

CHILD SEX ABUSE

Long Prairie native shares story of abuse



Billy Dinkel talks about his experiences as a child Oct. 26, 2019. DAVE SCHWARZ/ST. CLOUD TIMES

William Dinkel continues to battle childhood trauma now at age 51

Nora G. Hertel
St. Cloud Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

LONG PRAIRIE — Wind rustled through prairie grass, corn stalks and rust-colored oaks on William Dinkel's hunting land on a sunny morning in October.

He woke at 5:30 a.m. to wait for

deer in a cold tree.

The time that Dinkel — known as Billy — spends outside is sacred. It's what he lives for.

And yet, around the corner from Billy's 80 acres of paradise sit two farmsteads where he says he experienced such severe trauma as a child that he must reckon with it every day.

He's 51 now. And the sexual abuse he says he endured in the late 1970s, between the ages of 8 and 13, still haunts him.

Billy bought his land in Long Prairie with guidance from his father, because he loves to hunt. It was also a way to be close to family.

Resources

Darkness to Light:

1-866-FOR-LIGHT and d2l.org

24-hour National Sexual Assault

Hotline: 1-800-656-HOPE

Jacob Wetterling Resource Center:
1-800-325-HOPE

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Two local groups try to solve the problem

Nora G. Hertel
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Child sexual abuse has been around for thousands of years, said Patrick Wall.

"To our knowledge this is a multigenerational crime that seems to exist in the human condition," said the advocate for sexual abuse lawyers Jeff Anderson & Associates and a co-author of the book "Sex, Priests and Secret Codes."

Child sexual abuse happens in every type of community, but especially within closed and hierarchical systems, said Jeffrey Dion, CEO of the Zero Abuse Project. So, how do we stop it?

First we must talk about it. "We either become comfortable talking about childhood sexual abuse, or it's going to continue," said Billy Dinkel, who shared his story of child sexual abuse with the St. Cloud Times. "Even if we get comfortable with it, it's still going to happen. The hope is it happens at a much lower rate."

Groups across Minnesota and the U.S. are working to prevent and

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Jeffrey Dion CEO of the Zero Abuse Project



