

FINDING COURAGE

THE STORY OF GRACE AND TERESA



FINDING COURAGE

How Two Children Found the Courage to Confront Their Abuser

Please note: The names in this story have been changed to protect privacy

When 10-year old Grace and her younger sister Teresa first set foot in Dawson Place, our Medical Assistant Michelle was looking forward to seeing them. She had learned from their mother Sharon what terrible abuse their father had inflicted on these young girls.

Verbal abuse. Emotional manipulation. Physical and sexual abuse.

Michelle was aware of the trauma Grace and Teresa must be enduring. She knew it wouldn't be easy for them to talk about it. But if there was any hope of restoring Grace and Teresa to a life of safety, health, and healing, talking about it was the only way.

The medical exam room at Dawson Place was carefully designed to help kids like Grace and Teresa feel comfortable opening up about the trauma in their lives.

The exam room ceiling is covered with

colorful sticky hands. Almost every child asks about them. Each hand was stuck to the ceiling by a different child who came into this room suffering from some form of abuse or neglect. When kids see all those hands, they realize that what is happening to them has happened to other kids too.



They realize they are not alone.

Then, a therapy dog comes in and shakes the child's hand, and comforts them simply by being there.

But Grace and Teresa had lost their faith in adults who were supposed to care for them. The harm done by their father had caused a rift in their souls, and it would not be easily mended. Their mother Sharon had tried to get him to stop before, but without the girls' telling their story to the authorities - there was nothing that could be done to remove him from their lives.

The girls were terrified. They were hurt. They did not trust anyone, including the staff at Dawson Place. And they wouldn't talk about anything. Each visit to Dawson Place they would hide under the furniture. After a month, almost no progress had been made, and Sharon was worried her husband was going to return home and resume his abusive behaviors.

IMMIGRATING WITH HOPE FOR A BETTER LIFE

Years before they had children, Sharon and her husband immigrated to the United States from abroad, looking forward to the opportunities they believed they would find here. Their relationship had always been strained, and it would go through familiar cycles.

He was controlling, and at times emotionally and verbally abusive. She would resist and fight back. Sometimes she would kick him out. Eventually he would return, apologizing, promising to do better. It's a difficult pattern from which to break free.

But Sharon had no idea about the other monstrous impulses residing within her husband.

After settling in the Pacific Northwest, Sharon began to pursue a career in education. Her husband jumped from job to job, never really finding his way, and seeming to like the idea of Sharon being the breadwinner.

This pattern continued even after Sharon gave birth to Grace, and then Teresa 18 months later. A few years later, Sharon gave birth again.

But when Grace and Teresa revealed to their mom, in early elementary school, that their father had been sexually abusing them, she realized her husband was far more dangerous than she had ever imagined. Her family was seriously damaged, and she had to act.

Sharon contacted the authorities and reported her daughters' abuse by their father. Their safety was her top priority, and it seemed like they would all soon be free from his manipulations and abuse.

THE CYCLE RETURNS

Working with abused children is rarely a straight path. You don't usually just go from step 1 through step 10 and call it a day. Kids don't process trauma the same way adults do, because it is so contrary to what they expect out of life.

Often, things don't go the way we adults wish they would, but there's little you can do when that happens.

Even though Grace and Teresa had shared their secret with their mom, when brought before the authorities to tell their story, they withdrew. And no one could get them to break their silence. Even though Sharon knew their story of abuse, from a legal standpoint there was nothing that could be done if the girls refused to tell their story to law enforcement.

So, her husband was free, and Sharon and her kids would continue to live in fear of him. Sharon told him, "You can't be here anymore." And he left. But as before, after many months or years would pass, he would return, promising change, and work his way back into their lives.

Eventually he returned, and Sharon became pregnant again.

THE WORST DAY OF HER LIFE

Sharon was working as an educator. It was a great job, and she had worked hard to reach this point, in spite of everything she and her family had been through.

One day, Sharon came home at an unexpected time, and caught her husband abusing Grace.

Heartbroken and furious, she kicked him out yet again, and called the police. But this time would be different, because this time Sharon was an eyewitness.

