

make it ZERO

THE MOVEMENT TO
SAFEGUARD EVERY CHILD

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WITH JENNIFER BRADLEY FRANKLIN

ONE TRAINED, TEN SAFER

*Darkness cannot drive out darkness;
only light can do that. Hate cannot drive
out hate; only love can do that.*

—DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

WHEN I FIRST MET THE GIRL in Wellspring Living, I had no idea that what brought her to this place of desperation was having been sold and bought against her will.

I'll never forget the summer evening we sat on the swing in my backyard and she told me about her uncle raping her at the age of five. The reality of what this person, whom she loved and trusted, did to this little girl's body and soul sent a torrent of emotions roiling through me.

This wouldn't be the last time I heard that story or a version of it. The next young woman who walked through our doors had a similar story, as did the next and the next. It became apparent that while the women's stories of destruction (prostitution, being trafficked, drug use) weren't identical, they all had an eerily similar beginning. I became driven to find out more about how this travesty plays out on children.

Do you remember the campaigns in the 1980s and '90s called “Stranger Danger” and “Good Touch/Bad Touch”? These campaigns encouraged parents to teach their children how to identify unsafe people, as if a young, innocent child should—or even could—have that level of discernment. I initially thought those programs, while useful tools to a point, were great; after all, anything that’s done to keep our children safe is a step in the right direction, right? But when I realized what we were asking of our children, it was easy to see the limitations of such a campaign. How can a child truly identify an unsafe person, especially when so many of the perpetrators are people they know and are even encouraged to love?

The program has made a real difference, particularly as people in positions of influence began to help spread its teachings.

I’m so grateful for Ann Lee, who personally experienced the violation of childhood sexual abuse, for her work in pinpointing this misconception and creating a better solution. In 1999, she approached Elizabeth Ralston, PhD, executive director of Lowcountry Children’s Center in Charleston, South Carolina, about the need for a solution. They joined together

to champion the concept that adults, not children, were responsible for preventing child sexual abuse. After all, adults are the ones who are better equipped, both intellectually and emotionally, to work to stop it. Ann formed Darkness to Light under the umbrella of Elizabeth’s organization and together they brought this issue to the forefront. It seems so intuitive, yet across generations, children have carried the weight of sexual abuse, often by themselves. In our culture, we tend to believe adults over children, so it is the perfect setup for the abuser.

Working together, these dynamic women forged a pioneering training that revolutionized the approach for the prevention of childhood sexual abuse, initially with the publication of a documentary, television ads, and then the book *7 Steps to Protecting Our Children*. In developing numerous television and radio segments, Darkness to Light knew that a comprehensive training program must be developed. In 2005, the Stewards of Children program was made available for parents, youth-serving organizations, and communities across the nation and globe. In 2006, *Stewards of Children ONLINE* was released as a web-based version of the “live” or facilitated version of the training program. Interested adults can go online, pay a nominal fee, and be armed with a world of knowledge to help protect their own children and children in their communities.

The program has made a real difference, particularly as people in positions of influence began to help spread its teachings. Bridgette Barker, a dynamic and motivated woman who works as the victim’s service coordinator for Georgia’s Lumpkin County sheriff’s office, is a volunteer trainer for Darkness to Light. Because the county had seen a steep increase of sexual abuse cases, Bridgette wanted to do something proactive to see those incidents decrease. She sought funding and began a monthly training using the Darkness to Light curriculum in 2010. Bridgette remembers that first Tuesday evening workshop well.

Bridgette’s Story:

I arrived an hour before the training at Lumpkin County Middle School. My team set up drinks and snacks, arranged chairs and tables, and double-checked the audio/video equipment. Then we

waited to see if anyone would show up. To my delight, around 7:00 p.m. we began with twenty participants from various walks of life within the community. One major component of our training is showing videos of abuse survivors and identifying telltale behavioral signs that can point to the presence of abuse.

I noticed that one of the attendees seemed to be especially moved throughout the evening, her eyes even welling with tears as she watched the videos and heard the case studies. When I came to the office the next day, I found out that same woman made an incident report at midnight, the night of the training, on an abuse case involving her daughter. She'd watched as her own precious child's behavior and demeanor had changed over the preceding months and recognized the signs—isolation, fear of being around men, sporadic anger, emotional outbursts—that totaled up in her mind. She went home from the training and had a conversation with her daughter, who shared about the ongoing abuse by an extended family member. The woman was devastated, but encouraged that she could get her daughter the help she needed and protect her moving forward. The perpetrator is now serving jail time.