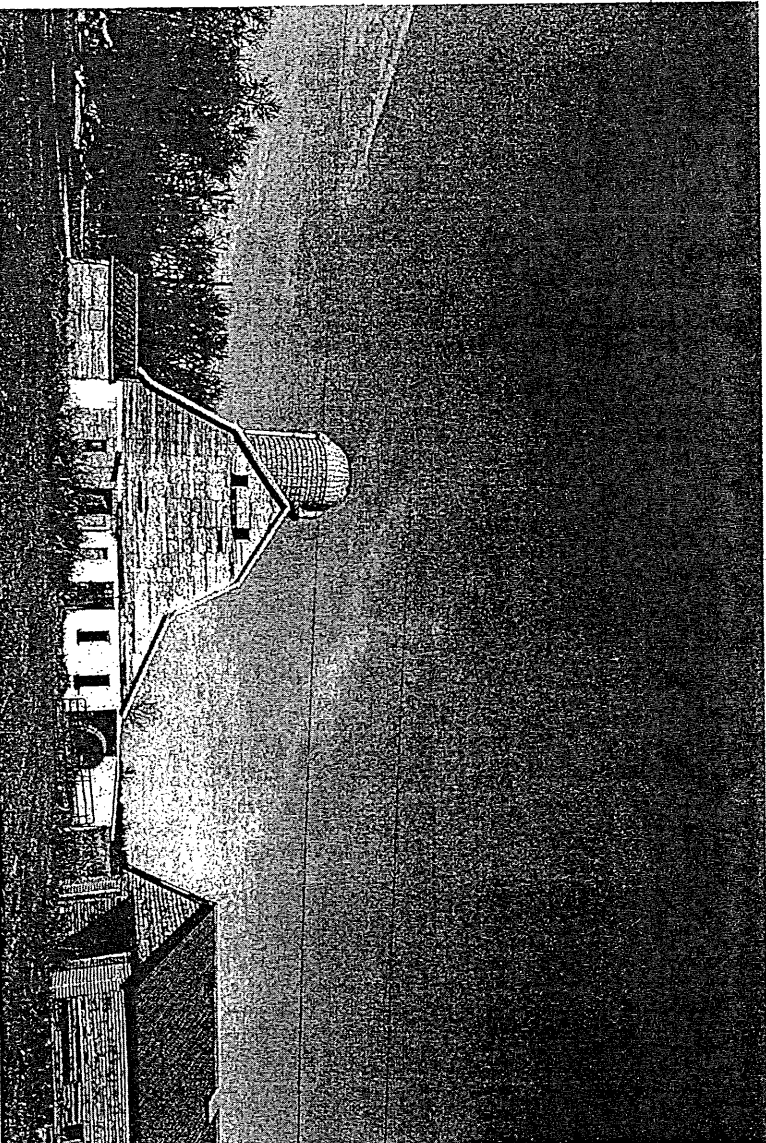
Weber

to better respond to the sexual abuse of children. That means targeted therapy for sex offenders as well as therapy and sensitive investigations for the children who report abuse and training sessions to help children, parents and faith leaders brace for potential abuse.

Central Minnesota Child Advocacy Center

The center investigates allegations of maltreatment in a child-centered manner, interviewing

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Buildings near the farmstead where Billy Dinkel grew up are pictured Oct. 26, 2019, near Long Prairie.

DAVE SCHWARZ/DSCHEWAZ@STCLOUDTIMES.COM

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"The reality is I might have been keeping myself close to a lot of pain, a lot of memories," Billy said while reflecting that October morning, the sun catching his pale green eyes. "I want to pretend that everything is OK. But it can't be."

Billy told his story to the St. Cloud Times to help himself heal and to help prevent the sexual abuse of other children.

Billy's story shows that sexual abuse can happen within well-respected families; his sister and brother-in-law served in the Minnesota Legislature. His story shows that sexual abuse can happen over and over again when left unchecked.

Billy met or talked by phone with Times' journalists more than five times in the last year. Reporters examined

court records and interviewed Billy's therapist, wife and many experts in an attempt to corroborate his story. One of his brothers provided a limited interview to the Times, three siblings declined to speak on the record, two other relatives declined to comment and several others did not respond to the Times.

No one contradicted Billy's story of sexual abuse, nor would anyone comment on the record about who may have known of the abuse as it happened.

The details of his trauma were difficult for Billy to share, and he said his nightmares increased after he recounted memories of abuse.

But he wants to talk about it. Because Billy believes silence and shame allowed his perpetrator to target him for five years.

"It's the silence that keeps it going," Billy said.

Some victims of child sexual abuse never break their silence, even though an estimated one in four women experi-

enced child sexual abuse and one in six men have.

The accused

George Orenba, the accused in this story, was never charged with crimes against Billy. As far as Billy knows, his abuse was never reported to law enforcement.

But a Morrison County court convicted George of a second-degree sex crime in 2002 after he played strip poker with a 10-year-old boy and touched that boy's penis, according to court records.

"I don't know how clearly it was said, but we weren't supposed to be alone with George," said Thomas Van Valkenburg, Billy's youngest sibling who changed his last name from Dinkel. "Without a doubt, George tried to lure us kids up to his private apartment above the garage on a

number of occasions. It didn't just happen once. It happened often." Thomas agreed to a limited interview



Billy Dinkel drives past the farmstead where he grew up Saturday, Oct. 26, 2019, near Long Prairie. DAVE SCHWARZ, DSCHEWAZ@STCLOUDTIMES.COM

with the St. Cloud Times because: "If we don't talk about it, it's destined to happen again."

George died in 2006 at the age of 48, according to his obituary. Two of his siblings declined interviews and other siblings could not be reached.

Perpetrators who are not stopped early on have an average of 50 victims, said Jeffrey Dion, CEO of the Zero Abuse Project.

And families that try to manage a case of sexual abuse at home — without alerting authorities — increase the likelihood that it will happen again, said Frank Weber, a clinical psychologist and founder of CORE professional services which provides treatment for sex offenders.

"It needs to be put in (an abuser's) face: This is just way out of bounds. And we're not going to accept it. And we're going to hold you accountable for it," Weber said.

Neighbors

Billy grew up in a Catholic family of 12 children on a dairy farm outside Long Prairie.

Across the road lived Billy's oldest sister, Mary Ellen, and her husband Ken Orenba. They farmed as well.

George, who is Ken's brother, lived with Ken and Mary Ellen for roughly 20 years starting when Billy was in elementary school. George helped on both farms; Billy described him as developmentally disabled.

