

Knights of Columbus Video Empowers Parents on Combating Child Sex Abuse

Supreme Knight Carl Anderson told the Register about the Knights' new video, which seeks to provide parents with the truth about sex abuse and destroy stereotypes that obscure the true dangers to children.



Peter Jesserer Smith: © 2019 EWTN News, Inc.

Reprinted with permission from the National Catholic Register – www.ncregister.com

NEW HAVEN, Conn. — A new video by the Knights of Columbus seeks to empower parents with the truth about child sex abuse by telling them the story of what happened to a devout Catholic family whose son was sexually abused by someone they never imagined: an adult close to their family.

The Catholic fraternal organization released the video “Protecting Our Children: A Family’s Response to Sexual Abuse” June 19 as part of its “Protecting Our Children” program. The video brings parents into a heart-to-heart conversation with a devoutly Catholic family, where Judy and Jeff, a knight, share how their worst nightmare — the sexual abuse of their child — took place by a deeply trusted member of their extended family who used various tactics and tricks right in front of them. The video was done in conjunction with child sexual abuse expert Monica Applewhite, who gives commentary offering education and advice, as Jeff, Judy and their son tell the story.

In this interview with the Register, Supreme Knight Carl Anderson explains why the Knights believe this video is critical to shattering stereotypes that give parents a false sense of immunity and empower parents and communities with the truth about child sex abuse.

Carl, how did the Knights of Columbus come to tell Judy and Jeff’s story in this video about their child’s sexual abuse?

Well, first of all, through Monica [Applewhite], we heard that they had an extraordinary experience and an extraordinary story. More importantly, they were willing to share that with others so that other people could learn through their tragic circumstances.

Why was it so important to tell this story?

It’s really a very compelling story. They’re very sincere and inspirational parents. If you look at the facts of their case, you would say, “How could it happen with his family?” and then “How can it happen with these circumstances? And if it does happen to this kind of a family in these kinds of circumstances, what family can consider itself safe from any threat?” Jeff also was a brother knight, and we were thinking about how to help our brother knights and their families protect their kids from this kind of danger.

And so we just thought [this video] was really a fresh way of entering into the problem, to understand the problem better, what to look for, and what to do when you see it.

Was there something that most surprised you about Judy and Jeff's story? What was so compelling or convicting about it to you?

Well, No. 1, these are very dedicated and sincere parents. So they're very conscientious parents. They're very conscientious *Catholic* parents. And then to see this happen to them in their own home was shocking — stunning. And then this couple has the courage — and their son has the courage — to say, "Look: Learn by what happened to us so you don't have the same situation in your life." I thought that was remarkable. What they went through was remarkable. How they responded was remarkable. And then maybe most remarkable of all was their willingness to take the publicity so that we can help others.

In this film, Jeff mentioned his own naiveté on child sex abuse: Because of pervasive stereotypes, he just thought that his family would be completely immune from it. Do you think that kind of feeling is pretty widely shared by a lot of parents, the fact that it could happen to their family, and that the perpetrator could be a close friend or family, is just really unthinkable?

I think so. I think most parents won't let their young kids go out alone at night for obvious reasons. But to go to the house of our best friend, who is the neighbor next door that we do all sorts of things with — who would think that he can be more of a danger than what you stereotypically think is the danger? So that seems to me another reason why this film is so powerful and so important, because it does away with the stereotypes. It does away with the stereotype of who we think is the bad guy and the stereotype of who we think will never be the bad guy. It moves away from stereotypes (which we should move away from), so we can then look at conduct, at action, and be aware of what that can mean. Maybe [an action] is harmless, but maybe it's not harmless. Maybe it needs a second look. Maybe it needs a careful look.

How this family came together is really remarkable ...

I think another important takeaway from the film is you need to be working on family strengths. The resilience of this family made the outcome possible [for justice and healing]. It wasn't just what they did, when they saw that they had a problem, but what they had been doing *earlier*, so they had the basis to solve the problem. I think that's the important stuff. The boy has "the test" of his father. And if [the father] had not handled that well, maybe there would have been a much different outcome.

But why does the son trust the father? Why do they have the communications that they have? Why did the father respond in the way that he did? All of those are kind of family parenting strengths, which I think lead into our domestic church program, and why we want to be so forward now in promoting family strengths in these kinds of areas: parenting, the relationship between husbands and wives, and what kind of an environment they create in their family.

One of the strengths of this video is Dr. Monica Applewhite, Ph.D., who gives viewers her professional expertise on child sex abuse throughout the narrative. Can you share some of the insights Applewhite provides families in this video?

We found her to be incredibly important in working through our *Praesidium* program for our councils, etc. She has a wonderful track record as an expert here. It's not simply enough to have the knowledge, but you need to communicate it in a way that gets the point across in a nonthreatening or a nonemotional way. She is able to convey that strongly. One of the strengths of the video is how she's able to provide you with some interpretive keys regarding the information you've just received [from the parents and their son]. So we inserted [Applewhite's explanations] at the important parts in the video to explain and give some direction. And she's clearly conversational, instead of being sort of instructive or didactic. We didn't make this film for classroom instruction. We made it for people to sit in their living room and watch. That's a whole different kind of approach: We thought having Jeff and Judy sitting in what looks like their living room, and then having Monica (a little more formal, but not too formal), was a good mix there.



Photo by Jody Horton

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

Something many people will find surprising is that sexual predators not only groom kids, but they also groom families. How crucial is it for parents to know these warning signs of grooming and sexual abuse and discuss it with their own families?

