

## Kelsey Holberg- Victim Impact Statement

Thank you for the opportunity to share my victim impact statement today. After many years of personal work, therapy, and deepening my relationship with God, I've learned that the impact of childhood sexual abuse is very complex and interwoven throughout every aspect of my identity and life. At the last hearing Michael's attorney was asking him a bunch of questions regarding the plea deal, one question that I keep playing over in my head is, he asked Michael if he touched my vagina. As if that was the extent of his wrongdoing, violating my body without my consent. And the reality of experiencing long term, excessive sexual abuse in one's formative years is that the act is the least traumatic thing about it. I'm going to try and illustrate what the impact of being molested by Michael starting at the age of 7 has been in my life.

I'll start with some obvious things. While the abuse was happening, I remember he would rub my vagina to the point of causing severe irritation. Prepubescent vaginas do not produce the same lubrication as adult vaginas. I can remember sitting down to use the bathroom and literally feeling like the wind was knocked out of me and not being able to breathe because the pain of urine making contact with my raw, unlubricated, prepubescent vagina was so great. It was to the point where I avoided using the bathroom if I could or going to the bathroom in the lake. I can remember wearing pullups until I was 12 or 13 and having numerous bedwetting accidents at home and at friend's houses, being made fun of for wearing diapers and wetting the bed so late in life. If you're unaware, bedwetting is a common symptom of sexual abuse in children.

I was void of emotion from an early age. I now know and understand that when a child experiences great trauma that they subconsciously try and protect themselves by disassociating to keep themselves safe from being present to what's happening to them. I didn't have any real emotional reactions to life. I've only started to really have feelings and understand my own feelings in the last couple years and I'm 35 years old. It's been roughly 20 years since the abuse stopped and I am finally starting to feel and operate like a whole person. For 30+ years I existed as a shell of a person.

I did not want to feel or be present for what was happening to me, my little 7 year old brain could not handle it. I smoked my first cigarette when I was 8 years old, about a year after Michael started touching my vagina and having me stimulate his penis. I would huff sharpies, smoke rolled up newspaper, anything to escape myself. When I was 12, I started drinking alcohol and smoking weed and eventually started doing harder drugs. At a minimum his abusive sexual conduct expedited the start of my use and amplified my drug addiction. I was able to get sober and have been sober for over 18 years.

All the things I've described are painful parts of my story and not easy things to preserve through, but again what I've described so far isn't the devastating part of prolonged, repetitive, childhood sexual abuse. It's the things you can't see.

When I was 7 and Michael forced sexual intimacy with me at an age I was not developmentally capable of processing, it created a domino effect on my ability to meet developmental milestones throughout my life. I can remember him putting my hand on his penis and putting his hand over mine and forcing me to massage his penis. I can remember him forcing my head towards his penis in what I now would assume was an attempt to have me perform oral sex on him. I did not understand what was happening and felt frozen in my own body. When I think back to those first instances and now being a grown woman and a mother, it makes my heart hurt for the little girl I see in my memories. He robbed that precious, little girl of her innocence and sense of safety. He robbed her of her virtue. He robbed the little girl inside me of the opportunity to grow and develop healthy coping skills, have safe relationships, have a sense of self and positive self-worth. I can now see so clearly how detrimental his abuse has been on my ability to form meaningful relationships, regulate my nervous system and thrive in life. Michael's forced sexual intimacy ingrained in my young, impressionable, developing brain that I did not have a choice when it comes to doing what men want. That my body was not my own. It made me susceptible to being abused by others both in childhood and adulthood. I have worked very hard on these issues through therapy and personal development over the years and have made tons of progress, but the impact on my life is permanent.

So, when Michael admitted to touching my vagina at the last hearing, on one hand it was nice that he is acknowledging what happened, because as you are aware these crimes are committed in secret and most victims struggle to overcome the impact in secret. Just as I have for most of my life. But touching my vagina doesn't really speak to the real crimes committed against me.