George abused Billy in barns, his bedroom and outside at both family farms, according to Billy.

Kennard Mary Ellen, both Long Prairie Democrats, would later serve as representatives in the Minnesota House of

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Representatives.

Billy believes Ken knew George abused him and that other members of the family and community knew that George posed a threat to children.

"Ken absolutely knew. No question about it," Billy said. He remembers more than a dozen times when Ken or Mary Ellen walked in on George abusing him.

Ken and Mary Ellen are no longer alive to respond to Billy's claims, and their children did not want to be interviewed. Ken died in 1997, and his obituary describes him as a lover of family activities and carpentry, along with with years of public service.

Ken served in the Legislature from 1995 to 1997, showing up even as he was treated for the liver cancer that ultimately killed him. A Navy veteran of the Vietnam War, he also served as a Todd County Commissioner and a Reynolds Township officer, according to the Legislative Reference Library.

Ken's wife, Mary Ellen, took over that legislative seat when Ken died and served seven terms. She died in 2004.

Thomas has fond memories of Mary Ellen and Ken, his sister and brother-in-law who acted more as parents. They helped care for him, even bringing him along on some of their vacations, he said.

Mary Ellen was patient with Thomas and taught him how to sew. And Ken worked with him to fix a snowmobile and encouraged him to program a computer.

"I really loved them," Thomas said. "And I can't imagine myself in their situation."

Speaking out

Billy waited for his mother to die before he came forward publicly about his abuse.

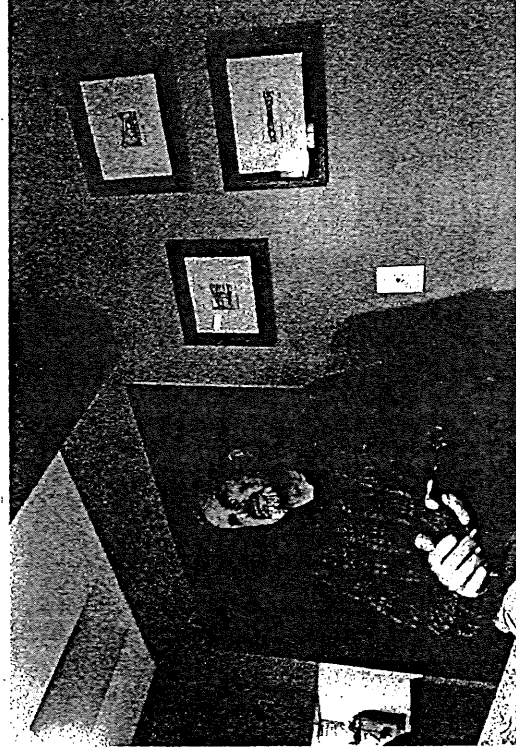
He remembers telling her as an 8-year-old that George touched him and asking her for her help. She responded by shushing him, Billy said.

Decades later, Billy's mother denied knowledge of the abuse, he said.

A year after he told his mother, Billy said, he asked a priest at the St. Mary of Mount Carmel Parish to help, and the father shrugged and said to a 9-year-old Billy: "What do you want me to do about it?"



Billy Dinkel's school pictures from first grade (left) when he was 6 years old and sixth grade when he was 11 at St. Mary's School in Long Prairie. WILLIAM DINKEL



Billy Dinkel shares memories of his childhood during an interview at his home Oct. 2, 2019. DAVE SCHWARZ/DSCHWARZ@STCLOUDTIMES.COM

At the time, the state did not require priests to report suspected child sexual abuse to law enforcement. In 2003 the St. Cloud Diocese adopted a Sexual Misconduct Policy to help protect children and young people.

At age 10, Billy wrote a letter to one of his brothers about the abuse and never heard back, he said.

"I'm so proud of that kid for trying and trying and trying," Billy said of his

younger self. "I didn't have anywhere to run."

He was trapped, and in retrospect, he feels betrayed by the adults he hoped would protect him.

Today Billy is estranged from most of his family.

He has considered selling his hunting spot near the old farm. But Billy put a lot

of effort into his land and it's a refuge for him. He planted trees and crops that lure

deer away from the perfect rows of corn nearby.

Billy believes the adults who might have known about George's behavior didn't report it to police because they worried about their reputation. He called it: "Losing your seat in church."

Years later, Billy stopped going to Mass after a priest prayed for the church — but not the victims — in the Roman Catholic Church's ongoing scandal of covering up child sexual abuse.

