

Best Feature Story — Profile

Third Place, Division C, Crestview News Bulletin
Florida Press Association, July 2015

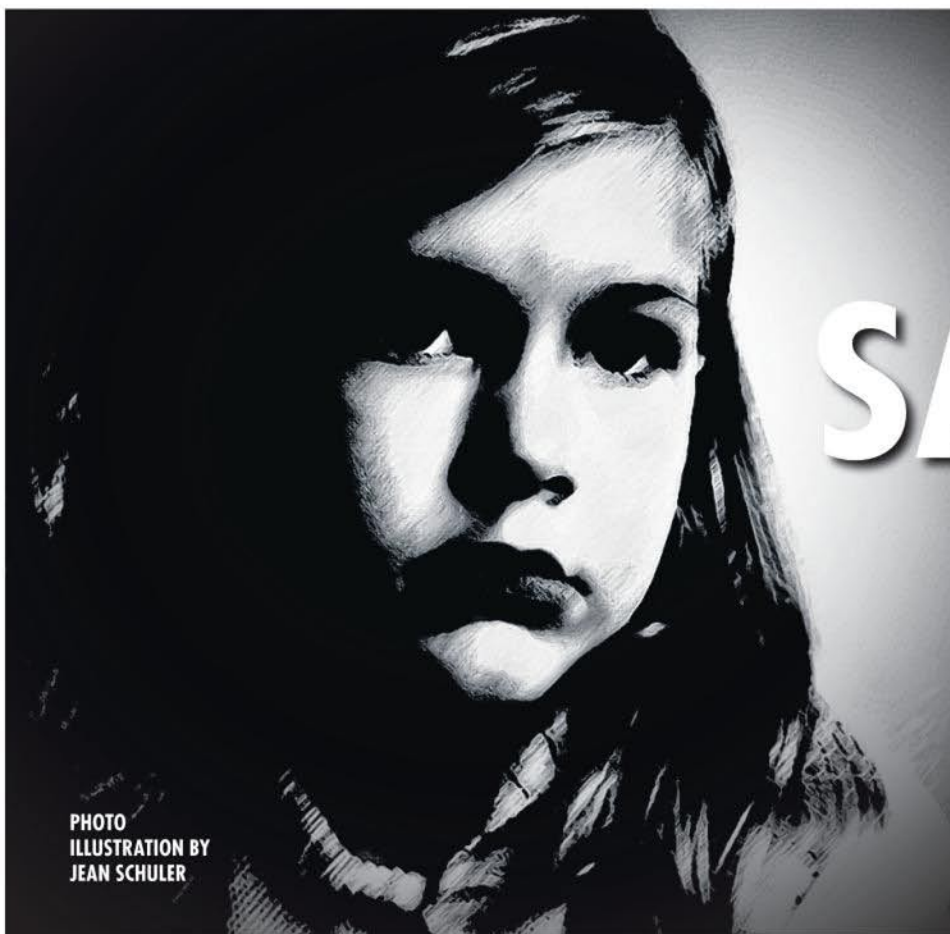


PHOTO
ILLUSTRATION BY
JEAN SCHULER

'HE SAVED MY LIFE'

Love, support help woman overcome 12 years of sexual violence

Editor's Note: Public documents support this story's facts, but we've changed some of the names to protect the survivor's privacy.

By **THOMAS BONI**
682-6524 | @cnbeditor
tboni@crestviewbulletin.com

Kayla Strong will always remember June 30, 2008: the day she decided enough was enough.

She was 17 or 18 years old, still in high school and dating Jacob, her future husband, when she realized how difficult it was to live a double life.

The couple had been together six months, and she was keeping a secret: her father sexually molests her, and he'd been doing it for as long as she could remember.

It started with him patting her but-

tocks when she was at least 5 years old, and escalated to him exposing himself and performing oral sex on her as a teenager, she said.

"Mom did a lot of traveling for work," Kayla said. "The more she traveled, the more we were left at home every day. My sister (Rose) would go to bed, and he would expect me to sleep in the bed with him."

Kayla's relationship with Jacob was becoming intimate, which complicated matters.

"I just kept feeling guilty and self-conscious, like I was cheating on my boyfriend," the 24-year-old digital media specialist said.

Explaining the situation was challenging.

"I lied to him at first," Kayla said, adding she initially told Jacob that the abuse "used to happen."

That broke more than a decade of silence, but Jacob could tell there was more to the story.

AN ULTIMATUM

"At first I didn't come forward and tell him it was my father," Kayla said. "But he kind of got it out of me and gave me an ultimatum: either you tell your mother or I'm going to tell her."

Kayla told her mother, Tammy, the truth on July 1, 2008.

"It's kind of odd, the emotion I got from her," Kayla said. "At first, it was disbelief and then it was pain. But there was an instance when I thought that she didn't believe me."

