

OUT OF THE DARKNESS AND INTO THE LIGHT

*A new Knights of Columbus initiative helps families
to protect their children from sexual abuse*

It's a parent's worst nightmare. Jeff and Judy never imagined it could happen to their child. Then, they discovered that a longtime, trusted friend was sexually abusing their 10-year-old son.

Unfortunately, their experience is not an unusual one. In fact, the vast majority of child sexual abuse perpetrators are family or friends of their victims.

While the spotlight that shines squarely on the abuse crisis in the Catholic Church has helped to further much-needed reforms, it has also led many to believe that the sexual abuse of minors is a "Catholic problem." To the contrary, child sexual abuse is a widespread cultural problem, and children's safety must not be left only to the offices of dioceses and parishes, but must begin in our homes. To this end, the Knights of Columbus launched a new program — Protecting Our Children — in June.

At the center of the initiative is a 30-minute video titled *Protecting Our Children: A Family's Response to Sexual Abuse*, in which Jeff, who is a member of the Knights, and his wife, Judy, tell their family's personal story of trauma and healing. Dr. Monica Applewhite, a leading expert in the field of sexual abuse prevention and response, also provides commentary and practical insights about how to recognize signs of potential grooming and abuse (see sidebar).

"This video is a critical resource for families seeking to keep their children safe," said Supreme Knight Carl Anderson. "Hearing the experience of a mother, father and their son is eye-opening and will help parents and guardians take the necessary steps to protect their children."

Columbia editor Alton J. Pelowski recently spoke with Jeff and Judy about the new initiative and their decision to share their story.

'A CULTURE OF COMMUNICATION'

JEFF: Once we got over the initial trauma, we felt compelled to talk to people about protecting their kids. We started telling people one-on-one what happened, so this wouldn't happen to them. We got involved with this project to educate and protect others.

JUDY: One of the things we learned is that once our son could talk about the abuse, the healing could start. A friend told me, "What we reveal, we can heal." My hope is that people will start talking about abuse and revealing it, so that healing can begin.

JEFF: After we first shared what happened, three people in our circle revealed to us that they had been abused. They all had spoken out but were not listened to or were told keep quiet. They said that was almost as bad as the abuse itself.

This is the gravest sin nobody's talking about. Right now, it's being looked at as a Catholic Church problem and a priest problem. But this is a problem throughout society. It's in the darkness right now. And we want to put it in the light. It's about creating a culture of communication.

JUDY: Perpetrators want to keep everything secretive and in the dark. The more we can take shame away from victims and their families, the harder it will be for perpetrators to infiltrate themselves. This video is being shared with families worldwide. Hopefully, it sheds so much

light on the crime that the perpetrators can't get in.

JEFF: Organizations, families, everyone has the responsibility to protect children and vulnerable adults.

JUDY: Whether or not they have children of their own, everyone has an opportunity to help. Every day, I say a prayer of protection over every child who crosses my path: "God, please protect this child."

To view the
Protecting Our Children
Program videos
on your phone,
scan here:





Judy and Jeff talk with Dr. Monica Applewhite (left). They share their family's story in the new K of C-produced video titled Protecting Our Children: A Family's Response to Sexual Abuse.

AWARENESS AND PREVENTION

JUDY: To families, I would say, "Before you watch this video, do not think to yourself, 'This could never happen to us.'"

JEFF: That's exactly the position we were in. Before this happened, we thought we were immune. Our relationship with the family of the abuser extended back to my childhood. We knew that these were the safest people in our lives. And we learned that was not the case. Nobody is immune.

We had been groomed for years and years. A perpetrator is very patient. You have to pay attention, and you have to have conversations with your kids about family rules and boundaries.

JUDY: As uncomfortable as they might be, those conversations need to happen, and they need to happen *regularly*.

I think back about some of our family rules that were broken by the perpetrator — simple things, like he would let them ride in the front seat of the car before they were legally allowed. We later learned that was one of the places he would abuse our son.

Boundaries need to be enforced, and tough conversations can make a difference. I should have stepped up and said, "No, that's a family rule."

WHEN ABUSE IS DISCOVERED

JEFF: There's a huge continuum of what potentially could be happening. The child, young adult or family could be being groomed. It's important to recognize grooming behaviors, or at least boundary violations. As soon as you set that boundary, you're going to stop the grooming process.

But it could be on the other side of the continuum, where there's actually abuse taking place. If this is the case, a professional should be involved as soon as possible.