"They're taking their cues directly from the Catholic Church," Billy said about those who ignored his pleas for help.

It was not until 1997 that Minnesota law required clergy to report suspicions of child abuse, said Patrick Wall, a former monk and St. John's University football player. He is now a California-based advocate for sexual abuse lawyers Jeff Anderson & Associates.

"Maybe the easiest way to avoid scandal is in the adage: 'We don't air our dirty laundry in public,'" Wall said. "People learn those aphorisms. And kids internalize that and don't feel comfortable to come forward and say something."

That's been changing in recent years, Wall said. The surge of allegations that describe Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein as a serial predator and the subsequent #MeToo movement encouraged people to come forward with their own stories.

As a white man, Billy knows he doesn't match what people imagine when they think of a sexual abuse victim. But the #MeToo movement inspired him, too.

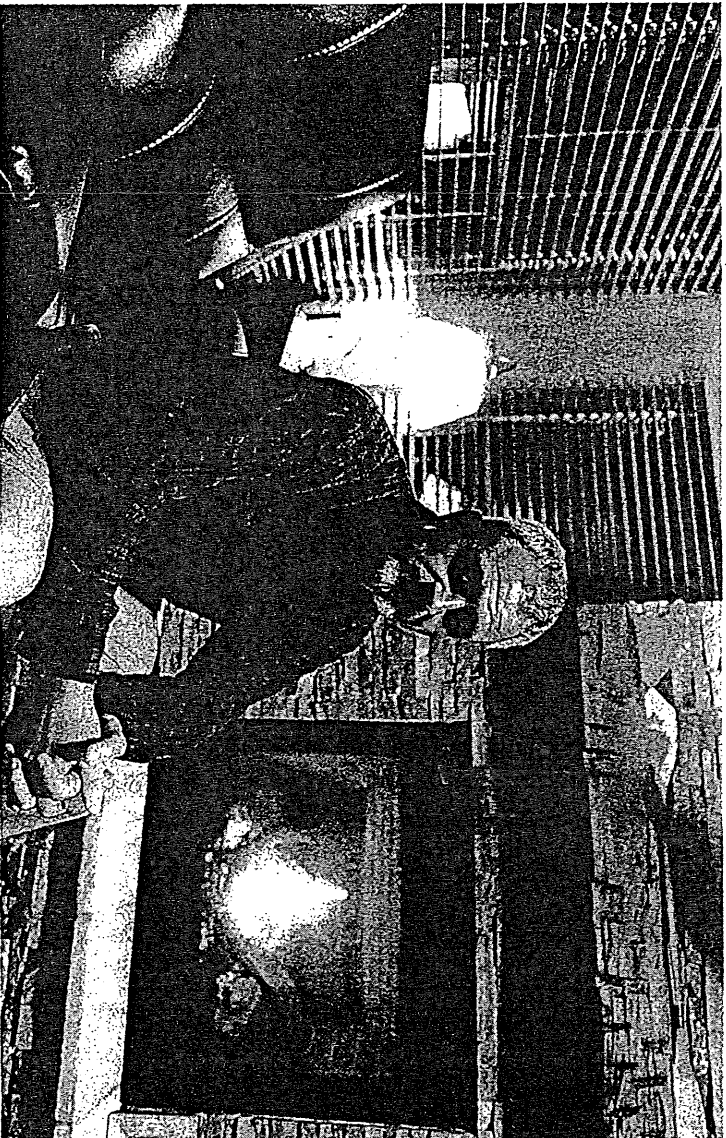
A traumatic childhood

Billy was born in 1968 and grew up helping on the family dairy farm. He was the 10th of 12 children in a devout Catholic family.

Billy's father died in 2001. He was a World War II Army veteran who served in Italy; he ran a dairy farm for 50 years and was involved in various associations from the Todd County DFL to the NRA, according to his obituary. Billy's mother died in 2015, and her obituary describes her as a kind person focused on family and friends, a good cook and someone who enjoyed finding treasures at garage sales.

Billy has harsher memories of his par-

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Billy Dinkel is pictured at his home Wednesday, Oct. 2, 2019. DAVESCHWARZ, DSCHWARZ@STCLOUDTIMES.COM

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ents.

His parents were tough on the children, assigning chores and doling out punishment when they weren't done. In hindsight, Billy views his father as physically abusive and his mother as emotionally abusive.

