

SISTERS AND SECRETS: two young adult incest survivors share their stories *

*Names have been changed to protect confidentiality

by Marilyn Wolgemuth

INTRODUCTION

This is a true story. The young women have asked to remain anonymous so names and places have been changed to protect their confidentiality. This family is well known to me and their stories have been gleaned from individual conversations with them, letters the girls and their mother wrote to me, public court records and newspaper articles.

I've included their mother's story to give added context to the situation. In the epilogue, I've included a short comment about their dad's perspective and consequences which he encountered.

First of all, for those who might not be familiar with the word incest, here's the definition: It is sexual exploitation and abuse of a child under 18 by a family member or step-relative of that child. Contrary to what some people believe, it is a crime and causes much emotional, medical/physical and spiritual damage.

These two sisters agreed to share their story to educate people about what is usually hush-hush in polite circles. They want to strip away the secrecy and tell it like it is. They especially want to educate men who are in a relationship with a young child under 18 years of age: father, grandfather, uncle, brother, cousin or step-relative. It's also true that a certain percentage of women are abusive, but by and large, the majority are men of all ages.

Parents, as you read Lola's and Susan's story, ask yourself "Would I want my child to have to go through all this?" If you are even the least bit suspicious that your child is being or has been sexually molested by a family member, I hope you will have the courage and resources to intervene immediately. It takes a great deal of courage for a parent to confront or report an abusive spouse or other relative. Remember, you are protecting your child from a life-time of emotional damage.

It's important that you seek counseling with a mental health professional for the entire family in order to ferret out and explore the unhealthy family dynamics that contribute to this illicit activity. I urge you to be a careful observer of your children and keep open communication with them. Learn what the physical, emotional, sexual and spiritual consequences are for the child.

I can't stress strongly enough that all parents must grasp the enormity of the severe damage that is done to a child's over-all development, how cruelly it robs them of their childhood innocence, causing multiple problems that extend in their adult life. I hope you will stay alert, care deeply

about your child's well-being and, to the best of your ability, prevent your children from having to go through this hellish experience.

Denial is a big part of this problem. It's so important that you not deny it can happen in your family but instead, realize that it happens even in the best of families and across all social strata. Hopefully, you will teach your children early in their life the importance of respecting their bodies and encourage them to report anything that violates or makes them uncomfortable. All parents of either gender need to understand and take seriously the life-long consequences of sexually abusing anyone, especially children.

And lastly, let me put it bluntly: if any one reading this is aware that you have urges to sexually molest your own or anyone else's children, please, get help for yourself and others in the family, in order to learn healthy coping mechanisms and protect innocent children. By seeking and taking advantage of an adequate treatment program, you and your whole family can reap many benefits and hopefully will make healthy choices that have a child's best interest at heart. You would not want to cause a child to be traumatized in the way you will read in this story.

Lola shares her story:

It began in 1990...I was five years old that year. My older brother, Jimmy, was seven, my younger sister Susan was three and my twin brothers, Alan and Peter, were eighteen months old. My mother, Karen, a stay-at-home mom, had her hands full caring for the five of us kids. After my father, Mitch, graduated from the small-town college where he studied to be a minister, our family moved to a remote and sparsely populated area of North Dakota where Dad began his career as the minister for a small struggling congregation.

It was difficult for our family to adjust to a very different lifestyle in the rural ranching community where neighbors lived miles apart and cattle and corn grew prodigiously. I missed my friends but I loved the vast scenic expanses of rolling prairie, the long horseback rides over the winding trails with my family on Saturday afternoons. I watched cattle being branded and often joined our ranching neighbors in a cattle round-up.