I think it's very important. It's important that we realize that they also groom organizations.

If you look in the animal world at predators, a wolf or a coyote or whatever, they're not hunting two hours a week — they're hunting 24/7. They're on the lookout 24/7. And that's another aspect of this. That's part of the reality: that these [sexual] predators are *predators*. And they're predatory 24/7. And so, yes, they're constantly grooming the victim or the potential victims. They're grooming the families. They may be grooming the organization that they're involved in. So it's very important that you understand that.

That doesn't mean we put every person in the world under suspicion, but there are boundaries, and there are boundary violations, and that's why the boundary violations are pretty important. Monica brings that out in the film, too. There's got to be certain boundaries, and if they're being crossed, it might be a harmless crossing; but on the other hand, it may not be so harmless, and so better not take the chance.

Is part of the Knights' intention with this video about giving parents a form of positive affirmation or support to have these conversations with their kids about sexual abuse? So many parents find just talking about sex with their kids an extremely difficult task in itself.

Yeah, no kidding! I think so. One of the takeaways I hope everybody, all the parents who see this video, think: If my child is in trouble — and it could be a daughter who's pregnant, a son or daughter who has this problem, somebody who may have a drinking problem or a drug problem — do I have the kind of relationship with my child that he or she can come to me when they're in trouble? Have I built those kinds of strengths into our relationship? Have I taken time to establish that (even if it's just communicating on small, inconsequential things) so that my son or daughter can come to me and say, "I've got a problem here. It's hard for me to talk to you about it, but I can do it, because I've got a trust relationship with you built."

As the video said, only about a third of kids will actually come forward and tell their abuse. Even so, many parents, when they find out, may not know how to react, particularly when the offender is a close friend or family member.

What did you learn was the best way for parents to really act on these kinds of revelations?

I think the measure has to be what's in the best interest of the child. There's a matter of justice for the perpetrator, but also, what's in the best interest of the child? Is the best interest of the child served by me being ashamed? By me being hugely angry? Or is that best interest served by being collected and trying to get the child help and counseling and going through the state agency correctly. As you see with the boy in the video, it was important to him to go through the process: the investigatory process, the interview process and then the trial — and actually confronting the perpetrator after he was convicted. So the focus ought to be on what's best for the child here. Not so much: "Do I feel embarrassment? Am I isolated? Am I ashamed?" — but trying to help the child who now has to live with this episode, the rest of his life or for the rest of her life. So how do we help that person work through this, so this isn't a flashback for the next 50 years.

Do you think it's important for parents to see Jeff and Judy affirm in the video that it was a good thing to rely on other people for help and not face this situation alone?

I hope that's another takeaway, as well. Because, let's face it: Most of us only get one chance to be parents. We don't get to come around the second time. We face these as a matter of first impression, and, therefore, we can't really be experts entirely. So we also need to know where you go for help and how you get the resources you need to confront something.

Jeff, Judy and their son had mentioned in the video that they wanted to create a ripple effect of awareness and conversation by telling their story. How critical are these conversations to making child sex abuse more difficult — to combat and prevent it — in our society?

I'm not an expert on this, but I would say that secrecy, shame and isolation on this problem, like so many other problems, is not healthy for the individual. Secondly, these kinds of things live in the darkness — they don't live well in the light [for] perpetrators.

Look at it this way: Terrorists have to be able to hide in the community or hide in the neighborhood, right? They need to be able to sort of fit in so nobody notices them. That's how guerrillas or terrorists operate.

But what if all of a sudden — and this is what I hope happens from this video — what if there are hundreds of parents in every parish now, not just the ushers or the choir members or the CCD teachers, but hundreds of parents in every parish who know what to look for: All of a sudden, it hardens that community, and it makes it more difficult for these guys to go out and do what they do disguised. It just makes it a more difficult environment for them to exist in. And that's part of what I think we want to do is: Drive them out, and make it very, very difficult for them to do what they do.

This video certainly had a lot of information, not only about adults preying on children, but also the possibility of older children preying on younger children, the fact that abuse could even happen right under your own nose, out in the open, and a lot of other excellent material. Besides this video, what other efforts are the Knights making to help equip Catholic parents to be vigilant against child sex abuse and empowered to take action?

Our mission isn't established to do this project, but over the past number of years, we've established safe-environment programs within our councils and within our activities. So we have a training component for our members, and it consists of three parts: one, how to recognize the problem; second, what our policies are; and, third, your reporting requirements. We think that was the first big step, and we think this is the second big step that we've taken, and we hope that this gets good attention within the membership of the Knights of Columbus and our families. But then also has a ripple effect, if you will, out into the parishes so that it has a much broader impact.

And then I think we're looking at maybe an additional step or two, perhaps a guide for parents that gives them more resources that are available, and then there's even some consideration of an age-appropriate version of this, maybe with entirely different individuals, but is for younger potential victims, that they could be looking at [these resources] in school, and maybe early in school. I mean, unfortunately, this boy was 10. So waiting until he's in high school or waiting until he's in college is too late for a lot of these people. So maybe that's a second [step] and looking at whether we can do something. I don't have a timeframe, but if this works as well as we hope it will, then maybe we can think through with Monica how to do something age-appropriate for children.

I just hope that we can learn like this family's Catholic response and courageous witness here, that they put forward to help other families.

This interview has been edited for length.

Peter Jesserer Smith is a Register staff writer.

Copyright © 2020 EWTN News, Inc. All rights reserved.

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