JUDY: A revelation of abuse can feel unbelievable, like it did in our situation. But if a child makes any sort of outcry, it's important that you take it as truth, immediately. You then contact the authorities so they can set up a forensic interview and ask the right questions to confirm the validity.

JEFF: The first steps involve reporting and interviewing. The police and child advocacy centers are part of the process. If there is an investigation, a grand jury and the district attorney's office become involved, and it's the state's job to prosecute.

It can be an agonizingly slow process. Working with the justice system isn't easy. For us, it was frustrating at times.

KEEPING CHILDREN SAFE

JUDY: Once a month, the perpetrator had to be in the courthouse and stand in front of judge. I went every month so the judge knew I wasn't going away. It gave me this feeling that I was doing something; I can finally stand up and protect my child. I'm here, fighting for him and fighting for justice.

FAITH, COMMUNITY, FAMILY

JEFF: A lot of people who've been through tragedy move away from God. But there's no way we would have been able to get through this experience, and stay intact as a family or as a couple, without getting stronger in our faith. I could hardly breathe certain days, and the only thing that got me through was leaning into God.

JUDY: In the first few weeks, I would go to daily Mass and then just sob the whole time. I knew I had to be there, because I needed those graces from the sacraments. And I spent hours talking to the Blessed Mother, because I knew what she had watched her son go through. I needed her courage and her strength, and she was there for me.

JEFF: We leaned on our priests as well. Our parish priest connected us with Monica Applewhite, and another priest helped us with spiritual direction. They helped us grapple with questions like "How do we find forgiveness when we feel so angry?"

We leaned into God; then we leaned into each other; and then we leaned into our faith community.

What's most amazing to me is how God can take something so horrible and turn it into something beautiful. That's what I've seen happen in my family. We're stronger as a family than we've ever been.

JUDY: We had to join together to love and support and strengthen each other. I'm not an angry person, but in the beginning, I was dealing with a lot of righteous anger. And Jeff was there to hold my hand and hug me. The same with our son. We all had to step up as a family in this.

JEFF: We focused our energy on our son's healing. He took it seriously, and he recognizes that it's an ongoing process. We've been blessed to have some really good therapists.

JUDY: He still has tough days, like any teenage boy, but he's an exceptional young man.

JEFF: He's doing very, very well. He's a typical 15-year-old, and he's a great kid. We were going to exclude him from the video and protect him from that. But he was very direct. He said, "I want to be part of this."

So, he's been part of the decision-making process from the beginning. It's also been a great opportunity for teaching — such as the difference between vengeance and justice, and how we move forward from here.♦

*An interview with Dr. Monica Applewhite
about child sexual abuse and the new K of C program
Protecting Our Children*

Dr. Monica Applewhite has been combating the plague of child sexual abuse for more than two decades. Since earning a Ph.D. in clinical social work at the University of Texas at Arlington in 1995, she has worked with hundreds of U.S. and international organizations that serve children and youth, specializing in programs for churches and schools. She collaborated with the Knights of Columbus to develop the Protecting Our Children program.

COLUMBIA: How has the understanding of child sexual abuse evolved, both in society and the Church, in recent decades?

DR. MONICA APPLEWHITE: When relationship-based sexual abuse was first identified as a significant problem in the 1990s, the concept of "grooming," or slowly preparing a child to be abused, was not well understood.

Today, we understand that relational sexual offenders take steps to ensure that children feel comfortable with them physically and emotionally before the contact ever becomes sexual. Grooming most often consists of gaining the trust of children and their parents through friendship, kindness and consistency. Over time, relational sexual offenders increase focus on children who are targeted for abuse — taking them "under their wing," helping the child and family in ways that are genuinely needed, and spending time, energy and money on the child or children.

Offenders then slowly increase physical contact and affection, making physical contact the norm, rather than the exception. "Accidental" touching of private body parts is often part of the boundary testing. Relational sexual offenders also test the child's ability to keep secrets by involving the child in using alcohol or cigarettes and then asking the child not to tell. Pornography is commonly used for grooming as well.

Both within the Church and within society, these behaviors were often viewed in isolation instead of as part of a pattern; they were not understood as the part of sexual abuse we can see. As a result, most investigations of sexual abuse focused on determining whether or not an individual event of sexual abuse did or did not occur, rather than looking at the overall pattern of a person's interactions with children.

COLUMBIA: How common is the sexual abuse of children today?