I grew up knowing I was a pretty child. My daddy would often rave about how my strawberry blonde hair, sparkling brown eyes and sunny smile made me look so "beautiful". Maybe that was why he started to make nightly visits to my bed. He would cuddle, fondle and caress me, finger my privates, then ask me to touch his privates, feel his erection, lick it or suck on it. Some deep part of me wanted to say "NO!", but another part of me wanted to be obedient - a good girl to please daddy. Everyone in the family knew better than to make daddy angry. I knew he was a lot bigger than me. Even though something about this felt totally wrong, he kept telling me it was all right, that everybody's daddy does this when he loves his little girl. He was the authority at our house so how could I not believe him? He was the minister of God so I must trust him!

During his night-time visits, Dad assured me he loved me, that it was our little secret – just between us. I discovered I could cut myself off from my feelings of disgust and fear of Dad’s wrath by letting my mind go somewhere else, smile prettily and pretend it really wasn’t happening to me but to someone else. “Don’t spoil it by telling somebody!” he would say. My little sister, who was too young at the time to know what was going on, was asleep in the other bed. Mom was totally preoccupied and physically exhausted with caring for the twins. I don’t think she suspected anything unusual since she figured dad was studying for his sermons until late into the night.

This went on for two years. Then it all stopped abruptly when I was nearly seven years old. I never knew why. Maybe, I thought, he didn’t like me as much any more. Was something wrong with me? I just knew that I felt dirty, used and ugly - uncomfortable about what I had to endure. But I never told a soul about what my daddy did to me, not even my mother.

Mom home-schooled all five of us during our elementary years and I learned to enjoy school. It wasn’t pleasant being around Dad, though. Fortunately, he spent a lot of time in his office at the church or out in the community visiting church members. Occasionally we did some fun things together as a family.

As I learned more about my own sexuality, I couldn’t stand to have him touch me or even look at me! I felt very tense and anxious around him, avoiding him as much as I could, slinking quietly around the house, making sure he was not around. I was trapped in my own home! There was no place to get away from him. In fact, the tension in our whole family was extremely high when Dad was around. He had a very short temper and would fly into one of his rages if anyone challenged or disobeyed him. He tried to control everything we said or did. This included his attempts to control my mother.

When he gave his sermons every Sunday morning he was like a whole different person -- relaxed, affable and easy to talk to. He liked to joke, laugh and socially interact with his parishioners and others in the community. I could hardly tolerate listening to his sermons. I often wondered how he could be such a different kind of person around home. In spite of all this, we presented ourselves as a happy family when in reality, our family was slowly disintegrating. We all learned how to pretend on the outside that everything was peachy-keen within the family. The members of the community and the congregation never suspected the turmoil we were going through.

I was horrified and devastated when my dad began abusing my sister Susan at age ten but I was powerless to stop him. However, I did strongly urge her to tell our mom, which she did. Now that he was exposed, he decided to stop. All this raised the tension level in our family even more. Secrets are terribly destructive to relationships!

By the time I was a freshman in high school the flashbacks began to haunt me. I would often have disturbing dreams about what Dad did to me during those early years. I would wake up feeling cold perspiration on my clammy skin.

I was fifteen when he made some derisive, insensitive comments about overweight people. I began to think my weight was an issue. Did he think I was too fat? I only weighed 110 pounds. As a result, I took up gymnastics as a way to exercise to keep my weight down. Added to that, I began eating less and less until I was down to just a few forkfuls of salad a day.

When our family would sit around the table together for meals the anxiety, stress and tension were so high that I just had no appetite - didn't feel like eating at all. Instead, I languidly picked at my food, spreading it around my plate to make it look like I was eating. With so much control in my life, food intake was one thing I could control. I became very thin – 90 pounds or less. Under my dull eyes were dark circles that I tried to cover up with a lot of makeup. My silky hair became coarse, stringy and began to fall out. My grades began to go down. I know now that I was on a downward spiral of severe, life-threatening anorexia and depression.

My teachers and some of my peers at school worried about me. They expressed their concerns to my parents about my weight loss, lower grades and dull affect. They then tried to intervene by begging me to eat, but that only made it worse. I was out to prove that I could be in control.

