

Wellness warriors take on abuse

By LISA DEMER

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In a small room in a converted apartment building in east Anchorage, it's story time. Only, these tales aren't for kids.

The grown-ups in this grim circle survived childhoods filled with sexual abuse and violence and shame.

Silent for so long, here they unleash.

One by one, they tell near-strangers some of the worst things that ever happened to them. They talk about being molested, sodomized and beaten, their pleas ignored.

"The first story I remember being told was my mother didn't want me. But a little of my memories are gone. And it's because I was raised with pedophiles," a woman named Margo tells the group.

The group is part of the Family Wellness Warriors Initiative. It's a training program that targets the ongoing epidemic of abuse, neglect and violence within Alaska Native families. It teaches how to build healthy relationships through techniques rooted in storytelling.

The effort is designed for people in professions such as counseling and health care, but also for the wounded themselves, or anyone who wants to learn how to help. It's for non-Natives as well as Natives and the twist is that it welcomes abusers.

The problem is huge. Alaska in general has alarmingly high rates of child sexual abuse, domestic violence and suicide, and the numbers are even worse among Alaska Native people.

When these storytellers were children, abusers got away with it in isolated villages with little law enforcement and no system of support for damaged families. Normal boundaries were torn away over generations of historical trauma: diseases that wiped out whole generations; culture crushed by misguided missionaries, teachers and bureaucrats; villages where all the children were sent to faraway boarding schools; roles and responsibilities confused by alcohol.

"It all kind of festers into devaluing human beings. Devaluing children. Devaluing yourselves. Devaluing who we are. It easily winds up into we're just things instead of people," said Katherine Gottlieb, who started the program as Southcentral Foundation president and CEO. The foundation is the health-care arm of Cook Inlet Region Inc.

"The damage started years ago," said Rick McCafferty, a training specialist with the program who grew up in Kotzebue, where it seemed as though just about every child he knew was being abused sexually or physically.

In Lisa Dolchok's family, dark stories are spilling out.

She's 69 years old, a great-grandmother, a traditional healer and a victim of childhood sexual abuse.

All of those named in this story agreed to speak publicly to shed light on a problem they say has been hidden for too long. They say they want others to get the help they need. Some are identified only by first name.

Dolchok, her husband, a son and a daughter-in-law have become anchors in the elder-led movement to heal families.

For more than 50 years, she felt inferior, dirty and different but always blamed the wrong thing: tuberculosis suffered as a teen; being half Yup'ik, half Filipino; lacking a college degree.

"I was always wanting to be in the background behind somebody else. I didn't want to be up front. And I learned why," Dolchok said. "It's the end path of what happened as a child. At 5 years old you shouldn't be introduced to that world."

Almost no one confronted the pedophiles who found easy prey in Alaska villages and hubs.

Forty-one percent of child sexual abuse victims in Alaska are Native, according to the state Office of Children's Services. That's high considering that only about 23 percent of Alaska children and teens are Native. Every set of statistics seems grimmer than the last. One university study found that Alaska Natives in Anchorage were six times more likely to be raped than whites.

"It's almost like a way of life. What an awful thing to say. That's what I hear from women today. It seemed to be an accepted - not accepted, that's the wrong word. It's just that - ," Dolchok said, at a loss for words that made sense. Girls were told that's the way it was and if they thought different, there was nowhere to turn.

As a girl, Dolchok remembers being molested at different times by three different men - none of them Native - in villages where she grew up near Dillingham and in the hub itself. The men are all dead now.

She's been part of the warriors initiative almost from its beginnings 10 years ago. She's learned to tell her story to her clients, who come to her as a traditional healer. Nearly every one of her clients has been sexually abused and most of them never talked about it before, she said. She uses talk and prayer and healing touch, whatever they are comfortable with.

One of her abusers, she said, was a friend of her father who assured her that other children, whom he named, let him do it too. Later, he took out his pocketknife and sliced into his hand. If she ever told, he said, "I'll skin your father alive, and I'll tell you where to find him."

Only once, she tried to tell her mother. "She slapped me and said don't ever speak of this again."

Years later as an adult, Dolchok asked her mother why she didn't step in to protect her. "She said she was afraid that my dad would kill this man. I was the oldest of nine living brothers and sisters. There was no welfare and food stamps in those days."

The child kept quiet until the Catholic church arrived in her village. At 12, Dolchok confessed to a priest, who told her it wasn't her sin and made sure she was safe.

Later, a pastor at Mt. Edgecumbe boarding school in Sitka made lewd comments around her, then masturbated in front of her.

"So that's when I thought I really had a mark here that a bad man or a woman could see, that they had the right to do what they did to me," Dolchok said.

Dolchok married at 19. Her husband, Max, came from a childhood of trauma too. He said he was physically and sexually abused at the now-shuttered Wrangell Institute boarding school.

She and Max had four children. The damage done as a child snaked into her new life. Dolchok describes herself in those child-rearing days as overweight, insecure, jealous and seething with misplaced rage.

More than once, she flung dishes off the table, relishing the sound of smashing glass.

"In a sense," she said, "that is abuse, to put such fear into my own kids."

Perhaps the worst of it was that, despite all they knew and all they had been through, the Dolchoks couldn't protect some of those closest to them. One son, Max Dolchok, came forward as an adult to reveal that he too had been molested as a child, by older kids.

Dolchok found out at a Wellness Warriors conference in Fairbanks when he asked her if it was OK to speak up. Don't hold back, she told her son.

Last year at a small training conference in Anchorage, the younger Max told the group how the sexual abuse shaped him. He became a passive "nice guy." Now he's learning to assert himself more, he said.

When he finished talking, his father hugged him close.

"For me, before I came here, that was wallowing. My whole life was based on what happened to me as a kid," Max, now 46, said during a break.

The family members now talk from the heart as a result of Wellness Warriors, said his father, who is 71. He used to be really quiet, but now he's a leader, an advocate with the program and chair of the committee that oversees it.

Some in the family never found their way. Some of the victims turned into abusers, the younger Max said.

Group leaders create a safe place for people to dig down to the depths of pain, to be totally open and vulnerable, said Bobbi Donadio, program administrator. "Even though we bring people to that difficult point, we also know how to bring them back up to healing and redemption."

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