

# SPECIAL FEATURE... Safeline gives voice to victims of unspeakable crime...

Reporter Simon Woodings meets the volunteers behind a Warwickshire charity marking its 20th anniversary

**S**EXUAL abuse costs the nation a staggering £26 billion each year in investigations, police enquiries, professional intervention, loss of earnings and the cost to the NHS.

What the figure doesn't take into account is the lifelong emotional, physical and psychological cost to each of its victims.

Victims are usually known to their abusers. The abuse always involves control. It starts in childhood but can continue into adult life. And many victims remain haunted by their experience for the rest of their lives.

In an area that remains heavily underfunded and often reliant on the work of volunteers, a local charity based in Warwick continues to help save and rebuild shattered lives as it has done for the past 20 years.

Safeline was founded in 1994 led by women who were themselves victims of sexual abuse. Having reached its 20th anniversary its core beliefs remain the same: to promote awareness, to relieve suffering and to advance education amongst people experiencing the after-effects of the trauma of rape and sexual abuse.

In addition to counselling, Safeline offers therapeutic support, a telephone helpline, early intervention and prevention projects, a lending library, a website, information and advice and an Independent

Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA) - providing support for those wishing to contact the police.

Most of all, Safeline listens and offers services to men, women, adults and adolescents, who are survivors of abuse. Family members and friends of survivors can also access Safeline services across the whole of Warwickshire and surrounding areas.

"I wished I had heard about you earlier," is an expression that Safeline chief executive Neil Henderson has heard victims say many times - and he understands why.

"It's okay because we can help people at any stage during the most difficult and traumatic times of their lives and will continue to do so even when they think they've got over the worst," says Neil.

The Herald was given exclusive access to two volunteer counsellors at Safeline who spoke frankly about their roles and how they try and help victims in any way they can.

"You walk in the victim's shoes and see the world from their eyes," says 40-year-old Kate Rushbrook, from Stratford, who has been a counsellor for four years.

"It's about making people feel safe, you mustn't judge them and you have to mirror their words so they will talk to you."

Kate has a degree in counselling and while she can't talk about individual client



*'My ambition would be to live in a world where there was no sexual abuse or rape'*

Neil Henderson

● Liz Welsh, Safeline's head of clinical services, conducts a counselling session. Photo: Mark Williamson (W14/2/12)

cases she is keen to describe the importance of the work she and her colleagues carry out week in, week out.

"We try to give back to clients a feeling of self-worth. They don't have to remain a victim, they are not alone and they will get stronger with each session."

"It's amazing to learn how many people have been abused and it can become a vicious cycle, unfortunately, somebody who has been abused in their youth can sometimes enter into destructive relationships in later life."

"When we are young we need inner confidence and trust. It's something very special at a young age but when that trust is abused it can go forever and that's why people need to be treated with utter respect and discretion and it's vital they are able to bond with their counsellor. They will be given total empathy and won't be judged on what happened in the past."

And the abuse knows no boundaries as Kate explains: "More and more men are coming to us sometimes for things that happened many years ago, but for the first time, they're letting the information out."

The second Safeline volunteer, who does not wish to be named, has been counselling for seven years and has a diploma in the subject.

**Harrowing**

For this person, listening is the all-important part of the job.

"You have to listen to the music behind the words. You have to watch the body language and the eye movement and you have to pay close attention because the client is the expert in their own world."

The client counsellor experience can be harrowing but not necessarily stressful; in fact it's a privilege to be allowed into their lives; it can even be mind blowing.

Counselling can be a life-changing experience for the client. Each session lasts an hour and it doesn't matter how long it takes, the counsellor will be there for the client until the day comes when the client feels secure enough to go their own way and the sessions come to an end.

"Every client knows that the door is always open and should they need to talk with a counsellor again they can do so no matter how many months or years may have passed since they last spoke."

This counsellor is an expert in person-centred counselling and admits that more victims of violent sexual abuse have come forward to talk openly about their nightmares following the shocking revelations that emerged during the Jimmy Savile public enquiry.

Counsellors say they are treating more people in relation to the sex abuse they experienced as youngsters but who have

never said anything because they felt ashamed. Now these same people are talking and are driven by anger at what happened to them.

"Now they have a voice and you can see a change in people after a few sessions. All we do is let them talk and we listen, for me the whole experience is quite spiritual."

Safeline's chief executive, Neil Henderson, agreed: "Now more than ever the time is right to raise public awareness of the charity and encourage people to come forward and speak out about their abuse whether it be historic or ongoing."

He added: "We are working closely with schools, young people and the authorities and encourage people to come forward and seek help because we can help them rebuild and take control of their lives. Our job now is to raise awareness so that people can turn to us and know they will be trusted and listened to."



*'I was made to feel ashamed and dirty because I didn't want anyone to know about the sexual abuse, and genuinely thought no one would have believed me'*

**"A**t times it seemed easier to die." Those are the harrowing words of Margaret Whitford whose life had been destroyed by violent sexual abuse which started when she was just six.

The abuser in this case was Margaret's adopted father as she never got to know her real father who was an American serviceman based in South Warwickshire just after the war.