My dad was a very proud, stubborn man who didn't believe in counseling so I knew that wasn't an option. He couldn't bear the thought of revealing family secrets to some stranger! Anyway, ministers were supposed to know everything there was to know about handling family crises, weren't they? He had baptized all five of us over the years, so he figured he had some influence over us. His philosophy was that if you pray hard enough and have enough faith and put on a good front everything will turn out o.k. So we all suffered in silence. Who would listen to me anyway? Although I wouldn't admit it, I know now I was teetering on the edge of self-destruction.

Finally, one of my teachers at school recognized what was happening and shared her concerns with me in a very caring way. She helped me see that I had a lot to live for. With her help, I realized that if I didn't want to die, I needed to make a change in my eating habits. I am so thankful now that she helped me see my potential and showed me how it would hurt so many people if I died. It took me nearly three years to turn my eating habits around to where I was finally willing and able to eat a well-balanced diet again.

Then, in October of 2003 everything came to a screeching halt. I was seventeen and a junior in high school. After one of Mom and Dad's huge arguments they called the church district superintendent, dad's supervisor, who told them they had to see a counselor. That meant admitting what was going on in their relationship. Dad knew he couldn't wiggle out of this one.

Soon our secrets were out in the open. My dad was arrested and taken to jail while we were at school. None of us even had a chance to say goodbye. Not that I really wanted to. It was a relief to have him out of the house. The news spread far and wide across the community through newspapers, TV and radio.

I felt very humiliated when the media was so ruthless. Then I was told I would have to give a deposition to the prosecuting attorney. That was the hardest thing I had ever done. Also

my sister and I were immediately put in state custody and on Medicaid in order to pay for the counseling. However, we were allowed to live at home with mom and were assigned a social worker/counselor. Weekly counseling sessions were scheduled for an indefinite period of time. The counselor was helpful and I learned a lot about myself.

She emphasized that dealing with all that has happened is a long process. Flashbacks and feelings will intrude from time to time throughout my lifetime. But she cautioned me that, even though healing happens slowly, the emotional scars will always be there. A big part of the healing process, she said, will be if and when I can directly confront my dad at some point in the future, when I'm ready and have the opportunity.

At the time, I thought, NO WAY! That sounded like a daunting challenge! I did have that chance, however, as we met over coffee recently after he was released from prison. I don't know where or how I found the courage, but I was able to tell him in no uncertain terms how it has affected me. I decided not to spare his feelings but to be honest and forthright. He listened with tears in his eyes, said how painful it was to hear what I had to say and to be directly confronted with his hurtful behavior when I was so vulnerable as a child.

Then he broke down and cried. I accepted his attempts to apologize and sensed that he was genuinely remorseful, that in the treatment program in prison he's learned why he did what he did. I can't truly trust him yet, and still am uncomfortable being near him. I know I don't want to have any prolonged contact with him at this time. What the future holds is anyone's guess. It has affected my relationship with guys, too. Who can I trust to treat me with respect and dignity? I find myself ambivalent about intimacy and fear getting too close.

I have moved on in my life, set goals for myself, nearing completion of college and am anticipating the beginning of my career. I am willing to ask for help if I need it in the future.

Susan shares her story:

One night when I was almost 11 years old I was awakened by this "presence" in my bed. It was my dad. I didn't know what was happening. I just knew that I was very scared. He whispered to me if I would stay very quiet I wouldn't get hurt. My sister was sleeping in the bunk bed above me so he didn't want to waken her. Dad began to caress, fondle and kiss me and tell me what a beautiful child I was. He told me that he loved me so much and wanted to be near me. I didn't know what to do except let him do what he wanted to because he would often get angry if we kids didn't obey him perfectly.

