

Living Bridges Project Transcript
Ending the Secrecy - Ending the Secrecy Part 1: I Survived This Thing

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VOICEOVER: The following audio is part of the Living Bridges Project, an anonymous story-collecting project documenting responses to child sexual abuse. For more, please visit LivingBridgesProject.com.

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STORYTELLER: I think I'll begin the story by thinking about the very first time that I even – that I realized that I was a survivor of child sexual abuse. It was – I was at community college and taking a psychology course and the conversation at the moment at that class was about suppressed memories. And we talked about what suppressed memories were and at one point the professor gave us a sheet – almost like a check-off sheet to say if you check off more than, I guess, five of these things then maybe you should go speak to a counselor or a therapist because it might be – you might be dealing with some repressed memories. And I remember looking at the sheet and marking almost all of them on the sheet and I was a little confused by that. I think the second part of the class was watching videos of families trying to deal with and address child sexual abuse after it happened within the family. So, in particular it was about a father who had abused the daughter and the family trying to stay together in spite of the abuse. At one point in the class I remember feeling completely overwhelmed and, now knowing – looking back now I know I was having an anxiety attack, but I didn't know then. And I really had to sit with myself and try to – I was arguing with myself “should I stay?” because this is hurting me too much and I don't know why. Or “should I run out of here?” but then everybody will know why I'm leaving. And at some point I just got up and literally ran out of the class and went to the bathroom and had a complete meltdown. I cried and I cried and I cried and I washed my face and tried to walk out the bathroom and came back in and kept on crying and I didn't know why. I knew my father did not abuse me so I think that was the confusing part for me. Why did this video or this thing or this issue hit me so hard? And my teacher came out to check on me and basically looked at me very concerned and said, “I think you need to go to the counselor.” And so there began my journey into figuring out what had happened to me and how to heal from it.

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The abuse that I had endured was through my sister when I was around the age of 8, 9 – I can't remember how long the abuse took place for, but I knew that it was substantial. I remember a lot of the things, but I think I forgot a lot of the things as well. And maybe that's just best because I think our mind helps us to survive horrible things. So, I didn't try to struggle to remember these things, but I do remember some of them. So, my sister sexually abused me for several years in my youth and it was under the guise of almost

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exploration. Showing me pornography – like magazines, naked pictures, wanting to see my reaction to them, letting me know – telling me that this was a secret, that I couldn't tell anybody about it, where they were, and what we were doing. And introducing me and my naked body to a lot of things that I wasn't quite sure of and when I fought against it, it was definitely met with physical violence. So, for a long time I think I didn't see it as child sexual abuse. I think because I didn't even have that in my vocabulary. I had no idea. I figured it was my older sister showing me some stuff that was a part of life – everybody was doing it. Then it stopped at some point. Then when I was 15 or so, it happened again in one instance where my sister and her husband raped me. Then I had definitely a lot more knowledge about my body that this was wrong, that this is not something that I wanted, that I did not consent to it -- and what I needed to do about it.

So up until then I avoided my sister. I avoided going to family reunions, I avoided being in the house when she went to visit my mom, and it served to be very stressful for me because no one knew why. Everyone thought we had a little disagreement that we needed to work out. So, everyone in the family was “you need to talk to your sister. You need to work it out.” But I couldn't very well tell them, so at some point for my sanity and trying to figure out what to do because I think never ever did I ever – did it ever cross my mind about legal ramifications. I never considered the fact to go to the police, to make a report, to go to court, to have my sister go to jail. It just didn't cross my mind then and it's something that I wouldn't have wanted now either. I feel like it just didn't serve me or what I needed for my mental health and my stability.

What I needed was for my mother to know. I needed her to know and I needed her to respect the fact that I created a space for myself that was safe and that safety was without being... not being around her. And that I wanted my mother to be a part of this in that she could share information with me if my sister was in town, if she was visiting, if she was sleeping over – so that she can share this information with me so that I can make a decision – an informed decision for myself to decide whether I was ok to be in the same space with my sister, share space with her or to say “Mom, I'm not coming to Christmas. I'm not coming for New Years because I cannot be in the space.” and also allow for a deeper conversation with my mother about what that meant – why I couldn't be around her. For me, taking care of myself was to acknowledge it – one, to share that information with someone else so that it wouldn't be a secret anymore. And then to carve out space for me and my family and not to be around her.