Now to protect her daughters and keep her husband away from the family, Grace and Teresa would need to get help and learn to talk about what had happened to them. They had been emotionally manipulated for years, and undoing their father's stranglehold on their minds would not be easy.

They needed more than just a police detective. They needed therapy. They needed patience. They needed understanding. They needed justice. They needed safety. Quickly.

BREAKTHROUGH

After a month of visiting therapists, advocates, and other staff at Dawson Place, little progress had been made with the girls. They would curl up on the couch and hide under the furniture, refusing to talk about their father's abuse.

But then, Sharon began working with a therapist from Dawson Place who had spent some time as a missionary abroad. She was able to connect with Sharon on a cultural and religious level, and establish a deeper level of trust.

Even as her children were still struggling to open up, Sharon had found the trusted connection she needed to keep fighting for her children. She kept bringing her kids to Dawson Place, letting them visit with Harper the therapy dog, giving them the time they needed to begin trusting these adults.



Sharon also needed financial help, childcare help, and so much more because she was working on a degree from the University of Washington to move into a management position at work.

As the sole provider for her children, Sharon was doing everything she could to be there for them.

Many months went by, and Grace and Teresa finally began to talk about what their father had done to them. It was a huge victory – for them, and for their quest for justice and healing. They would continue to receive counseling for several more years, and throughout the criminal investigation that soon followed.

LAW ENFORCEMENT SPRINGS INTO ACTION

With Sharon's testimony, and with Grace and Teresa starting to tell their story, law enforcement could begin to build a case against their father.

Detectives with the Snohomish County Sheriff's Special Investigation Unit, who work on children's abuse cases that are brought to Dawson Place, began to assemble the evidence.

The Snohomish County Prosecutor's Office Special Assault Unit worked with the detectives and other specialists, all of whom are located

under one roof at Dawson Place, and prepared to charge the father and take the case to trial.

Together with Providence Intervention Center for Assault and Abuse, Compass Health, and Child Protective Services, Dawson Place has helped over 14,000 abused and neglected children since 2006. And even though in over 93% of abuse cases, the abuser is known by the victim, something felt different about Grace and Teresa's case.

Perhaps it was because Sharon had seen it happen with her own eyes. Perhaps it was because it had gone on so long. Perhaps it was because the legal system had been unable to help the last time, and the abuse had resumed. Whatever it was, everyone came together in a really special way, and worked as a team for these kids and their mother.

Grace and Teresa agreed to tell their story to a Child Interview Specialist at Dawson Place. During their interviews, detectives sat in an adjoining room while watching and listening in order to build their case. The process is designed this way so that the kids only have to tell their story once to a Child Interview Specialist.

Because their interview is recorded, victims don't need to tell their story again to detectives, and again to a nurse, and again to a prosecutor. By having all these professionals in one location, Dawson Place is able to protect the children and yet still effectively work for justice on their behalf. Because EVERY child abuse victim deserves safety, justice, and healing.

Eventually, Grace and Teresa's father was charged with two counts of first degree rape of a child, one count of second degree rape of a child, and four counts of first degree child molestation.

He maintained his innocence, all the way through to the end. To this day, he has never admitted doing anything wrong.

CONFRONTING THEIR FATHER IN COURT

Nothing is more terrifying for a victim of abuse than to confront their abuser, especially having to do it in a courtroom full of strangers. Courtrooms are not known for being very child-friendly. They are procedural, legalistic, and not organized to accommodate childhood trauma.

But for Grace, Teresa, and Sharon, testifying in court was the only way to protect themselves – and the younger children – from this man who had nearly destroyed their family, and whose path of destruction was still evolving.

The therapists at Dawson Place knew the stakes. They also knew how the children had been manipulated by their father for so many years. He was a scary man, perhaps not psychologically stable. Grace and Teresa had adopted extreme coping strategies, simply to get through each day. These coping strategies did not always help the girls function in helpful ways with adults in positions of authority or the requirements of the legal system.

These therapists had to help these girls feel like it would be okay to tell their story, even in a courtroom. They had to help them let their guard down, and trust that this time there really were caring adults who would work to keep them safe.