The third time he came to my bed I just knew it was very wrong. His touch made me feel yucky. What should I do? I finally decided I couldn't take it anymore so in the middle of the night I went downstairs to Mom's bedroom to tell her what Dad was doing to me in my bed. I had no idea what her reaction would be, I just knew I had to tell somebody. She hugged me and told me that it was going to be all right, that she would take care of me. But that was small

comfort. How was she going to do that? Fortunately, he didn't come back again when he found out I had told my mom.

From then on, I was haunted by growing resentment that bordered on hate and fear toward Dad. In fact, I felt like I didn't even have a dad. He was just this weird, controlling monster in my life. He wouldn't protect me from my brother Jim who was often mean to me. Jim was a lot like my dad -- I was scared of him, too. I never knew what he would do next. Sometimes he locked me in the storage shed for several hours, but no one in the family knew about it because he swore me to secrecy. Other times Lola and I would have our bedroom door shut and he would barge in uninvited even when we begged him to stay out. I sure wished we could have had a lock on the door. He did mean stuff to Alan and Peter, also. As far as I know, he was partial to Lola and never hurt or harassed her. Growing up as a middle child between my twin brothers and an older brother, I was forced to fight for myself many times.

Over the next couple of years, I began to have a strong wish that I had never been born! More and more I felt like I'd be better off dead than live with this family that looked so perfect on the outside but inside we were all living in quiet desperation with this parent who controls our lives! When any of us kids would encounter his disapproval of some minor infraction, all he had to do was shoot his piercing glare at us to let us know he was not pleased and there would be consequences.

One night, when I was extremely depressed and feeling hopeless, I began experimenting with a knife. First by making scratches and then small cuts on my legs, wrists and arms. It felt good in an odd sort of way. As I watched my blood seep out, it was like letting my raw, hateful, angry feelings ooze out! It also proved to me that, even though I felt dead inside, I was still alive and well. At times I was very tempted to just slash my wrists, bleed to death and get it over with. But I never quite had the courage. I did this over the next year and a half when I would feel depressed and hopeless. It was the only way I knew to cope with what I was experiencing.

One day Lola saw the scars on my legs and arms. I told her not to tell anyone, but she did tell Mom who realized it could be life-threatening, but didn't know what to do about it. She was pretty sure that I needed some counseling, but since she and Dad were totally against it, counseling wasn't an option. That would mean that our secrets would get out about our family problems. So I was trapped and I could tell that Mom needed help, too. But how?

October 10, 2003 -- I was in tenth grade when the bombshell shattered our family. I really didn't know what all was going on. One day my parents had one of their big arguments. They called Dad's supervisor and he told them they had to go to a counselor, who was mandated to report the abuse. When they came back home I couldn't believe what happened next!

My dad was arrested by the county sheriff and taken to jail! After a week in the county jail, he was released on \$25,000 bail, put up by his parents, and went to live with some ranch friends fifty miles away from us. He was court-ordered to avoid contact with anyone under 18, so that included us four kids still at home. My older brother Jim was already in college so it didn't affect him that much.

The next day's newspaper carried a big write-up and Dad's picture. I was scared to go back to school the next day. Gossip travels terribly fast in that rural community. By then everyone knew that my dad was in jail for what he had done. But the kids and teachers at school weren't cruel at all. Instead they seemed to understand what we must be going through so I didn't feel quite so depressed.

During the next month, my sister Lola and I were put into state custody so Medicaid could pay for the counseling since my parents had no money for it. We were assigned a social worker with Children's Protection Agency. We were still allowed to live at home, though. But if Dad would try to contact us, the state would have the authority to put us into foster care. The weekly counseling sessions with my social worker were o.k. but I thought all the questions were terribly boring and didn't really apply to me. I know now I was in a lot of denial and felt like no one understood me. It was about this time that Mom took me to the doctor and he prescribed some medicine for my depression. I didn't like the way it made me feel and after about two weeks I decided to stop taking it. I tend to be oppositional, anyway, so this was one way I could be in control.