Despite this, Kayla said, she received "just an overwhelming amount of support from my mom."

See **VIOLENCE A8**

Best Feature Story — Profile

Third Place, Division C, Crestview News Bulletin
Florida Press Association, July 2015

VIOLENCE from page A1

It was the last day Kayla saw her father.

Stephen Peter Fairbanks Jr., a registered sexual offender, is still in a Bristol, Fla., prison for lewd or lascivious molestation of a victim 12-15 years old, according to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement's website.

DR. JEKYLL, MR. HYDE

Living with Fairbanks was unpredictable for Kayla and Rose.

"It was like living with a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," Kayla said. "There were many times he took my sister and I to school almost every single day, he packed us lunches every day, he cooked more than my mom did.

"In the morning, he'd be this pleasant person ... then one of us would ask to have dinner at a friend's house and it'd be just a 180. Have you seen someone get so angry that they just turn into a different person? His eyes and face would get really red. He would just get really loud and towering.

"It was like, 'Where did this come from?'"

As for boys, Fairbanks hated whoever interested Kayla.

"He almost started acting like a jealous boyfriend," she said. "Boys call the house, he would answer and would be like, 'Who the hell is that?' It's this guy I'm talking to at church."

Rose noticed how protective her father was of Kayla, and

questioned her worth.

"She asked my mom, 'Does daddy love me?'" Kayla said. "Because he would always be doing stuff with me and watch cartoons with me and play outside in the pool with me. Whenever Rose came around, it would always be, 'Go to your room.'"

SEARCHING FOR NORMAL

Kayla started to realize the relationship with Fairbanks wasn't normal.

"Other kids' dads gave them high-fives; mine gave me a pat on the butt," she said.

Still, she didn't feel right about exposing her father's secret side.

"I think in my mind for the longest time I was letting it happen almost," she said. "I think partially it's because my mom wouldn't have a husband anymore, my sister wouldn't have a dad ... for my whole life, I felt that it was more important for my family to stay in a normal household."

Her point of view changed three years later, after authorities hauled Fairbanks off, and after family members found several binders of pornography — countless images of women printed and preserved from the Internet — stashed in his man cave.

"I was the least upset to see him go," Kayla said, recalling the Fourth of July in 2008. "Everyone's really upset and I'm out with my boyfriend, watching fireworks, having the best day of my life."

TALKING IT OUT

"I think my biggest help has been talking about it with people I know," Kayla said.

She bonded with her University of North Florida sorority sisters during "firesides" — they're "basically a big cry-fest amongst 120 girls," she'll tell you.

She also found strength in UNF's Take Back the Night ceremony, an international rally and candlelight vigil that raises awareness about violence against women.

Today, Kayla has not just survived; she also seems to thrive. She has a baby boy on the way and the career she loves after bouncing between odd jobs due to the recession.

She credits Jacob's persistence six years ago for some of that.

"I always tell him that he saved my life," she said. "If I hadn't told him (about the violence), who would I have told and where would I be now?"

Support from Tammy, and a certain furry friend, also have been invaluable, she said.

"Three or four days after my dad went to prison, we bought a puppy," she said, referring to Cupcake, her cocker spaniel poodle mix. "I think just having that non-person thing to connect to helps a lot."

REMINDERS OF VIOLENCE

Sometimes, certain events and circumstances remind people of traumatic experiences, which can

"It was like living with a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

Have you seen someone get so angry that they just turn into a different person?

His eyes and face would get really red.

He would just get really loud and towering.

It was like, 'Where did this come from?'"

send cortisol through the body and trigger the "fight-or-flight" response, according to Psychology Today.

Kayla said she occasionally experiences such feelings during sexual situations with her husband.

Occasionally, even caressing is stressful, as is a rare fight, she said.

"We don't fight at all, but (when we do), the way that he gets loud kind of reminds me of how my dad used to get," she said.

"I get really shaky and crying ... I revert back into that (mind-set), like 'I'm always wrong and I shouldn't have said anything and I'm so sorry that I even brought this up and I'm so sorry for even feeling this way.'"

FINDING CLOSURE

Soon, Kayla will face the next challenge: Fairbanks's prison sentence ends in April.

"It's a little nerve-wracking," she said. "I think, with us, we're due (to have the baby) in February. He'll be living over on the east side of Florida. We're five hours away from home so there's really not the chance of running into him."

Still, a part of her wants closure.

"I wanted to reach out and visit him in prison about six months ago ... they said victims are not allowed to see their abusers," she said.

Kayla hopes that Fairbanks has reflected on the consequences of his actions.

"I have a very big feeling that he has changed," she said.

Still, after all the confusion, pain and deception, she is certain that they can't start over.

"Having any sort of father-daughter relationship is not going to be possible at this point," she said.