Billy remembers a specific time his father hit him for spilling milk. Around the age of 3 or 4, Billy said he blacked out briefly and found, when he came to, that his blood had turned the milk pink.

"You didn't spill your milk," Billy said. "That's the intensity of my father's rage."

Within that environment, as Billy started to become curious about bodies and sexuality, he recalls George began to groom him.

George would have been about 18, but he had some cognitive or developmental issues that made him seem younger, Billy said. "It's perfectly obvious when you met George that he's not all there."

Because of that, George spent time a lot of time with children, Billy said.

In a 2002 court transcript George's attorney described him as "technically not mentally handicapped, he is borderline range of having a little difficulty expressing himself."

He lived and worked two decades on Ken and Mary Ellen's farm, spent a few years with his mother after that and then moved to a home in Pierz with food and special services for residents.

George was well-liked, considered fun and funny, even by Billy. He played cards and other games and was a member of the Christian men's group Promise Keepers, according to his obituary.

After Billy turned 8, George started to talk to him about anatomy and sex, topics both foreign and intriguing to the boy. "He's my buddy," Billy remembered thinking about George. "He's going to teach me the naughty stuff."

After talking about sex, Billy says George started to sexually abuse him.

The abuse escalated and continued as Billy tried to stop it.

He estimates that at least 300 times,

George performed or coerced oral sexual contact and raped him with his thumb or nearby objects, Billy said. That's more than once a week for five years in addition to groping and other touches.

George was bigger than Billy by more than 100 pounds, he estimated. And George would assault Billy, to various extents, whenever they were alone, Billy said.

Billy felt guilty for years and feared that he allowed George to touch him, he said.

Children cannot legally consent to sex, but they don't understand that abuse is not their fault, Dion said, CEO of the Zero Abuse Project. "Most sexual abuse is not forced. It's coerced."

The summer after Billy turned 13, he got the chance to fight back against George. Before he could hold Billy down, Billy repeatedly kicked George in the face.

"There was a lot of blood," Billy remembered. "I kicked three of his teeth out."

George, whose teeth were already rotted, got dentures after the incident, Billy

Billy started to make some lifestyle changes after one of his relationships ended and his ex-girlfriend told him to figure out his drinking problem. He got sober and started to see a therapist to address depression.

said. Billy was punished by his father for beating up George, for being angry.

Still today, the smell of rotting teeth triggers Billy.

"I will never forget George's teeth," he said.

'I'm not like everyone else'

Billy's experience of grooming and abuse, silencing and shame led to fallout that's typical for survivors of child sexual abuse.

He still thrived in some parts of his life. He became homecoming king, class vice president and a three-sport athlete in high school.

When Billy was 17, another trusted adult sexually assaulted him. He attempted to kill himself after that. And his freshman year of college, another student sexually assaulted him, Billy said.

Victims of sexual assault are more likely to be targeted in additional assaults than people who weren't victims in the first place.

It's also common for victims to develop addictions and disorders, anxiety and depression, Dion said.

After high school and into his 20s Billy was a big drinker and a womanizer, he said.

His drinking helped him forget, and his sexual exploits were a way to re-entact the trauma stored in his body, Billy said. He relates to the work of trauma scholars who describe hypersexuality as a reaction to sexual abuse, because it provides some catharsis for victims.

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Billy Dinkel talks about his experiences as a child Saturday, Oct. 26, 2019, on land he owns near Long Prairie near where he grew up.

DAVE SCHWARZ, DSCHWARZ@STCLOUDTIMES.COM

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sober and started to see a therapist to address depression. It was 1995, and he was 27.

Billy learned he had developed complex post-traumatic stress disorder — PTSD with related issues including alcoholism and a sex addiction in Billy's case. He's now in his third decade of treatment and recovery.

"I've been desperately trying to find out why I'm not like everyone else," Billy said.

A breakthrough and a broken chair

Billy didn't tell his wife Nancy Haas about the childhood abuse until they'd been married for more than five years. He had not really acknowledged it to himself either.

The couple lives in St. Paul now, and they met through Billy's sister, Mary Ellen, who knew Nancy through work at the Capitol.

Mary Ellen kept suggesting to Nancy that she meet Billy and date. Nancy is a lawyer and a lobbyist, and she worked in the Capitol at the same time Mary Ellen served as a lawmaker.