Now I realize I was angry at my mom for not protecting me and not being emotionally available for either of us. She had a part-time job and was gone a lot of the time and I needed someone to listen to me. I soon became depressed and started cutting on myself again, deeper this time. My sister Lola knew what I was doing and again told my mom about it. Mom talked to the social worker who realized that things were not going well for me at home and she needed to move me into foster care. Soon after Christmas my school basketball coach allowed me to live with their family during the next year. I was so glad it would allow me to stay at my school. It was such a relief to get away from home and be able to freely talk about things that were bothering me!

Both Lola and I were required to give depositions to the prosecuting attorney and that was the hardest thing I ever had to do. It meant we had to give details of what our dad had done to us so the attorney would know what charges to bring against him. My mom told us to "just tell the truth", so that's what we did. Dad ended up with felony charges for two counts of sexual assault of a minor. In November 2004, the judge sentenced him to 4 years at the state prison with a mandatory sex offender treatment program. I was SO relieved when the suspense was over and we could all get on with our lives!

I was so ready to leave this god-forsaken place that I decided to take my junior and senior year of school in one year. I didn't know what I was asking for! Even though it was a lot of work, I made it through with good grades. At the end of the school year I joined the U.S. Navy.

Now I'll let Mom tell you her side of the story:

Karen shares her story:

Soon after we moved to North Dakota, Mitch confessed to me that he had been sexually abusing Lola over the previous two years. He said he was very remorseful, repentant and assured me – no, he vowed – he would never to do it again. He said God had forgiven him and that I should too. I wanted to believe him.

What was I supposed to do with that information? Nothing had prepared me for THIS! If I told anybody I knew it would mean being reported to authorities, breaking up our family and dragging the congregation through all of that garbage. At that time I wasn't willing to do that, so I just swallowed the pain and went on. I went into denial and hoped it would all go away by itself. How could I protect her from further abuse? Would he abuse Susan too? He promised not to do it again with Lola, but did that mean he wouldn't start in on Susan? I felt helpless and clueless as to what to do about it. I was minimally aware of the damage that results from sexual abuse but if I reported it, I knew it would destroy the family and maybe even break up the congregation if they found out what their minister had done.

I also was afraid of what Mitch might do to me and the other children because he often abused me emotionally by controlling and crushing my spirit with put-downs, manipulation and explosive, angry outbursts. I had gradually lost a sense of who I was. Wasn't a wife supposed to be submissive and obedient to her husband? That's what the church teaching was. And being a minister, Mitch assumed he had the power of the church behind him to enforce that teaching. He wasn't about to let his wife have a voice for any reason!

I don't think anything more happened with either of the girls until six years later when Susan came down to my bedside in the middle of the night, crying, shaking like a leaf, telling me that Mitch was in bed with her. When I confronted him this time, he swore it only happened twice, but it scared her enough to come tell me about it. Bless her heart – and only ten years old.

She's the middle child, with a tendency to have wide mood swings. As a younger child, she would throw some terrible tantrums. All her life she has had to stand up for herself against her older brother who was often mean to her. Now she was having to cope with an impossible situation that she had no power over. Ironically, it turned out that she was abused for a shorter period of time, but it has affected her in a much more profound way, considering her type of personality.

So here I was, faced with the same dilemma as before with Lola, only this time there was much more at stake. We were now well established in the community. Mitch was known and respected in the community far and wide, the church was growing by leaps and bounds, people were accepting salvation. The congregation had just finished building a new sanctuary.

When I confronted Mitch, he was repentant and knew that he had committed a great wrong, but his attitude was summed up like this, "I asked God to forgive me, so why can't you just forgive and forget, too!"

I was also faced with the harsh reality that I would be left alone with five children under 14. What was I supposed to do? I knew I should have left him when he first told me about abusing Lola, but I was not willing to put our family and the church through that hell. Any trace of love for Mitch that might have been there before was gone and has never returned. I did resolve that if there was even a hint of any more abuse, the kids and I were out of there, although I did question the wisdom of even giving him another chance. My fears got in the way of my better judgment. Where would we go? How would I support five children and myself? Again, I carefully stuffed those painful feelings back down inside and pretended everything was hunky-dory with the family.