It was a long and grueling process, requiring huge amounts of patience, sensitivity, compassion, and commitment.

BUT THE DAY FINALLY CAME.

Grace and Teresa both took the stand and testified in court against their father. Harper went with them. Their courage was not lost on the team at Dawson Place. And it was not lost on the jury either, because their father was convicted and sentenced to 40 years in jail.

The relief and the joy at finally feeling safe for the first time in their lives will last a long time. Sharon finally felt like she no longer had to look over her shoulder constantly. She knows there are people who really, truly care. Grace told her she had never seen her mom this happy before.

To this day, helping Sharon's family escape the reign of fear and abuse they had lived under for so long is one of Dawson Place's most celebrated stories and a clear example of the team environment that makes it so special. All the specialists and experts within our walls worked together and played their part in bringing about justice for this precious family.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

Several years later, Grace graduated high school. Teresa will graduated too. Even though their father is in jail, life still hasn't been easy.

As you can imagine, they still struggle with the trauma from their past, and it will impact them the rest of their lives. School wasn't always easy. Grace has battled depression, and Teresa has gotten in trouble in school a few times and had some behavioral issues.

But Teresa also starred on her high school track team, excelling in the shot put. She hopes to attend college. Both girls have become good at utilizing their resources. They now trust people enough to ask for help when they need it. They know that caring adults will help them, and more important - that they are worthy of it.

Grace continued to return to Dawson Place to get additional counseling and help. Teresa has opened up to her school counselor, and joined a support group at school. These actions are very encouraging, because it means these girls have chosen a better future than the one their father was leading them toward.

Just as Sharon came to America looking for a better life, now her daughters are working on their education looking for a better future.



Sharon feels truly safe for the first time since moving

And with their father out of the picture, all three are well on their way to finding it.

While Sharon has struggled at times parenting her two oldest kids as a result of what they've experienced, Dawson Place helped her understand and empathize with them, and encouraged her to not give up. She has learned the importance of balancing compassion with firm boundaries.

At times, Sharon feels guilty, blaming herself for failing to protect her family. Many parents experience this guilt. With help, Sharon and her oldest daughters have bright futures.

The younger children also received help from Dawson Place, however they had not endured nearly as much abuse as Grace and Teresa. Sharon's parents have moved to the Northwest, and are helping Sharon care for her children and re-building her family.

WORKING FOR SAFETY, JUSTICE, AND HEALING FOR ABUSED CHILDREN

We hope Sharon's story has been encouraging, knowing that safety, justice and healing for kids can happen. However it works much more efficiently at Dawson Place, because all the critical organizations operate under the same roof. It's that collaborative environment that makes Dawson Place so special, and so unique.

With child interview specialists, advocates, law enforcement, therapists, prosecutors and nurses available in one place providing services at no charge, families no longer have to drive all over the county to get help they need and deserve. They don't need to fill out the same forms six times, talk to a different receptionist every time, and tell their story over and over again.

They come to one place, tell their story, find safety, justice, and healing from our team and therapy dogs, and begin the process of healing.

Grace and Teresa represent just two of the sticky hands on the ceiling of the medical exam room. Every other hand, and every hand not there yet, is another child who has endured things no child should have to endure.

But you can help them.

You can help Dawson Place continue to meet the needs of kids like Grace, Teresa, and the thousands of others who have found trusting, caring advocates and professionals within our walls.

YOU CAN HELP IN ONE OF THREE WAYS:

- 1) Become a **monthly donor** - even \$10 per month makes a huge difference
- 2) Become a **one-time donor** - [click here](#) to give to Dawson Place
- 3) **Continue reading our newsletters** and tell your friends and family about Dawson Place

You can share our newsletters with anyone. Follow us on social media. Participate in Child Abuse Prevention Month every April.

One thing we love about the sticky hands is that eventually they do finally fall from the ceiling. When that happens, we like to think it means the child who stuck that hand to the ceiling has fully recovered from the injustice, fear, and trauma that once brought them to this room.



If you stick with Dawson Place, you can ensure that many more hands go up on that ceiling, but even better, that they eventually fall down as well.



www.dawsonplace.org

