

Supporting Survivors

By Tony DeGol

It was a revelation more than four decades in the making, and one that Claire Rennie was not expecting.

She and her husband were visiting friends in Cresson in December of last year when the subject of the clergy sex abuse scandal came up in conversation. At that moment, Claire noticed a change in her husband's demeanor.

He was very quiet on their trip home to Lancaster County the next day, she recalled, and when they arrived home, he finally told her something a wife would never want to hear.

Claire's husband, who is 52 years old, shared that he was abused by a priest in the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown when he was an eight year old altar server and also by another priest while he was a high school student, also in the diocese.

"He did not tell me all of the details at that moment, but he has shared them with me slowly over time," Claire said. "It's hard to judge when he's going to talk about it or what he's going to say."

The long path for Claire's husband to finally share his story was not unique. Victims of sexual abuse always reveal details of their horror on their own timetable – often many years after the abuse occurs.

The road to healing is a life-long journey.

Claire took an important step in helping her husband heal by calling Jean Johnstone, the Victim Assistance Coordinator for the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown.

"Jean has been a huge support," admitted Claire. "She has directed us to every possible avenue to get help."

When Johnstone receives a call from a survivor of sexual abuse or his or her loved one, she



HELPING OTHERS: Victim Assistance Coordinator Jean Johnstone routinely fields calls from victims and survivors of sexual abuse. Johnstone listens to each individual's story and encourages them to seek support through counseling.

typically follows a few steps.

The first is simply listening to the person's story.

"That is such a monumental turning point for any victim because by the time they call me, it could have been years since the abuse," she stated. "I listen to their story, I document it, and report it to authorities and Children and Youth Services."

Her next move is asking how she can help.

"We don't tell them how to heal, we ask them how we can help, including if they've started counseling," she continued. "If they haven't, I make a recommendation -- a therapist who has experience in trauma-informed care."

Johnstone, who is the Exec-

utive Director of Catholic Charities, has professional experience working with at-risk children, and she has held leadership positions with various social service agencies, then learns whether or not the individual has health insurance to cover counseling expenses.

"We want to make sure they are supported and they don't incur costs," added Johnstone.

Beyond those actions, Johnstone's role includes being a source of support -- not in the role of a counselor, but as a link to the resources that could offer healing.

"I know they have a long journey ahead of them," Johnstone acknowledged. "I know counseling is the one thing that's going to help them. Making sure

they get counseling is important to me."

For Claire and her husband, the advice and guidance from Johnstone seems to be making a difference. Claire's husband has been engaged in counseling for about nine months, which is "helping tremendously."

Claire, herself, is also considering the same path -- a move Johnstone encourages.

"When someone has been abused, it affects their spouse, their family, their job, every part of their life," added Johnstone, who has handled at least 32 complaints as Victim Assistance Coordinator.

In fact, Claire admits that she has experienced a range of emotions and suffered nightmares.

Despite her own struggles, she quickly pointed out that they are miniscule compared to her husband's trials.

As the couple move forward, they do so outside of the Catholic faith. Both left the Church and are now members of the Episcopal faith tradition.

Their three children are aware of the abuse their father experienced, but, according to Claire, they do not readily discuss it.

The one priest who abused Claire's husband was laicized, the other is deceased.

"The most important thing to me is that people understand the hell these victims go through, Claire stressed.

In the case of her husband, it is a hell that ultimately came to the surface after a simple visit with friends, and one that hopefully will become more manageable with counseling and support.

Victims and survivors of clergy sex abuse – no matter when the abuse occurred – are encouraged seek support through Victim Assistance Coordinator Jean Johnstone at (814) 944-9388.

