

Stephanie's Parents Learned A Lot

My husband and I and our two daughters moved to Michigan from a nearby state. We had lived in a city with over 250,000 people before moving to Coldwater. We would always hear throughout the day and night sirens from emergency vehicles like police, fire and ambulances. We decided we wanted to move to smaller city in a less populated area. So, we moved into the last house on the last street in an addition just outside of Coldwater. It was nice, quiet and we felt safe. Even the school bus turned around at the end of our drive way to pick up and drop off our girls.

Their first year in school at Coldwater our girls started in the 2nd and the 7th grades. Our girls made friends quickly as they were both involved in activities like band, track, volleyball and 4H. Though both my husband and I held full time jobs outside of the home, we both encouraged, supported and attended their many activities.

Fast forwarding 10 years, one night I woke up to knocking at my bedroom door. It was my oldest daughter who was home from Michigan State University for the summer. She said her sister was sick and that I needed to come right away. When I walked into her room she told me her sister had been raped. I said "But, your dad and I have been home all night." She went on to say that her sister went outside to get something from her car. That's when she said, "Look at her feet mom." That's when I saw it. Grass clippings on her bare feet. That's when I knew what she had told us was true. That our daughter had in fact been raped. That's right. Raped right outside our home while both her father and I were right inside.

We contacted the police immediately. They interviewed us and then interviewed our neighbors. A couple of them mentioned seeing a suspicious car at our addition entrance.

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One of the neighbors even wrote down the license plate number which he provided to the police. With that info the police were able to confront the rapist in less than 12 hours from the time the crime took place. DNA was obtained and presented at the trial where he was convicted of the rape and sentenced to a minimum of 30 years in prison and up to a maximum of 55 years.

That night truly changed our lives forever. But we would soon find out that it also had an impact on an endless amount of other people. Our extended family in Michigan, Indiana and California; friends from here to Florida and Colorado; our co-workers, teachers, and even people we had yet to meet.

My husband and I chose to wait a week to tell the rest of our family about the rape as we did not want to ruin our parents 50th Wedding Anniversary celebration scheduled for the coming weekend. I remember when I did tell my parents how it made my father cry. I don't remember ever seeing my dad cry before. It was heart breaking. However, my father told me prior to his passing, that my daughter was his hero. Given he was an Army Veteran, I did not take that lightly. He said he was so proud of her. How well she was recovering and her willingness to share her story in an effort to educate and to try and help others.

When we contacted family and friends to let them know about our daughter being raped we found out that when we shared the information with each person, we suddenly had to become their counselor. Both my husband and I come from very large families with 5 and 6 siblings each and we both have a lot of friends. We had to take time to with each of them to make them feel better after sharing such sad news. It was an exhausting! After all, we were already doing that for ourselves and our daughters. We were the ones that needed to be consoled and made to feel better on those phone calls.

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We quickly realized after just a few phone calls that we had to come up with a better plan. All I can say is, thank goodness for Telephone Trees. I called my closest sister and told her I would share future updates with her and she would call the others with updates. Or they were welcome to call her as our phone had to be saved for our girls and for the police.

My daughter's physical injuries were quick to heal, like the scratch across her face and the injury on her back. All three of us girls saw counselors within a week of the rape. However, within 9 months of the rape, both my daughters and I ended up suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. We all had problems sleeping, nightmares, and our daughter had regular flash backs of the attack.

It was quite a challenge for my youngest to complete High School given the amount of absences she had from school based on her weakened physical and emotional health. It also added a semester of school to my oldest daughter's education at Michigan State. I too ended up going on Short Term Disability from work which was recommended by my doctor and my counselor. It was only 6 weeks for me, but not working allowed me to get the rest I needed to regain the strength I needed so I could continue to take care of myself and support my family in the years of healing to come.

Rather than seeing a counselor, my husband's friends made themselves very available to him. They would often get together so they could talk, vent and heal together. When my husband told his hunting partner about our daughter being raped, I was surprised how it consumed his friend with sadness to the point where he went to church to be consoled by his minister. One of our closest friends who lives in Colorado actually heard about the rape of our daughter within a couple days through a mutual

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friend in our neighborhood. He too was heartbroken and offered any assistance we needed.

As I said earlier, our lives were changed forever the night our daughter was raped. Though some changes were for the better. For example, both of my daughters and I have literally met thousands of wonderful people in our efforts to increase awareness of sexual assault and rape in our community as we provide prevention education. Neither my daughters nor I had ever done public presentations or training before. It was a new experience to stand in front of a classroom of students, or in front of a thousand students for a school assembly, or in front of a crowd with a microphone at a community event like Walk-A-Mile in Their Shoes.

However, we now know something we didn't know before. How statistics show that you may already know or you will know someone who will be sexually assaulted or raped. We believe a one hour prevention education class at her high school saved our daughter's life. She knew to be aware of her surroundings and she provided very detailed information to the police. She knew that the crime scene was more than just the location where she was raped. She knew her body was a crime scene and that she needed to go to the hospital so that they could collect the evidence. She knew so much more than me on what to do and what not to do from this one hour class.

When our daughter went back to school after the rape, for her last three years in high school she introduced the nurse who continues to teach the prevention education class. She shares what happened to her that night and the need for everyone to listen to the nurse's important information. It also helps the students in the class realize that while we hope something like this never happens to them, it could. Or it could happen to one of their friends and we want them to be able to help their friends.

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Our daughter shares her personal story with them as she and we believe that if by sharing her story that we can help even one person, or they can help one person or a friend from the information we share, then it's worth telling her story. Even after she moved away to college my daughters and I have continued to partner with the nurse to share her story and jointly present prevention education and training. We have been doing this together now for over 15 years.

Once at a Middle School full assembly, students waited in line to get my daughter's autograph or a hug as they too considered her a hero after hearing her tell her story as a survivor of rape. That's the positive attitude we want to continue to promote with education awareness in the community.

My daughter told her father not so long ago, "It was a terrible time and a terrible thing that happened to me. But somehow, I'm stronger for it."

I must agree with her. Our family was strong together before this happened. And somehow as a family we've become even stronger from it. And as a result, our family now volunteers and promotes community awareness and prevention education whenever and wherever possible. Standing in front of people with a microphone sharing information is something none of us had ever intended to do. But now we have a passion to share our story and educate others with information that may help them, or may help them help someone in their future. Thank you so much for your time and feel free to share the story.

