

## 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 SB0686. By now, you already have a good idea of how you're going to vote on this bill; And 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? It's 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? Because it's a lot easier to make me into a liar than it is to face the uncomfortable and disastrous truth of what happened. In addition, it's a lot easier to scapegoat me than deal with the wrath of adults who are cornered and can spin a different truth that everyone wants to

believe instead. 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. Nor do they want to believe that my mother (their own flesh and blood) was hugely active in the cover-up. My family would say, "They didn't want to pick sides." But that statement is picking sides! When it comes down to it, my mother, my siblings, my aunts, my uncles and my cousins don't want to be upset. My truth destroys the ability of everyone to have a nice Christmas, Easter or wedding. The truth makes them feel bad—so they don't deal with me which is their way of not dealing with the uncomfortable truth. Because if they believe me, then they must take responsibility for their part in the damage that was done. What I mean by this, is if they allow themselves to believe me, then they have to take responsibility for the cover up and for actively ignoring the truth and marginalizing what happened. And they can't do this because this challenges their world view of being good people.

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.

To complicate things, if people like my family can't see the damage, then it's so much easier to convince themselves that none of it happened. So, their response is 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. At least this is the way it works in my family.

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. But this stuff just never goes away. Two years ago, at my grandmother's

funeral, my mother told me that she hoped I die alone and that I will never see her again. 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 real 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. Steve 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 into Freehold Area Hospital. (Another dirty little secret that was hidden away.) 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.