

Founder, Lee Ann Mead Shares her Story of Abuse –

In order to understand why I've created Sparks of Hope, I want to share my brief history of what has brought me to this point. My story may not be unique, but it is one that I have never shared publicly, and only with a few very close family members and friends. I share this for one purpose, to help kids - kids that are like I once was. Children are being abused in epidemic proportions - 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will be abused by the time they reach the age of 13. This is just the *reported* cases. We are fighting a war for our children, and I intend to, through Sparks of Hope, save as many kids from the path of destructive behavior that they often find themselves on when trying to overcome abuse. I want them to know that this is NOT how their story ends. We can make a difference. We can change lives. Please support Sparks of Hope and help us fulfill our mission to help these children.

My story - I don't remember a time that I wasn't being abused mentally, physically and sexually by my stepfather - a time before I was four years old. I see photos of myself before the abuse and wonder what could have become of this little girl but for the abuse? I mourn my childhood that could have been, but accept what it was. Truth be told, I am a strong person and I am proud of the woman I have become because of the circumstances I overcame. It made me who I am today. I have the ability to turn the ugliness that happened to me around into something good, and I am doing just that.

I remember always being afraid of my stepfather. To me, he was a monster that I despised, my stepmonster, as I call him. He had a large gun collection that he had mounted on his bedroom wall and an extensive knife collection. Not only did his gun and knife collection intimidate me, but his crude vocabulary and his size did as well. He was a very large-overweight man with large hands. When he spanked me, he really had no reason to use a belt in my opinion; his hands hurt me bad enough. He would punish me quite often when I wouldn't comply with what he wanted me to do by calling me vial names. I didn't know what these words meant when I was very young, but I knew I didn't like them. In my opinion, there is no place for the "c" word any time or anywhere. Some of his punishment would consist of him denying me visitation with my father, which I of course loved to get away, and in acting as though I didn't exist. He would address me through my mom if I was in the room. It made me feel worthless and like I didn't matter. I learned later that all of this behavior was his way of controlling me. It made me feel like I was bad – all the time, and I must have deserved it.

My family was poor. We didn't have a lot of money. My mom would cook what our family could afford with the budget she had. The food wasn't always good or easy to digest - much like her stews. The meat in her stew was of low quality with lots of fat. It would take me 5 minutes to chew one piece. I hated her stew, but had to eat it as there wasn't much else to eat and I didn't want to get into trouble. One particular dinner time of eating stew is etched into my mind and I'll use as an example of my stepmonster's cruelty. I remember that I wasn't feeling well, and couldn't stomach the stew so I decided that I might be able to get away with putting the meat into my jean pocket and later flush it down the toilet – good plan – wrong! My stepmonster saw me put a piece of meat into my pocket and came up beside me and backhanded me so hard that I flew off my chair and onto the floor and so did my food. I was told I had to eat it off the floor. We had animals and the floor was gross, but I did what he said because I was afraid. After I ate what had landed on the floor, I then had to go stand in the

corner. What I thought would be only a few hours turned into an all-nighter. I was standing there until 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning when my mother came down the stairs wondering why I was still there. Really?!

I don't want to be too graphic in my description of events as this is for public consumption, but I'm confident through my limited description you'll get the idea. From the age of 4 to 16, I lived in hell. For many years, most every night before I went to bed, I had to go say goodnight to the stepmonster. He would always take pictures of my privates and make me pose for him. If I didn't do this, he would punish me. I hate Polaroid cameras to this day. The noise from those types of cameras makes me want to vomit. In the middle of the night, he'd come into my room and fondle me and do other stuff to me and himself. I'm surprised that I didn't die as a child. I never slept. I was always afraid to go to sleep. I knew it would happen again and again – and so it did for many years. Whenever the abuse happened I froze. I thought that if I just pretended it wasn't happening or that if I complied with what he wanted it would be better for me and he wouldn't hurt me, but he always did. I hate the dark to this day, but I'm still working on moving past those issues. I also hated taking baths. Baths were never fun for me growing up as they should be for kids. For me, it meant my stepmonster would come in and touch me and want to "clean" me, but cleaning shouldn't hurt, right? It did. This is a reason why now I won't take baths in a regular bath tub – it has to be a large Jacuzzi-type bathtub in an open space. As I got older and grew into a teenager it was a rule to never lock doors. He would always walk in on me in my bedroom when I was dressing. He would always come in when I was taking a shower. He would always find a reason to touch me any time he was alone with me. I never had any privacy.

