THE KANSAN

Shattered innocence: Child abuse destroys families

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It started in November of 2015, when then 10-year-old "Kim" had a talk with her mother.

"(She) told me words a parent never wants to hear. They were devastating," said "Jennifer."

Kim told a story of sexual abuse by a member of her extended family. The Kansan has extended anonymity to the family members to ensure the identity of a minor involved in a sexual abuse case is not revealed.

"How she framed it, there was no reason to believe that she was lying or to think that this did not happen," Jennifer said.

A school teacher, Jennifer is a mandatory reporter. With what she had just been told by her daughter, she and Kim's father John had a decision to make.

For the couple, it was easy.

"That was a blessing. We did not have to sit and struggle with if we were going to come forward with or not, she had no choice," John said

Jennifer went to the school resource officer in her school district, who immediately began investigating. With the help of other agencies, Kim was taken to the Heart-2-Heart Child Advocacy Center. There, she was asked to tell her story again.

She was not alone — both literally and figuratively — when she was taken to an interview room. The center has worked about 144 cases in the last year. Heart to Heart Child Advocacy Centers serves children ages 3-18 (and their non-offending family members). Case load varies from 120 to 174 forensic interviews each year.

“Have the cases always been high? Probably so,” said Sheriff T.Walton, who founded the center 15 years ago. “Have we provided enough education in the last 15 years that people need to report? Probably so. ... The reporting is getting better. That is important. Get the reports in so we can start working on your mental health.”

Kim was, as expected, nervous and apprehensive.

She was taken to an interview room, designed for children, with child advocate. Once there, she was able to tell her story — quickly.

“We had not even gotten our names on the forms when the detective came back and said ‘she told me what she needed to tell me, you know what you need to know, and I am done,’” John said.

That statement, along with the ensuing investigation and a confession from the accused, led to an arrest on a pair of rape charges along with a pair of indecent liberties with a child charges. Next up for the family was navigating the court system.

They also had to deal with the destruction of a family.

“This is truly like a death,” said Dede Trumble, a child advocate with the Heart-2-Heart Center. “You go through the same cycles of grief. ... You really have lost something.”

Kim, her mother and her father can not be in the same room as the accused — who will face sentencing this summer — the pain is just too great.

There were several incidents, over the course of a short period of time a couple of years before she came forward. When John confronted the accused, he was told Kim had “put a stop to it with him.”

“Whatever was in her head, she knew this was not right,” John said. “That was the end of it for couple of years. She had a vague idea that this was not right, but she didn’t really understand how serious it was until they watched some videos about inappropriate touching at school.”

She also saw a news report about a man from Wichita headed to prison for something similar.

According to Kerri Grosch, after a confrontation between Kim and the accused, Kim began to fear for the safety of younger siblings.

“She was also worried about some other children he had access to,” John said. “After an hour of phone calls to others, I came to find out he has a history. … though no charges have ever been brought.”

Kim is now in therapy to deal with the trauma, while her family tries to recover around her.

The family will face a sentencing hearing this summer, one last legal day. However, changes to the family and to Kim will last a lifetime.

“Her personality changed a little bit, she is not as fearless socially as she used to be, but that is not debilitating,” John said.