

Sexual abuse victim breaks her silence

Survivors Healing Center of Santa Cruz offers support

By AMY LARSON
OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

Maria Elena De LaGarza said that when she was 3 years old, her older cousin began sexually abusing her.

De LaGarza, 42, grew up in Watsonville as the daughter of well-known business owners. Like many Mexicans who recently immigrated to the United States, her parents helped relatives get on their feet, which included paying for her cousin's education and allowing him to live in their house.

When her 18-year-old cousin began touching and folding her, "I was so young, I didn't realize this was not normal," De LaGarza said. "I would wake up and he would be touching me."

Many people have an image of what a child sexual predator looks

like, such as the old uncle drinking in the back of the house, said Survivors Healing Center director Maria Rodriguez-Castillo. But De LaGarza said her cousin was the "sunshine of the family," with good looks, personality and intelligence.

De LaGarza did not tell anyone about her cousin — not even her friends or her parents — and the abuse continued.

She first realized that something was wrong when she was 9 years old and her older sister walked into the room while the cousin was molesting her.

The sister was shocked, but she too did not tell anyone about it.

"In Latino culture, you are taught that your family comes first, and you do not say anything that brings shame to the family," Rodriguez-Castillo said.

Throughout the United States, child sexual abuse has become a "silent epidemic," creating mental and social havoc for children, adult survivors and society, Rodriguez-Castillo said. Child sexual abuse occurs across ethnic, religious and socio-economic lines.

An estimated one out of three girls is a victim of sexual abuse, as well as one out of six boys, according to Rodriguez-Castillo.

Later in life, De LaGarza went away to college, but her intense feelings of fear, insecurity and self-blame continued.

When dating, she sought relationships with hateful, angry and violent men.

She joined a group counseling program in 1999 with other victims

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of child sexual abuse at the Survivors Healing Center in Santa Cruz. At 34, De LaGarza sat in a therapy group and, for the first time, told of how her cousin sexually abused her.

"I did not want (sexual abuse) to impact my decisions for the rest of my life," De LaGarza said.

During the interview, De LaGarza looked down at a newspaper article stating a former martial arts instructor in Watsonville was sentenced to 15 days in prison for sexual battery of an 11-year-old girl.

"Fifteen days," De LaGarza said shaking her head. "The law does not support victims in this case," De LaGarza said quietly.

She noted that she would never be able to press charges against her cousin because the crime happened more than 30 years ago.

Survivors of child sexual abuse commonly experience short- and long-term effects of low self-esteem, depression, self-destructive behaviors, eating issues, shameful feelings and fear of other people and situations.

Stopping thousands of children

from quietly suffering behind closed doors will take both parents and teachers educating our youth, Rodriguez-Castillo said, adding that "child sexual abuse is not just one person's problem, it the whole community's problem."

De LaGarza overcame her insecurities and fear of disgracing her cousin in the eyes of the rest of the family.

"Why should he live with privilege when I had to live with pain? I did not owe him anything," she said.

Even though she is now an activist, raising awareness of child sexual abuse, some family members to this day do not believe her. De LaGarza said she has done her part.

De LaGarza went from being emotionally paralyzed to becoming director of a nonprofit organization in Santa Clara, dating a supportive boyfriend and living happily in her Watsonville home.

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A demonstration to raise awareness of child sexual abuse, Walk to Stop the Silence, will start at the corner of St. Patrick's Church in Watsonville on April 21 at 11 a.m. The Survivors Healing Center urges people who are being abused or have been in the past to call 423-7601.