As a little girl, I felt as though I wore a sign that said "damaged", "dirty" or "sexually abused" and "worthless", and that it was obvious to everyone around me. I spent my entire childhood trying my hardest to act like I wasn't being abused. I tried to be normal. I wanted so desperately to be normal, but I knew I wasn't. I felt so alone. I think I stuffed a lot of what was happening to me down and that is why I inevitably developed Crohn's Disease. I used to have horrible stomach pain and I'd have to lie on the floor and do breathing exercises just to make the pain stop. I always had stomach pain and it's no wonder.

I never knew that I had any power to change a thing or that one day I could have my justice and my day in court until it was too late. What that monster did to me would have sent him to prison for a very long time. He died when I was 22 years old of a massive coronary heart attack. I was relieved. I smiled. I never really felt at peace until his death. Before he died, I felt as though he was always watching me. I never liked being alone for fear he would find me and hurt me. I hated that feeling. It was only after his death that I could finally move on and heal. I later learned that most of the men around me growing up on my stepmonster's side were all petifiles, and had gone to prison in the 90s or in early 2000 for abusing someone in their family. I can't say that I'm surprised.

I was angry at my mom later in my adult years because she was not there for me. She often would tell me that she knew there would come a day that I would be very angry with her because she did not protect me and because she was mean to me. She was right. I don't ever remember her being mean to me, but I remember her not protecting me. She was an alcoholic through my childhood until I was 12

years old. During that time, she was in the hospital multiple times and the doctors would say that she was killing herself and that she wouldn't live if she continued to drink. I was angry at her for that. I remember coming home from school and her being passed out on the couch. She wanted me to clean the house so the stepmonster wouldn't get pissed at her. So I would clean to avoid conflict and the fights.

As you can imagine, my mom and I had a rocky relationship where one minute I loved her to death, and then the next I was back angry at her again. We grew closer as I got older and I learned to forgive and forget for the most part, but there were times when I would get unexpected anger welling up directly at her. She knew why, and still took ownership to some degree. Through the years, I was able to tell her how I felt about her not protecting me and a little about my stepmonster's abuse of me. She would always tell me she was so very proud of me and my courage. I explained to her my passion and desire to help kids that were abused like me and she was very supportive of that. She was excited for me to do something with what happened to me. She died in March 2011, but before she died and on the day of her death, I forgave her and released her and myself. I wish she could see what I am doing now, but in some way, I think she can and is very proud.

Lastly, my *real* father has been my rock. He is the kindest, gentlest man I have ever met. He didn't know I had been abused until I was 29 years old. I prided myself on this because I wanted him to see me as undamaged. Through him, I felt as though I could feel what it was like to me a normal little girl – even if it wasn't exactly true. In his eyes, I was a princess and the light in his eye and he loved me beyond measure. He collapsed on the floor the day he found out I had been abused, and I thought we were going to have to get an ambulance for him. He was in shock and I heard him say over and over again that he tried to get me and that he didn't know. Tears welled up in his eyes, and I thought for sure he'd look at me differently from that day on. He did not. He, I think, was even more proud of me and the circumstances I overcame and of the woman I have become now. I love him so very much for that.

I have many more stories about growing up abused, having to live in other homes, god intervening and so much more. One day, I hope that I can put it all down on paper, but for now, I will spend my time pouring my heart and soul into this organization – Sparks of Hope. I want to inspire and empower children who are like I was to know that they can move passed the ugliness and into wholeness and healing.

Please join me and help us light a spark in the heart of a child. Support Sparks of Hope.