

Sex-abuse victims speak up to help others and find healing themselves

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NEW YORK (ABP)—Debbie Vasquez was 14 when her pastor started touching her inappropriately. She was 15 when he raped her and 19 when she had his baby.

Tina Boyd first was molested at age 11. Later, she was raped by her church bus driver. The rapist, whom she eventually married and divorced, has been arrested for dabbling in child pornography.

Vasquez told members in her church about the abuse but was disbelieved and accused of lying. Both women ultimately clammed up, refusing to acknowledge the molestation and living with their pain for years. Now, they're using that pain to alert others to the danger of clergy sex abuse.

"The hurt from it is life-long. It's not something that ever goes away," Vasquez, 48, said. "The way that you're treated if you ever tell anybody anything makes it worse. It makes it really hard to even have a relationship

with anybody else, to even trust anybody. It's not a hurt that ever goes away."

Vasquez has filed a lawsuit against her former minister at the now-defunct Calvary Baptist Church in Lewisville. Pastor Dale Amyx acknowledged in court documents that he had a sexual relationship with Vasquez and had fathered her child. Texas court records also show Amyx was convicted in 1967 for giving alcohol to a minor.

Amyx used the Bible and his position to justify his actions, Vasquez said. And that made her situation even worse.

"Being molested by a minister is twice as bad as any other kind because of the spiritual and physical aspects," she said. "Here is someone who is supposed to be a man of God. And if you're made to feel guilty because of it, it's a very strong message to that person for the rest of their life."

It'll take the rest of her life to heal from the abuse, she said, and it hasn't been easy. Vasquez used to have panic attacks during sex, ended up getting a divorce and even tried to kill herself after she learned her abuser had taken up with a teenage girl.

Like Boyd, though, Vasquez decided to tell her story to anyone and everyone who will listen. It has helped her feel stronger, she said. They both think their openness could save others from a similar fate.

"It took me 10 years to admit to myself that this happened," Boyd said. "I think I've healed as much as I'm going to heal. There are times when I still have moments of unforgiveness. Other than that, maybe I can heal by just finding a way to just let it go and be forgiving and to help as many people as I can."

To that end, Boyd has created a website, www.notmyfamily.org, aimed at helping victims of sex abuse. A web-developer by trade, the 38-year-old

mother provides a listening ear for abuse survivors and helps them connect with the tools they need to recover.

Boyd was married 11 years to the man who molested her. He has since been in jail and now has supervised custody rights to their three daughters.

Her current husband encouraged her to start the site after a friend confided that her daughter had been molested by a youth pastor. Earlier, the couple had learned at least five other families in their church had daughters who had been inappropriately touched.

“My husband comes home from work and said: ‘We have to do something. We have too much information and too much experience not to help people,’” Boyd said. “From that day, we began working on the website.”

Boyd and Vasquez are typical survivors of abuse; both went through periods of self-doubt, guilt and isolation. Boyd said she’d lie in bed at night and pray God would make her a better wife. When Vasquez became pregnant, church leaders forced her to go before the congregation and ask forgiveness as an unwed mother.

“Considering how bad I was doing, I’m definitely doing a lot better,” Vasquez said. “But I think the (difficult) thing is ... trying to overcome the feelings of the guilt itself. I felt like there was nothing I could do. I thought I had to protect myself and my kids.”

Besides displaying their lives as a warning for other victims, the decision to file custody suits and lawsuits and become involved in a healthy church has helped each woman as well.

Their attitudes toward church, especially, are striking. Neither woman is bitter against God or their current pastoral leaders for the abuse. Boyd said she still believes God can make good things come out of bad things. Her life now, with a loving husband and well-adjusted daughters, is “totally

unexpected.” Vasquez blames “the person, not really the church.”

“I know there have been other people who have been hurt, and they are extremely bitter. I really do believe in God,” she said, adding that she is unhappy with church leaders for not taking appropriate action and wishes denominational leaders would take an active stance against abuse.

In spite of her continued belief in God, it was more than 20 years before Vasquez and her children returned to church.

Her time back has been a “mixed bag,” she said. On one hand, some people have supported her journey through sex abuse and her desire to talk about it. On the other hand, some have made it clear it’s not a subject they want to discuss.

The topic of sex makes people uncomfortable, she said. But knowing that staying quiet allowed her abuser access to others pushed her forward. She said she realized that if she didn’t tell her story, “more and more people (could) get hurt.”

“I’m trying hard to be able to trust people again,” Vasquez said. “I’m trying hard to trust churches again. I want to have that ability. I would like to be able to have a relationship, to get married. I feel like I’ve gotten stronger since I’ve started talking about it. I’ve gotten stronger since I’ve realized there are other people than just me.”