[Music]

I'm thinking about what happened as a child and then ultimately the abuse that happened when I was a teenager around 15 at the hands of my sister. So, there was a gap in between that the abuse happened when I was around 8, 9, 10. Then there were several years where she was out of the house – gone. Then she was reintroduced into my life after several years

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away. At this point, again, I had not had true total knowledge about - that this was child sexual abuse or anything. If anything, I pushed it so far back in my mind that I didn't even have it on my radar. But she came back into my life and started manipulating again in the way that she knows how. Manipulating me and then basically lured me to her house with her husband and at - I think I was 15 years old - at 15, re-victimized me with her husband and they both raped me. That definitely catapulted the nightmares, the really, like - kind of like flashing back on this stuff and it was interesting that there was that instant connection for me because I think it was very much associated with the manipulation - the manipulation piece. And that I was very angered at the fact that she felt that she could access me - again. And she did. And that -- after that happened, it continued to shift my life.

I ended up running away from home and getting pregnant at a young age. It's like a domino effect of a lot of things - bad decisions, bad relationships, things like that. I literally felt like I was losing my mind at one point. And I had already tried to commit suicide several times. After my daughter was born, I couldn't. I wanted to so desperately to end my life, but I couldn't because I - I just couldn't leave my daughter behind. So, she, in a huge way, saved my life. Because I could not end my life and that I had a new life that was depending on me, I really had to sit with myself because I - like I said, I felt like I was losing my mind. I couldn't sleep, I had insomnia, and when I did sleep it was just horrific nightmares. I just - there came a point where I was like "No more. What do I do to change this? What do I do to get control over this thing?"

It was a lot of writing. A lot of writing, a lot of angry poetry [laughs], and making a lot of lists, and pros and cons, and what do I want, what do I want to say, what would be beneficial - all of those things. After weighing everything, thinking about it way too much I came to the point where what I want is something very clear and simple. I need my separation from this person and I need people to know why. But it took a while. It took a while. It was just trial and error trying to figure it all out, but therapy and art therapy and writing angry poetry - all that stuff - really was a great process for me to think about that.

[Music]

I think at one point in my life I did confront my sister very briefly. It wasn't very thought out. She approached me as she did often because she wanted to be in my life and she was very aggressive about it. She asked me, "Why? Why don't you want to talk to me? Why don't you want to be in my life?" And I looked at her and I said, "You know why. You know exactly why." And she looked at me, she understood exactly what I said and she said, "Sorry," and that was that. She never talked to me again which was exactly what I wanted. I would - I kind of didn't want to have it because I - all long I felt that if I were to confront my sister she would deny it. And that would kill me that she would deny it because I knew it was the truth. And I just - I couldn't handle her saying, "You're wrong, you misinterpreted it," or whatever the case may be. And I guess maybe that day I was lucky

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and I caught her off guard that she didn't deny or didn't say anything but "I'm sorry" and ended the conversation at that point. I felt - it was - for lack of a better way of saying it - I felt anticlimactic. It was - I wasn't going to get anything back. She couldn't fix it. It was done and she has definitely... her actions have definitely altered my life in a huge way. In a very huge way. Whether it was for worse and tragedy or for the better because I think a lot of people say things happen for a reason and I don't agree with that statement. I believe that things happen and we make sense of the things that happen. So, this horrible thing happened to me and me making sense of it was about tapping into me and tapping into my sexuality, how I interact with people, how I negotiate or don't negotiate sex. My life has been - in just completely immersed in boundary setting, negotiation and consent, and being a sex educator. That was a direct result of my abuse because it was important to have control and to just have knowledge and definitions and all of these things to understand how this could have happened. I don't know what else I would have wanted. I think it was really around uncovering that secret. Talking about it publicly and openly. Saying that I survived this thing. I always - I think I always knew that my sister needed some help and I think she did in some way get help via back door because of her drug addiction. So, through drug addiction services I think got to get some mental health resources and I think tapping into the wrongs that she has done in life.

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I think the first time I told my mom about it the first thing that she said was, "Did it happen to her?" I remember that and I remember feeling angry about it. I felt very angry about that question because I said to myself "It doesn't matter if it happened to her because it happened to me and I haven't done it." Later on, my mother tells me that my sister admits that no, she was not a survivor of CSA. What she did tell my mother was she was curious. That's how she answered it. I don't believe that. I mean, I don't think anybody tends to believe their abuser, but I don't believe that. But that's what she said to my mom. That she was very curious.