Margaret had to live in the shadow of her adopted father's sexual abuse and violence, regularly hitting Margaret around the back of her head with a hammer.

"I was in the back yard and it was freezing and raining. You had to break up the coal to make it go further and I just watched me and told me I wasn't doing it right. So I threw the hammer to the floor and told him to "do it yourself then" so he picked up the hammer and bashed me on the head with it; by the time I got back in the kitchen my ears were bleeding," Margaret said.

To this day, she suffers from hearing problems and has needed ear operations as a result. And the physical scars act as a constant reminder of the emotional scars which followed the childhood pain she endured.

For her own safety, social services then placed Margaret, by now aged 12, and her sister with foster parents, well away from her original abuser. But for Margaret the nightmare was about to become even more terrifying as her new foster father repeatedly raped and abused her.

In a candid interview with the Herald, Margaret, now in her early 60s, describes how she was subjected to relentless sexual abuse from an early age and was forced to live her life in a climate of continual fear and shame because there was no one for her to talk to.

"We lived in different times then. In the 60s, 70s, and 80s everything went on behind closed doors and you just didn't talk about these things, that's how the abusers were able to get away with what they did, there wasn't a helpline you could call in those days and, besides, who's going to believe the word of a child against an adult?" Margaret said.

The sexual abuse also had a massive impact on Margaret's education. By her own estimates, she was at school for a total of only two and a half years, the rest of the time either spent truanting or deliberately kept at home to help her foster mum with domestic chores.

When she did go to school Margaret found it also becoming a victim of bullying and never had a chance to make real and lasting friendships.

She also became adept at hiding the truth

from other adults. When asked by teachers to explain the bruises on her arms and on her body, Margaret would tell them she had fallen down the stairs.

"I was made to feel ashamed and dirty because I didn't want anyone to know about the sexual abuse and genuinely thought no one would have believed me, at times it seemed easier to die," said Margaret.

As an adult Margaret met and married a man whom she described as a 'gentleman'. But, at the age of 35 Margaret began to self-harm and eventually she attempted suicide, a frightening ordeal that ultimately led to the break-up of the marriage.

"I was crying out and I hope when I attempted suicide, it was a silent scream. When you are abused you have a smiling public face but behind that face there are tears," said Margaret.

It was soon after this that Margaret contacted her doctor who gave her some of the most important advice she'd ever received in her life.

The doctor recommended she contact Safeline, based in Warwick.

"I didn't think I needed counselling but they were there for me and have been on and off for the last 16 years, even in my darkest hours there's always been somebody at Safeline there for me," Margaret said.

**Healing process**

Eventually the counselling helped Margaret re-build her life and she's since married for a second time. Over the past two years she has penned her harrowing story and hopes to soon publish her book which she's called *Always Chasing Butterflies*.

"It's about my life and it's part of a healing process and I hope it will help other people. There is no reason why people should be frightened, bullied and controlled into sexual abuse but it still goes on and we've recently seen how shocking the Jimmy Savile revelations have been. People must not suffer in silence, they must speak out," said Margaret.

"It's been an unbelievably painful journey through life for Margaret but, for the time being, she's reached an inner peace."

Margaret said she wanted to tell her story in the hope that it would help inspire others overcome their own personal demons and to highlight the work of Safeline.

But after all the counselling and the therapy and the fact that Margaret now enjoys a happy life, can she ever completely leave the past behind her?

"I want to believe so," she said, "but even in my darkest nightmares, it lives in the shadows of my mind," she said.

● After years of enduring sexual abuse, Margaret Whitford appreciates the value of the work of Safeline Photo: Mark Williamson (W22/2/15)

**FOR COUNSELLING**

Sexual abuse affects one in four women and one in seven men. Safeline wants to reach out to those people who are abused or at risk and wish to talk in confidence.

Call Safeline on 01926 402498 between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday. A national helpline also operates on 0300 1230208 on Tuesdays between 7.30pm and 9.30pm.

**TO DONATE OR HELP**

Safeline is funded by donations like those it received this year from Stratford Town Trust and Stratford Lions but it still needs funding to continue the vital work it does in order to help hundreds of abuse victims across the county who spend every day living in fear of being sexually violated and abused. The charity also relies on the tireless efforts of its volunteers.

Call Safeline on 01926 402498 between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday to discuss the different types of volunteering opportunities.

**Pamper your pets!**  
New pet boutique opens at Yew Tree Farm, Wootton Wawen

**THIS WEEKEND** (February 28th) a new approach to pet supplies will be hitting Warwickshire. The Parlour Pet Boutique, offering quality, ethical and not-to-be-found-on-the-high-street supplies, will be opening its doors at Yew Tree Farm Shopping Village in Wootton Wawen

Nothing beats a modern-day puppy. A puppy will be able to produce a wide range of pool toys, such as footballs, tennis balls, collars, leashes, grooming products, and much more. All of these items are available at the Parlour Pet Boutique. The Parlour Pet Boutique is a one-stop shop for all your pet's needs. It's a place where you can find everything you need for your pet, from food to toys to grooming products. The Parlour Pet Boutique is a place where you can find everything you need for your pet, from food to toys to grooming products.



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