For another six years I lived with the guilt of not having protected my girls. I managed to maintain the outward appearance of normalcy by denying the absolute seriousness of all of this. I so desperately hoped that everything would be OK on its own eventually. Of course, it wasn't. The girls were struggling with the damaging consequences: Lola battled anorexia to a point that her health was seriously threatened. Susan was trying to cope with depression and suicidal ideation by self-mutilating -- cutting on herself in a life-threatening way.

The sense of extreme guilt for not protecting the girls grew even heavier. I knew they needed counseling but, with limited finances, it was out of the question. The nearest mental health clinic was almost 100 miles away. I also knew that counselors are mandated to report abuse, so if it did come out it would throw everything into chaos, even more than it was already.

It became increasingly difficult for me to cope, too. I've always been a positive person and try to think of what I can be thankful for. My attitude was "Yes it's bad, but things could be worse. I'm thankful he's not beating us". I realize now this was big denial. It was a day-to-day struggle to keep my head above water emotionally. Dealing with all this emotional baggage sapped my energy and dulled my appetite, so I was losing weight, also.

Mitch and I had poor communication between us. He is very verbal and blurts out whatever is on his mind regardless of how hurtful it can be to another person. I am a private person, reluctant to share my inner thoughts and feelings. Those two ingredients didn't mix well. Early in our marriage, a bitter cycle of hurt and misunderstanding began from which we could not break free. Each time he would scold, judge or ridicule me it felt like pieces of my heart were sliced off and trampled on the floor. I could endure only so much of that before I began to close down and withdraw from him. Then he would become angry, insecure and jealous, which only made matters worse.

We argued frequently about my attraction to another man. He would put the worst possible interpretation on it even though there was no affair. Confessing that attraction was difficult in itself, because I knew that I was in danger of letting it go too far and had I known what the result would be, I would have never done it in the first place. My life was hell for a long time after that. Instead of the forgiveness and reconciliation that I sought, Mitch, in his jealousy, beat me up emotionally even more.

This pretty much killed any intimacy and love I felt for him by that time. I was starving emotionally and my armor was beginning to crack. I couldn't reach out to anyone in the congregation - I wasn't a very good pastor's wife because I didn't want to allow anyone to get too close to me.

My friend Bill offered me a safe place for my heart to confide in, no condemnation or judgmental pronouncements. We would meet occasionally when I went to town for supplies. He listened to me as if I had something worthwhile to say and that was so refreshing. At some level, I felt guilty and knew it was wrong of me to sneak around and compromise my marriage but I so desperately needed someone to confide in.

Finally I garnered some courage and wrote a "letter" to Mitch giving him the unvarnished version of just how hurtful his attitudes have been down through the years. In some ways it was a wake-up call for him. He became very contrite and apologized for crushing my spirit early in our marriage. Soon after that he came across some romantic emails Bill and I had exchanged and, with good reason, was very upset. I don't blame him for that. But it was the last drop that finally caused the water to flow over the dam and let everything spill out.

One day in October 2003, after a particularly intense war of words, we decided to call our denomination's district supervisor. We told him that we were at an impasse in our relationship. He strongly advised us to see a professional counselor ASAP, so we set up an appointment for the next day. This was very humiliating to Mitch, who was so adamantly against seeking counsel. But by this time, he knew he had few choices about all this.

I was pretty sure that it would be an exercise in futility if the subject of the sexual abuse was not addressed. Counselors are mandated to report it, so we went knowing that this could be the tipping point for everything we'd worked for up to now. Sure enough, the counselor affirmed that it was his duty to report the abuse, but then he surprised us both by saying, "You would do yourself a favor if you turn yourself in, Mitch". Wow, that set him back on his heels with surprise! I couldn't believe it when he said, "I didn't know it was a crime!" Well, duh! What did he think it was anyway? Just a little game he played.

