

Why Don't Victims Come Forward?



My name is Jenipher Kollar Cochrane and I am a 51 year old incest survivor from childhood rape and molestation. I was 12 when first attacked. I am writing in support of HB01 for the Childs Victim's Act of 2023. By now, you already have a good idea of how you're going to vote on this bill. I wish there was something I could say to move you towards the affirmative. But despite how you vote, I hope you give me the courtesy of reading my victim impact statement because there are two points I would like to make. First, did you wonder why

it takes survivors and victims' such a long time to come forward? The reason is because they don't want to become me. Unlike a lot of my fellow survivors testifying on this bill, I had my day in court, and I put my Stepfather, Steve Dwyer, behind bars when I was in high school. But the price for speaking the truth was a lifetime sentence of family destruction. I lost EVERYTHING. Most importantly, I lost my mom's love and maternal bond. I lost ALL four of my maternal siblings; And I lost the love of my close-knit Italian family. Why did I have all this loss? Because it's a lot easier for people to say I am a liar than it is for them to face the uncomfortable and disastrous truth of what happened to me when I was a young child.

Childhood sexual assault is like a hurricane that destroys everything in its wake. No one wants to believe that a nice man like my stepfather would do such a horrible thing to his own stepdaughter. Nor do they want to believe that my mother (their own flesh and blood) was an active part of the cover-up. My family would say, “They didn’t want to pick sides.” But, to me, that statement shows they did pick a side and it wasn’t mine. When it comes down to it, my mother, my siblings, my aunts, my uncles and my cousins don’t want to be upset so I’m the one who continues to be punished – even to this day - for what my stepfather did to me.

My telling the truth destroys the ability of everyone to have a nice Christmas, Easter or wedding. The truth makes them feel bad—so they manage that by ignoring the uncomfortable truth – which leaves me out in the cold. If they believe me, then they have to take at least some responsibility for the cover up and for actively ignoring the truth and marginalizing what happened over the years. This is difficult to do, so they continue to live their lives while I remain shunned from the family.

At the end of the day, I learned that families work a lot like corporations and churches. They just want to keep the status quo. They don’t care about fairness or what’s right or wrong. They just care about the uncomfortable truth going away. So, the response is usually to pressure the person that has been hurt the most to keep quiet using guilt and shame as their most lethal weapons heaping years of sadness on top of the abuse.

To complicate things, if people can’t see the damage, then it’s so much easier to convince themselves that nothing really happened. This is true in most childhood sexual assault cases.

In my teens, my mother even drove me to a notary republic to retract my statement saying that she would kill herself if I didn’t recant. Then

she dropped me at a local police station alone to recant my statement. But, this hasn't gotten better over the years. Two years ago, at my grandmother's funeral, my mother told me that she hoped I died alone. And followed that up with 'this is the last time you will ever see me.' She has turned the majority of the people in my family against me despite the fact that my stepfather went to prison for his crime. This is the pain that victims and survivors most often deal with when they come forward. *And this is one of the many reasons they don't come forward until later in life.*

But the uncomfortable truth is that I do exist and so do all the other survivors testifying on this bill. I didn't lie, and neither did they. My stepfather did rape me in the dead of night in the back of my mother's gray Capri. He did shatter my innocence along with my hymen and the whole dirty matter broke my heart and threatened to take my soul.

The effects of childhood rape are disastrous over a lifetime. At 16, I tried to take my life and was admitted to Freehold Area Hospital. Today, I know I didn't want to die. I just wanted all the pain to stop. But the biggest obstacle to keeping a victim in pain is the silence and shame. And the threat of being broken again is almost too much to bear. But that is one thing you can change with the passage of this law—at least for the other victims and survivors that still need to tell their story.

This brings me to my second point. Every victim and survivor deserve to have a forum to speak their truth. No matter if that truth does not come out for 50 or 90 years. If victims are brave enough to come forward, then I'm asking you to be brave enough to give them a forum to tell their truth. It's time to let victims speak. It's time to shift the burden to the families, corporations, organizations, and the churches

that help cover up the harm every day. And most importantly, it's time for them to say their sorry.

Please vote in favor of HB01. Thank you for reading my testimony.