

Out of Harm's Way, Part 1

Burlington, Vermont - March 12, 2009

"When you have a traumatic experience you don't forget," Catherine Metropoulos says.

It was 12 years ago on a cold January night and Catherine Metropoulos had just picked her daughter up from church.

"I never will forget her face," Catherine says. "She was terrified; locked the doors of the car and said mom I'm not sure if I should tell you. I said tell me what and she started to tell me what Koveos had sexually done to her."

Emmanuel Koveos was a priest in Burlington teaching Greek school to several girls when he took Catherine's 12-year-old daughter into his office and shut the door.

Catherine explains what happened next, "He was leaning across and every time she would read the book he had his hands inside her clothes and he was squeezing her breasts together and had taken his legs and put them around hers and was squeezing and I know he was pushing himself against her-- it was just gross."

Sexual abuse Catherine never imagined possible.

"This is after church service," she says.

An album shows a more innocent time.

"He's our priest so we let our guard down," Catherine says. "We went to church every Sunday and he took advantage of our family. He took advantage of our daughter."

The abuse happened once and Catherine's daughter told her immediately. It led to an emotional court case where Emmanuel Koveos was sentenced to 4 months in jail.

"He thought my daughter was incapable of her abilities. She is very strong," Catherine says.

Reporter Kristin Carlson: What do you think worked that allowed your daughter to tell you right away when this happened?

Catherine Metropoulos: We are very close as a family-- we have a close communication.

But experts warn most kids do not tell about abuse.

"Even when we direct children to tell only one in ten tells and that's a child who has such a strong relationship with a trusting adult, usually a parent," explains Linda Johnson, of Prevent Child Abuse Vermont.

Johnson says the abuse is rarely from a stranger-- 95 percent of the time it's someone the child knows. It typically starts with grooming-- where the abuser works their way into the child and family's life by offering to pick them up after school, taking them to sporting events, or buying them gifts.

"It happens over time and they need to be alone for it to happen," Johnson says.

In 2007 there were 322 child sex abuse cases in Vermont and about one-third were committed by kids themselves.

Experts say it's important to teach children the appropriate names for body parts so they know how to tell what hurts and where.

Also you should always be able to see your kids while they're playing-- and look for trouble signs, like if someone is tickling and touching your child. Any behavior where an adult is showing unusual interest.

Carlson: Abusers are so manipulative, is it really possible you think for adults to see the signs of abuse?

Johnson: Oh definitely, oh definitely. Looking back in almost every case that you could review there were always people who wondered, people who worried.

Johnson says people need to report abuse by calling the state. You can do it anonymously.

"I'm really proud of my daughter," Catherine says.

Catherine Metropoulos says looking back there were signs her priest was grooming her daughter for abuse. Now she speaks out for prevention and stronger child sex abuse laws.

"We can't allow this to happen," she says. "These are our children. We are adults. We need to protect them."

Catherine's daughter went through years of therapy. She is now 24 years old, has a job and remains very close with her parents.

The state has a toll-free number to report abuse any time of the day -- 1-800-649-5285.

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