On our way back home, we stopped at the county sheriff's office and Mitch turned himself in to authorities. He wasn't arrested right then but he was told he could no longer live at home and was ordered to live elsewhere. On arriving home, he gathered up his stuff and moved out. The next day, the sheriff arrested him and took him to jail to await trial. After a week in jail he was released on bail and went to live on a friend's ranch 50 miles away.

The separation was a great relief for both me and the girls. The atmosphere around home was much more relaxed. However, it was very difficult for my twin boys, age 14, as they had no clue what had gone on in the past and had no way to prepare for what was about to transpire. They were understandably confused for awhile until the details became clearer.

My oldest son Jim, who was then 20, was married less than a month before this broke open. He and his wife lived in another state and he was in denial about the seriousness of the damage to his sisters. He was like his dad and thought we should just "forgive and forget" all this

ever happened! That's probably the only way he knew to deal with it. His dad talked to him often on the phone and “dumped” on him about the trouble he was in and how everyone was against him. For a long time Jim blamed me for what his dad did to the girls.

Vicious rumors flew all around this rural community. I didn't know about some of them until I was socially shunned by people who had been my friends. A whispering campaign would sometimes filter back to me and I would hear snippets that were very exaggerated and outright false. It was rumored that it was my fault that Mitch abused the girls, that I wanted him to go to prison, that I had multiple affairs. I also learned that some of these rumors had been perpetuated by Mitch himself in retaliation for what he perceived as a disobedient, non-submissive wife. That was extremely painful to hear.

As might be expected, the congregation reacted with utter shock and disbelief. This was beyond their wildest imaginations! They more or less went into survival mode after all this. When I attended services, I felt shunned by the majority of members. The church board informed me that some even threatened to stop coming if I continued to attend there. A few remained friendly but concerned about me. But it was obvious that they were at a loss to know what to say to me. I didn't want to be a stumbling block so I decided to attend another church.. The children continued to be accepted and welcomed in the youth group there, though, and I was glad for that.

During 2004, the public defense attorney plea-bargained Mitch's way through several appearances before the county judge. Finally, he was charged with two felonies and sentenced to four years in prison with two of those years to be in mandatory sex offender treatment. Finally, the suspense was over. Life would go on.

With four children still at home, it was a challenge to make ends meet without Mitch's salary from the church. Between credit card debt and a second loan on our van he had run up more than \$30,000. I was overwhelmed with the enormity of this financial burden. The credit card was in his name only so I was relieved to know I would not be held responsible for that. Thankfully, my part time job became full time and the children picked up odd jobs in the community -- baby sitting, lawn mowing, ranch activities etc. With the help of supportive friends, we made it work. I filed for divorce in 2005 which freed me to get on with my life.

We have all begun to move forward to healing and forgiveness -- healing soul and spirit. However, my trust in men has seriously been eroded and will need to be earned. God has been our refuge and strength, brought beauty from the ashes, and shown us His love and mercy in very tender ways. The girls and I are learning that what has happened doesn't need to define us as people, but rather becomes a piece of our history from which we can grow. God is good.

I have recently married Bill, the wonderful man who listened to me so lovingly. Each of the children graduated from high school with good records and are all living elsewhere. Jim is in the U.S. Army Reserve, Lola, Alan and Peter are university students and Susan is in the U.S. Navy .

As for Mitch, he made good use of the sex offender treatment program in prison, acknowledged the pain he has caused, recognized his own needs and began to learn how to meet

them in healthier ways. He was released from prison in 2007 and has moved to another state. His life as a registered sex offender will not be easy. He will encounter obstacles along the way as he seeks employment. I can truly say my anger toward him has subsided and I wish for him the best life possible.