It's been a process. I think when I first told her, she did what any parent I think would do - is blame themselves. And I said to her straight off, "Before we continue this I'm just letting you know I do not blame you, I have never blamed you, it is not your fault." My mom always taught us about predators. She did. She talked about men who touch and rape, men who do this, men who do that, but it was men. And it was strangers. It was never your sister could do this or a family member could do this. This doesn't put any blame on my mom, but it was just a limited conversation about what sexual abuse or sexual violence could look like. So, she blamed herself. I told her not to. Later on, I don't think she was able to fully comprehend what it means to be affected in this way. To her, it was an event. A thing that happened and it's the past. So, time to get over it. It's like it happened so long ago, so we really don't have to be talking about it now. It's unfortunate, it's very sad that it happened. This is my way of fixing a wrong. I don't think she really believed that she didn't

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have any part in this taking place. I don't blame her, but I think a little bit of guilt - and I think because I really did give much leeway - I came in there with my agenda and my agenda was this. You're going to know this. You're going to know the seriousness of why I don't speak to her. And you're going to do these things for me if you want to be in my life. You're going to respect the fact that I need this space. I'm not going to ask you to choose because I know that we are your children. That was very clear for me. I did not want my mother to choose. I didn't need my mother to say that my sister was a horrible person or anything like that. I just needed her to hear me out and understand why I needed this and to give it to me. I think that was kind of simple. We didn't have to talk about it in depth. She, still to this day, doesn't know the things that happened and I don't think she needs to know. What she needs to know is that my sister hurt me in a really, really big way and these are the things that I needed to get better because I think that would crush my mother in a huge way if she knew the details of the abuse.

I think when I started talking to my mom - actually recently - about the work that I'm doing around child sexual abuse, she was kind of shocked. She was kind of shocked about the work and how I continue to talk about how my abuse affects me 'till this day. I had to really try to get her to understand - I think she's still struggling with the idea - I'm happy that she is not a survivor. She's struggling with the idea of how something that happened so many years ago continues to affect a person in their adult life. I struggle with her not understanding that. Not understanding how it completely affected how I had sex, who I had sex, what I did sexually, horrible relationships I was in, domestic violence situations that I was in, and the continuation of the cycle of abuse that permeated through my life because of that. So, I don't think a lot of people get the longitude - the depths of how this can affect people.

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I think if I had the ability or the language to know what was happening to me then and then say something about it then - one, I think I would have went straight to my mom and talked to her and I think what I would have wanted was for us to sit down and talk about it. I mean, it sounds silly but that's - that would have made me happy to give face - my mother, my father, my sister, myself sitting down and talking about everything that happened because then my parents could really assess what kind of help my sister needed and also just support me because of - knowing that this was wrong, something wrong was happening. And then creating the boundaries or whatever that needed to happen at that point. But really it was that simple - a conversation and ending the secrecy. The secrecy was the thing that was killing me.

My parents never left us alone that much. I mean, really, my mother was a very, very careful mom, but my sister found a way when "I'm going the store, I'm going to the neighbor's house for a minute." So, she found those ways and I think having the

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conversation about what was going on and maybe my mom taking me with her when she left and not leaving me alone with my sister and getting help for my sister. That would have sufficed and maybe if I would have had that language or agency it could have been a turning point for her for later on in life. I don't know, but it is definitely – it's a difficult thing to bring up when – one, I didn't want to hurt my mom; two, you always see the victims getting blamed or not believed; and three, I didn't want to break up my family.

Also, the bigger picture here is I had no language or words to describe what the heck was happening because I just didn't know. I didn't know what it was. I kind of wish that I had the resources and the language before I was 15 because I walked right into – and that has been a piece for me that's been difficult to accept. As a kid, I'm very clear I was a child. She manipulated me. And then at 15, it's the thing we do as survivors – the blame. I blame myself, I shouldn't have been there, I should have known, I could have left, I could have did this. So, that piece is really difficult for me to this day -- that re-victimization piece. I wish I would have had the language prior so that I could have realized it, not seen her, created my boundaries earlier on, understood what the signs were. I'm very clear on those things now.

In working in stuff around survivors you – it's interesting to work in the field of CSA and then also be a CSA survivor because you read and look at statistics and that's you. Right? [laughs] That's you that's the – if you are a survivor of CSA, you're more likely to be in a domestic violence situation, be raped. You name it, there it is. It's been there for me. So, these conversations definitely, although very important now, these conversations definitely have to be happening **way** earlier than this because I continue to go back to "I wish I had the language, I wish I had the resources, I wish I had the vocabulary, I wish I could have known what was happening."

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