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Victim's emotional scars often last a lifetime

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Children trusted Michael L. Cranford.

So did their parents and people at the Raymond church where the former Candia man worked as a youth pastor for the last three years — despite being a convicted sex offender.

But that trust has been shattered, and now two young men have broken their silence, claiming the religious leader molested them when they were 14.

The alleged victims in the case are now 19 and 20. The men have suffered with the scars of the alleged abuse for years, police say, and they finally felt it was time to tell their stories.

Child abuse experts say it's not uncommon for victims to keep the abuse locked up for years.

"There is a tremendous amount of shame. Kids often feel they are to blame," said Dianne Lavoie, director of education and training at Sexual Assault Support Services in Portsmouth. "They feel like they must have done something to bring this on and assume a huge burden."

Often times, Lavoie said, it is much more difficult for males to admit that they've been molested. "To admit to being hugely vulnerable is difficult," she said.

The senior pastor at the New Life Assembly of God church, Kenneth Bosse, says he counseled the men and urged them to press charges.

Cranford, 37, is now charged with molesting one of the alleged victims between January 1995 and December 1996 and the other some time between September 1996 and June 1997.

The two alleged victims, who police say are related, reported the assaults to Raymond and Candia authorities within the last two weeks. Police say Cranford told them he had sexual contact with the teenager in the Candia case.

Last week authorities said Cranford told them he planned to move to Kentucky to

join a sex offender treatment program to help him deal with his “problems.”

While he attended the church when the alleged assaults happened, Cranford didn't become a part-time youth pastor until 1998. He was hired as a full-time youth pastor in February 2001. The church fired Cranford when the recent sex allegations surfaced.

According to Lavoie, at least 85 percent of perpetrators are known to their victims. Police say Cranford lived with the family of the victim in the Candia case at the time of the alleged assaults.

“It's not the stranger jumping out. That's far more rare. They usually have the trust in the child's family,” Lavoie said.

Bottled up inside

Often times young sexual abuse victims choose to keep the abuse bottled up inside because they feel no one will believe them, Lavoie said. Many pre-adolescent and adolescent children feel they should have somehow been able to prevent the abuse, she said.

Experts say that sometimes the emotional wounds of sexual abuse deepen when victims form close partnerships and intimate relationships. “To become that trusting with somebody brings this issue back for them,” Lavoie said.

Sometimes male victims struggle with their sexual identity as well, wondering if the abuse they suffered as a child means they are gay, Lavoie said.

For professionals who work with victims of sexual abuse, the job is tough but rewarding.

“We're really helping kids and empowering them to tell what has happened to them. I try to look at it positively. We're providing them the opportunity to help themselves and keep them safe,” said Kathryn Adler, executive director of the Seacoast Child Advocacy Center in Portsmouth.

The center's goal is to make the experience of reporting and discussing the abuse as painless as possible for the victims. The center brings all of the professionals in the case together — police investigators, prosecutors, and the child advocacy representatives — so that the victim must only be interviewed once.

The center, an independent non-profit agency, receives referrals from prosecutors, police departments, and the Division of Children, Youth and Families. The center, which opened in January 2000 and now serves all of Rockingham County, services children from ages 3 to 18 who were either sexually or physically abused or a witness to a crime.

Since it opened, the center has handled close to 400 abuse cases. According to Adler, it is the only center of its kind in the state.

Adler said that in the last 10 years more attention has been given to the issue of child sexual abuse, which has created more opportunities for victims to make

disclosures.

“I think every person and every child reacts differently. For some children they tell right away and they move on. For other children it’s very difficult to verbalize what’s happened to them,” Adler said.

Warning signs

Cranford has been in trouble with the law before. He was registered as a sex offender with the Candia Police Department since moving to Candia in 1993, police said. In 1991 he was convicted of sexually assaulting a child while serving as an associate pastor at a church in Groton, Mass., police said. He was given a one-year prison sentence that was suspended, paid a \$2,000 fine and was placed on probation for five years.

Cranford was also a Candia firefighter and the chaplain for the fire department, but he turned in his gear last weekend and resigned.

While it’s difficult for parents to see all of the warning signs of child sex abuse, experts say it’s important for parents to know whom their children are with and who their friends are. A red flag should be raised if an adult often wants to spend time alone with a child, showers a child with gifts or seems to favor one child over another, said Lavoie.

“We tell parents that it’s important to know their child’s environment, who they are with, where are they going and what are they doing,” Lavoie said.

Sexual Assault Support Services works with school-age children beginning in kindergarten, educating them about abuse.

SASS offers a 24-hour hotline for abuse victims. The hotline number is 888-747-7070. Anyone with questions about the support groups offered by SASS should call 436-4107.

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