DR. APPLEWHITE: We work with two kinds of studies regarding rates of abuse: prevalence studies and incidence studies. Prevalence studies help us determine how common it is to experience abuse. The most reliable of these are "retrospective" studies, in which you give adults a definition of abuse and then ask them if they ever had the experience as a child. Such studies reveal that about 1 in 4 females has had an experience of contact sexual abuse — not verbal suggestion or inappropriate comments, which are substantially more common — sometime before the age of 18. About 1 in 6 to 8 males has experienced sexual abuse.

Incidence studies tell us how common occurrences of abuse are at a given time. In these, we rely on current reports of abuse even though we know that not every incident will be reported.

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The national statistics for current reports of sexual abuse show that incidents of abuse have been declining steadily since about 1990. We believe that this decline is real because correlated societal problems such as teenage pregnancies and runaway youths have also declined during the same time frame.

Although we don't know for sure about the cause for this decline, experts believe it can be attributed to greater awareness and education about the harm of sexual abuse and the proactive steps being taken to prevent abuse. Compared to 20 years ago, there is much more focus on prevention than there is on responding in the aftermath of abuse. That shift is an encouraging trend.

COLUMBIA: What developments would you like to see going forward?

DR. APPLEWHITE: First, I would like parents and young people to develop more comfort with addressing problem boundary-crossing behaviors openly and in the moment, and simply saying the behavior is not acceptable. Normally, an innocent or unaware person does not mind being told that his or her behavior could be misinterpreted, or that the behavior is against the rules. A person who is grooming may be angry or confrontational, but that is a risk we should be willing to accept as protectors of children.

The second area I would like to see develop more is "primary prevention": helping adults or young persons address their feelings of attraction toward minors before they act on those feelings. The younger a person is when he or she gets help, the easier it is to control those impulses and to prevent any form of contact or abuse from ever occurring. I believe it is necessary to address this area directly.

The most difficult part of my work involves helping organizations and families after abuse has already occurred. Taking what we learn from those cases and using that knowledge to prevent future incidents is what keeps me going.

COLUMBIA: How can the Knights of Columbus Protecting Our Children program help? What do you hope it accomplishes?

DR. APPLEWHITE: The Knights of Columbus program fills a critical gap in the Church's overall programming to address sexual abuse because it directly educates parents and families about what they can do to protect children. The program also provides much-needed guidance about how to respond when children disclose abuse or inappropriate behavior.

My hope is that this program gives parents the confidence to recognize warning signs and confront problem behavior, regardless of the awkwardness they might experience. I also hope that they feel

more prepared to talk with their children and handle difficult information if their child has something he or she needs to share.

COLUMBIA: In your experience, how early should parents introduce this topic with their kids?

DR. APPLEWHITE: I encourage parents to teach their children the names of body parts from a very early age, and then help them to understand that private parts are different. By the time children are going to school or other places by themselves, they should know that we respect private parts by following certain rules. In this way, parents

are talking about the sacredness of our bodies long before we ever start talking about sexual abuse. Each of the many conversations should be based on the child's development and understanding, not on a particular age.

It is difficult to know how to begin a conversation with children about actual sexual abuse. We are working to develop a guide for parents to use the Knights of Columbus *Protecting Our Children* video to start the conversation about abuse with their children, beginning between ages 10 and 12, depending on the maturity of the child. This will create a shared language between parents and children, and demonstrate to the child that the parent is capable of handling delicate and disturbing information if the need arises.

COLUMBIA: Does your professional work make you anxious as a parent? Do you struggle to balance your protective instincts with your children's independence?

DR. APPLEWHITE: People often ask how I am able to function as a parent without being completely paranoid, but I am actually less paranoid than many parents. It is not that I believe my family is immune; I don't believe that at all. The reason I am not fearful all the time is that I am very precise in what worries me.

I have had to identify and confront behaviors involving my own children, and I am perfectly willing to accept the discomfort that comes with addressing behaviors directly. For me, awkwardness is a small price to pay for explaining that a behavior is not acceptable. Most of the time, the behavior ceased, but when it didn't, I had no problem removing my child from the situation. As my children have gotten older, my role has shifted to being more of an adviser for them to draw their own boundaries with less direct involvement from me. That is ultimately the goal: that young adults will have the ability to recognize both appropriate behavior and boundary violations and know how to respond when they witness behavior that is not acceptable.♦



Dr. Monica Applewhite is a leading expert in the understanding and prevention of child sexual abuse.