I continue to be astounded about the results that come from this training curriculum. *From that first training until today, I have seen victims identify their abuse and abusers and begin healing; in fact,*

numerous reports have been made as a direct result of the program.

In another powerful incident, the local board of education made the training available to education employees, from school nurses and administrators to teachers and bus drivers. Jimmy, a local bus driver, took my course and a few weeks later witnessed something that may well have saved a young girl from being abused. He was driving a middle school girls' soccer team to a tournament outside the state, and he watched as a male coach flirted with and had one of the players sit on his lap during part of the long drive. Alarm signals went off in his mind, and he reported what he'd seen to the school's administrators and to local authorities. The coach was investigated and it quickly became apparent that he had made advances on and even molested four other girls. He was brought to justice and, fortunately, the young soccer player was saved from abuse.

Bridgette continues to train at the local college and has found the funding to offer all interested educators/school employees in her county access to the training free of charge. In addition, she trains physical therapists, nurses, criminal justice staff, and the community at large. Anyone who is interested in learning what to look for to prevent childhood abuse can take the two-and-a-half-hour training classes. Bridgette says that every time she trains a group she has one or two victims come forward or reports made that are the direct results from the awareness shared. The success

with these trainees drives Bridgette to keep volunteering her time to train in her community. In fact, Darkness to Light shares an astounding statistic about the effect of their training: For every one adult who is trained, ten children are safer.⁷

While programs are effective for awareness and prevention, many times those in the training receive just what they need to move forward in their lives. Sylvia Goalen, a survivor, came to a Stewards of Children training in the Atlanta area and, as a result, became aware of the implications of the sexual abuse she suffered as a child.

Sylvia lived in Guatemala with her six siblings and Mom and Dad. In the Latin American community, families often live together in clusters in order to support each other. Since Sylvia's dad traveled back and forth to the United States to provide for the family, it made sense for her mom and family to rely on the support of their family nearby. Unfortunately, this arrangement led to Sylvia becoming prey for a family member. Sylvia explained how the situation played out:

Sylvia's Story:

When my mom would go out with the other moms to go shopping, she would leave me with my older cousins. My sixteen-year-old cousin targeted me. He was charismatic and everyone liked him. He was a natural leader. He stole my innocence, and I was never the same. I felt like I had no control and that no one would believe me anyway.

Years later, when our family was planning on moving to be with my father in the United States,

my mother told me that a family member was going to move with us because he needed to raise some money and get his life together. At sixteen, I remember coming home from high school one afternoon to discover that this family member was that same cousin who had raped me as a child. I told my mom and dad what had happened, and they insisted that I deal with this on my own and left it to me to confront him.

I gathered up my courage and did speak to him, but when my parents were out of earshot, he threatened me. He pinned me against the wall and he said to me, "If you keep going on about this, I'm going to show you what I should have showed you years ago. That will really teach you a lesson." I came to find out that the same kinds of abuse happened to some of my cousins and other family members as well. That happened long ago. I'd been married ten years and had never talked about what happened to me, even with my husband, until I attended a Darkness to Light training.

My husband and I were in the process of adopting a teenage boy, and one of the requirements was to attend this training. As the trainer, Tiffany Sawyer, spoke and shared the video stories, I realized the secret that I had been holding inside was actually affecting my entire life. After the training, I approached Tiffany, who encouraged me to seek out counseling. A lot of things came together after that training. My husband and I were able to understand

why certain things triggered me, and I began to finally heal from a trauma I had experienced over twenty years earlier. It's been a tremendous gift to get to be honest about what's happened to me and to live out from under the weight of carrying a secret.

Today, Sylvia works for the fire department and is a trainer for Darkness to Light. She especially volunteers to train in the Hispanic community. Sylvia thinks of other little girls—boys too—who could be at risk from predators and wants to bring awareness and prevention.

Darkness to Light now has more than 7,700 authorized facilitators who teach the program in fifty states and seventeen international locations, and more than 920,000 copies of the training have been distributed to communities around the world.

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