I learned that Michael is in therapy learning about the devastating impacts the abuse has had on me and I hope, dealing with his own issues too. According to his therapist he acknowledges what he did was wrong and is showing remorse. If that's true then I am happy for him and appreciate his remorse, however the defense is moving to dismiss the case today. If Michael is truly remorseful and has any care or any concern for making amends to me then he would be willing to take responsibility and be accountable for his actions. Nowhere along this journey has 7 yr old Kelsey been prioritized or supported. And if, he is remorseful and wants to try and make anything right then he would stop doing more harm to me and do what will be beneficial to my healing and my future, not his. He has taken so much from me and our family. Having remorse is nice, but what he did was wrong and there should be severe consequences for those actions. As I said before, the impacts from this type of trauma are complex and impact every aspect of a person and how they see themselves, how they exist and function in the world. He dramatically disturbed my ability to meet healthy childhood development milestones that has devastated my ability

to thrive. Causing issues of severe insomnia and anxiety, to drug abuse, teen pregnancy, the inability to connect and form secure attachments in interpersonal relationships, and sexual and romantic relationships...

As a people we've made progress with acknowledging that childhood sexual abuse is happening a lot more than people think and at face value people understand that it's wrong and traumatic, but I do not think people really comprehend the devastating impact that victims have to work through throughout their whole lives to heal and become healthy, functioning people. I have leaned on and had support from so many beautiful people who have had similar experiences, but even in their 50s and 60s, they are still 'managing' the implications of their abuse in their lives. It never goes away.

When I told my family about the abuse when I was a teenager there were mixed feelings on whether I should take legal action or not. My grandmother, who is Michael's father's cousin discouraged it at the time. She was concerned about how it would impact the family dynamics at the family camp where this all took place. She also didn't think that legal action would help me heal or cope with what he did to me. I respect and love my grandmother so very much, she had been a pillar of love and support throughout my life helping me navigate all the carnage the abuse and resulting behaviors the abuse caused in my life. I tried to deal with what had happened in private so as not to cause issues within our family. I did a lot of therapy in preparation for having to see him at a family union in 2011 and planned to meet with him to deal with what was going on with me privately. I don't remember much of what I said specifically, but I tried to tell him how his actions impacted my life. Funny enough, I didn't even understand the full extent of it at that moment in time. I do remember him saying that he was sorry and that he was afraid to be around children because of what he did to me.

Fast forward, when the "me too" movement started I had a whole new set of feelings of shame and guilt based on the principle of not saying anything. What if I wasn't his only victim and I have this information and am choosing to be quiet? I thought about him saying how he was afraid to be around children often and carried the weight of knowing what he was capable of. It sickens me the dozens of people I personally know who have experienced sexual trauma in childhood and adulthood, women and men ranging from 20 yr olds to 60 yr olds. None of them have seen justice. Unfortunately, that is the norm. Although, as a people we agree these crimes are unacceptable, our legal system's actions or inaction in many of these cases does not mirror that sentiment.

After more therapy and personal development, I realized that I had been prioritizing everyone else's comfort including Michael's, over the hurting little girl inside myself. I physically could not do it anymore, impact to others aside. I decided I shouldn't be the only one carrying the weight of Michael's choices. I was protecting Michael and other's from the pain and suffering caused at the expense of a little girl who was ignored and abused. By not coming forward, I would be continuing to neglect what that little girl so desperately needed.

Which brings us to the last year and half of legal action. I was able to talk with my grandmother after I called the police in the summer of 2023, and she supported me going forward with legal action and we were able to amend the damage the abuse had caused in our relationship. But my grandmother was right, it impacted the family ecosystem at our family camp. My immediate family and I spent the summer being shunned by Michael's immediate family, a family that I've known all my life. It's true what they say... the victim gets revictimized and blamed. Sadly, my grandmother passed away the day before Thanksgiving and had to spend her last summer alive at her favorite place on earth being shunned by people she loves deeply. I know that was devastating for her. So again.... Michael touching my vagina is the least of the pain and turmoil caused by his actions.

That brings us to today and respectfully, I have to say I am disappointed in Pine County and their treatment of this case. This plea deal is so far removed from what the sentencing guidelines are in statute and overall, it tells me and little girls and boys like me and the public that Pine County does not see Michael's sexual conduct as a serious offense, and that it does not warrant harsher consequences. The leniency he has received in this plea deal is continuing to perpetuate the legal norm of minimizing and dismissing the severity of these crimes. It's quite insulting to think about given the implications this has had on my life and knowing what the law states. At the very minimum I am asking the court to require the full 6 months in jail and 30 years of probation. I'd also ask the courts to remember that when they see a case like this, that there are 1,000s and 1,000s of victims who never came forward and to do their utmost to hold the perpetrators accountable to the full extent of the law when confronted with the opportunity.

Thank you for listening.