

## **Abusers in Positions of Authority**

*Lynette Gilmore, Family Advocate, Family Advocacy Center*

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. The FAC is providing information this month to raise awareness of the many different ways in which sexual abuse can occur. One issue which is in the news frequently and is central to the #Metoo movement is that people who hold roles of authority are capable of using that authority to get access to vulnerable individuals and sexually abuse them. Sexual assault and child sexual abuse can affect everyone, it does not discriminate. This type of trauma affects all gender identities, ages, levels of income, single and double parent households, and races and nationalities. As we come from various backgrounds, we put our trust in certain members of society - teachers, coaches, supervisors, law enforcement officers, spiritual/religious leaders, doctors, nurses, care takers, therapists, political leaders, etc. They are "Authority Figures" in our eyes. In the field of sexual assault and child sexual abuse, they are called Positions of Authority. These individuals are often seen by us as friendly, helpful, supportive, well-liked, honorable and kind. They are praised for what they do. We can typically trust people in these roles, as we should. However, in some cases, this trust can be violated. You may have heard of high profile sexual assault and child sexual abuse cases involving Harvey Weinstein, who used his power house authority in Hollywood to sexually assault women; Larry Nassar, who used his medical practice to sexually abuse Olympic gymnasts; Catholic Priests, who used their role in the church to abuse children; and most recently, Nathan Chasing Horse, who used traditional religious practices to target vulnerable women and girls and sexually abuse them. Perpetrators use their position to gain the trust of their victims. The trust might have been gained through the use of grooming tactics or during times of vulnerability and need in an individual or family. Or, simply because of the role an authority figure has in a community, they are trusted.

All survivors are up against a huge battle when sexual abuse of this nature occurs. The battle is internal - emotionally, mentally, physically and spiritually. The battle is also external because society, supporters of the perpetrator, communities, the work environment, friends and family are not likely to believe an authority figure is capable of such heinous acts. Sexual assault and child sexual abuse is a shocking and unspeakable act. It is difficult to heal from this abuse because the memory never leaves. It can often feel like a never ending nightmare. Now, factor in that the abuse and/or assault came from a public figure or someone "everyone" likes or puts on a pedestal. Think about being a child or someone in a vulnerable state and having to disclose the abuse to anyone, let alone report it to an agency or law enforcement. The pressure and fear of the unknown or imagined consequences can be consuming. It can feel like it's your word against the perpetrator as well as their supporters. It is a constant mental, emotional and spiritual battle. It becomes something one must live and cope with every day because the abuse was by an authority figure who continues to have a prominent role in the community.

As dark as this feels, there's hope. Every survivor has a voice. When that voice is ready to speak their truth it is powerful. Hearing that voice empowers other survivors to come forward and speak their truth. The voices get stronger and louder. The journey for healing and justice begins.

In Diné culture, we are called Bila Ashlá'ii - five fingered beings, it is what makes us equal regardless of our background. As such people, we have free will. We will encounter so many experiences in our lives. When we are faced with negativity, challenges and trauma, we are capable of coming out of those dark places. We can be on a path of restoring beauty to our lives with understanding, support, knowledge and guidance. Healing does not happen instantly, healing takes a great amount of time and work.

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Although the abuse and trauma creates mountains and depths in our lives, we CAN heal. There is help. There are people, services and groups who can support, listen and help you be strong when the trauma is overwhelming. Such agencies and services exist solely to help sexual assault and child abuse survivors through healing and a variety of processes along the way. Healing takes time and energy but moving forward to fulfilling lives and good experiences after trauma is possible and real.

This piece on Positions of Authority was written for the purposes of prevention and awareness. It was also written to acknowledge survivors of this type of abuse. Any type of abuse by a person who is an "Authority Figure" should be reported. Reporting is optional for adults who have been sexually assaulted but it is mandatory for child sexual abuse. All survivors are brave. Survivors have voices that deserve to be heard, supported and believed, especially when the abuse was by an authority figure.

As you know, The Family Advocacy Center provides medical care, resources, referrals and healing for sexual assault and child sexual abuse survivors. We have an on-call schedule and we share call with Chinle Hospital and GIMC. We take referrals, do intakes and provide follow-up care. Feel free to call us for any questions or concerns related to sexual assault and child sexual abuse.