

MY VOICE

My name is Ruth-Ann Klassen Shantz. Silver Lake Mennonite Camp has been an important part of my life as a camper, Counselor in Leadership Training, summer camp staff (1984- 1987), Board Chair, board member and volunteer at work weekends for the past twenty years.

I was sexually abused by Lawrence Pentelow, who was Camp Director at Silver Lake Mennonite Camp from 1978 to 1987.

Lawrence became Camp Director at Silver Lake when I was 12 years old. My three older siblings spent their summers in leadership positions at camp. I was a camp kid. Lawrence quickly became part of my world. He knew me well. I trusted him. My family trusted him. I spent time with Lawrence and his wife and their young children. I went to their cottage. He was welcomed into my family home in the off season. We were like family.

The years of grooming and sexual abuse by Lawrence robbed me of what camp was meant to be for me and more importantly, robbed me of who I was meant to be. I have perfected the art of falling asleep quickly so that I do not have to lie awake remembering him leaning over me, breathing on me and touching me. He rubbed my back. He rubbed my legs. He fondled me. He put his fingers inside me. He exposed himself. He masturbated. He talked. I pretended to listen. I said nothing. I did nothing. I felt powerless. As a teenager, I had no way of predicting the lasting impact of his abuse and my silence.

I have spent my whole life denying the depth of my pain because I did not want the truth to hurt anyone else. My inability to ask for help when I was 17 years old was deeply rooted in my desire to spare both the people and the institutions I loved. I maintained the secret for many reasons, for many people and for reasons that I shouldn't have. I felt deep shame for what he had done to me – and deep shame for letting it happen. How could I explain it? I trusted him. He betrayed my trust.

I live every day with the memories of abuse. I cannot erase the memories. For years, I tried to ignore them. I somehow thought that if I kept silent, I would not have to own the pain. He made me believe I was nothing and in doing so he took part of my life. I did not understand that my life had been destroyed by Lawrence - my abuser.

So why now?

Through counselling, I learned that the abuse will always be part of who I am, but it will not define me. I choose to not let it define me! I worked hard to find the path that I should have been on before the grooming and the abuse began. I went back to university as an adult and completed my undergraduate degree and then my MBA from Bluffton University.

To move forward, I had to go back...35 years, to confront myself. As a 17-year-old, I stayed silent. I asked people to stay silent. I told people I was okay. I never told anyone what he physically did to me.

It has been Bluffton's motto "The Truth Makes Free" that has anchored me, given me courage and helped me to find the strength to discover my voice. I am a survivor!

This statement is about honoring my 17-year-old self and every other girl, daughter, mother or grandmother who has stayed silent. I cannot recapture those lost years when I chose silence and protecting others. It has taken me 35 years to choose me. It does not matter what your circumstances are in life or who has created them. Please choose you. Always choose you. It has taken me a very long time to get this right.

Ruth-Ann Klassen Shantz - July 2018