

Season to Give stories will run in *The Tennessean* through Christmas Eve. They highlight Middle Tennessee residents who have bettered their lives thanks to help provided by local charities. The series will cover organizations throughout the region that help people who find themselves in a number of different circumstances.