"I just went to get Mary Ellen off my back," Nancy said of her first date, with Billy.

Billy knew after four or five dates that they were a match, he said. He admired Nancy, her drive and success, her emotional fortitude and her looks — she's tall and played college basketball.

"Emotionally she is so much stronger than I am," Billy said. "When she wants to do something, she just does it."

He told her that he was in therapy for alcoholism and severe bouts of depression. And she was understanding.

The two married in July 2001. Around 2006 or 2007, Billy's bad dreams intensified: dreams about George and about Billy's father. He almost hit Nancy in his sleep, and that's when she pressed him to work out whatever caused that behavior.

His therapist referred him to a residential facility in Arizona, ostensibly for his depression. And there he had a breakthrough.

Billy broke a chair in a group therapy session after a counselor urged him to finally say out loud what happened to him as a child — that he had been violently sexually abused for years and no one intervened.

"It was OK to be angry. It was OK to say it out loud," Billy said of his first big disclosure. "After that it became a little bit easier, and a little bit easier and a little bit easier."

A long road to healing

Nancy understood Billy better when she learned what happened to him.

"For so long he didn't talk about it," Nancy said. "And when you don't talk about it, you don't realize some of the problems you're having have a deeper root."

The knowledge that Billy was abused stirred up "immense" care and concern, she said. She has learned to be a good listener when Billy needs to talk, and she tries to help him move forward.

"He's a wonderful human being who cares about people, who's fun to be around and is a great partner," Nancy said. "It happens that we have to deal with some things that happened to him. Just like every couple has to deal with things like that."

The history of abuse has challenged their marriage, but Billy names Nancy and her family as cornerstones of support. And support is key to healing.

"You need people around who can understand that something really bad happened to you and you need to do something to address that every day, in your own way," Billy said.

Billy acknowledged what happened to him as a child in the mid-2000s, and he went on to start his own business, Ad-

vanced Auto Service in New Brighton. Now he manages fleet maintenance for the Ramsey County Sheriff's Office squad vehicles.

Previously Billy sold cars and tools and worked in chambers of commerce. He lost jobs due to his mental health issues, he said.

His own business took a lot of time and he drifted away from a long-time therapist. He found another when he started gaining weight.

He started with Maggie Christopher in 2014, initially to address weight gain and issues with food. But it turned out that his unresolved trauma was at the heart of those problems too.

Maggie is a psychotherapist and a holistic nutrition counselor. She also is a Quantum Neurological Reset Therapy practitioner, a treatment that "helps bring balance to the brain and nervous system after experiencing toxic stress and trauma."

"You cannot just do talk-level therapy when there's trauma involved," Maggie said. "Because trauma is stored in the body."

So she worked with Billy to resolve the trauma he carried around since childhood. He read books she recommended and worked to understand shame.

The same year Billy started to work with Maggie, he confronted his mother about the abuse in his past. She denied that Billy had ever told her about George's assaults, Billy said. And she denied it ever happened and accused Billy of making it up, he recalls.

He skipped Christmas that year. His mother died the following February.

Billy stays away from most of his family these days.

"All he wants is someone to say, 'I'm sorry this happened to you. I understand. And I love you anyway,'" Nancy said. "That's all he wants."

Moving forward

To keep surviving, Billy has a list of strategies to get through each day. He exercises, eats well and gets seven to nine hours of sleep.

He's working on a book about his experience as a survivor.

"I don't think that this is important because it involves me. I think this is one of the most important stories, because of the topic," Billy said. "My story is a pretty darn good example of classic childhood sexual abuse, silencing, enabling."

For years he pretended the sexual abuse didn't happen. He tried to "white-knuckle it."

He's sometimes angry and fearful, but he has generally come to peace with what happened to him four decades ago. "Although it happened, it doesn't define me," Billy said. "It's part of who I am but it doesn't need to define me."

In his own words: *Go online to scrib.com to watch Billy talk about his childhood, abuse and recovery.*

Nora Hertel is the government watchdog reporter for the St. Cloud Times. Reach her at 320-426-1404 or rihertel@stcloudtimes.com. Follow her on Twitter @righertel.

Resources

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Childhelp: 1-800-422-4453 and childhelp.org

Central Minnesota Sexual Assault Center: cmsac.org and 1-320-251-4357.

Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault: mncasa.org

RAINN (the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network): rainn.org

Zero Abuse Project: zeroabuseproject.org

