

# behindCLOSEDdoors

Robbing children of their innocence and leading to a lifetime of silent pain, sexual abuse is a problem that ravages through every culture. Victims share their personal stories of survival.

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## Laveranues

Coles was always apprehensive when talking about his childhood, but the wide receiver for the New York Jets finally spoke up during an October interview on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Between the ages of 10 and 13, the man Coles knew as his stepfather sexually abused him—often at gunpoint. “I haven’t talked about it in forever, but I know that holding something like that inside has been a burden for so long,” he confessed to the studio audience. “For me to get on this platform, having been in the NFL and to have all the media attention that we have, I think it’s something that should be [discussed].”

Coles is not alone. Public figures like Mary J. Blige, Carlos Santana and gospel singer Donnie McClurkin have also admitted to having similar incidents occur in their childhoods. Sexual abuse is a crime that can happen to anyone, regardless of race, culture or social status, and has damaging effects that can remain throughout a person’s entire life. However, shame and guilt oftentimes make victims



Soul Survivors: Carlos Santana (left) and Mary J. Blige (right) overcame sexual abuse

reluctant to seek out help. The issue becomes even more problematic when the abuser lives in the same house as their victims. According to Bureau of Justice statistics for 2000, 93 percent of juvenile sexual assault victims knew their attacker, 34.2 percent were family members, 58.7 percent were acquaintances, and only 7 percent were strangers.

"On an emotional level, that's a horrible situation," says Scott Burkowitz, founder and president of the Rape and Incest National

**"I think [sex abuse] happens to more people in this world than we actually allow ourselves to believe. Coming up, I always felt like I was the only one that it ever happened to."**

Network (RAINN), the nation's largest sexual assault organization. "To have the person you're supposed to trust over anyone [molest you] is difficult to understand."

Even more unfathomable is how some family members knowingly ignore the abuse. That's what happened to Karmin Jones\*. "The molestation started with members of my family when I was about 4 years old," says Karmin, now 28. "It was a few people [who did it]. My innocence was taken away and no one was there stopping it."

Nicole Nasser\*, 30, had a similar experience. The LA native endured five years of sexual abuse from her oldest brother with little help from her parents. Rather than

address the issue, Nicole's family decided to send her brother back to their native country of India for a decade. Even though her abuser was hundreds of miles away, Nicole still had to deal with the difficult memories.

"My earliest memory [of the abuse] is seeing inappropriate things and hearing very blatant sexual comments," she says. "At first it was comments about the way I smelled and looked, and then conversations where my brother would want me to rub up against him.

He would sleep with me a lot. I would wake up and I'd be wrapped around him. I remember once I had hickies all over my body and my neck. I know my parents saw it, but all they did was get real mad at him and at me."

With no real support group, Nicole remained quiet about what was going on. But part of her actually felt guilty about revealing her sibling's dirty secret. "I felt like I was the only person who understood him," she says. "I was the only person he had in this world. That was the mental part of it. I remember a lot of looks, a lot of closeness. It was very sexual. But I think as I got older and I started getting more of an idea of myself, the physical stuff backed off."

**P**edophilia is defined as any kind of coercion or forced sexual activity with a child, including vaginal and anal intercourse, oral genital contact, masturbation, fondling of the private area, exposing oneself, voyeurism, and child pornography. Whether people want to talk about it or not, these acts occur quite often. In fact, statistics from the US Department of Health and Human Services for 2000 indicate that there were an estimated 60 million survivors of childhood sexual abuse living in America alone. But because so many of these crimes go unreported, it's virtually impossible to determine the exact number of victims. "The impact for victims of childhood sexual abuse tends to come to us years later," says Burkowitz. "Or as adults when they start to deal with what happened."

Children who feel compelled to keep their abuse a secret put themselves at risk for long-term psychological distress. While the effects may not be obvious during childhood, they can be severely traumatic and emotionally scarring. Victims tend to experience high rates of depression, substance abuse, anxiety disorders and insomnia as adults. They can encounter problems learning how to trust and form healthy balanced relationships. Sexual abuse survivors are also more likely to be the victims of rape and to be involved in physically abusive relationships. In fact, 95 percent of teenage prostitutes have been sexually abused.

Karmin can attest to the negative effects her childhood molestation had on her life.

“It was a few people in my family that molested me. My innocence was taken away and no one was there stopping it.”

— Karmin, sex abuse survivor

Throughout her adolescence she acted out in a state of sexual promiscuity and confusion. “After I had my first boyfriend and he broke up with me, I was trying to have sex with everything that moved,” she says. “I used to dress like a slut and then I would dress like a boy.”

Nicole also found herself struggling to develop a healthy sexual identity. During her college years, she wound up dancing at a strip club. It took an intervention from some concerned friends for Nicole to finally get her life back on track. “I had a problem being around people,” she says. “I didn’t realize that until a friend talked with me about it. For long periods I would isolate myself. I was really afraid to open up and make any kind of connections. I didn’t realize why I was like that. I knew there were large parts of myself I was uncomfortable with, but I didn’t want to acknowledge that I was uncomfortable with myself.”

The problems are similar for male victims, but they usually have more difficulty acknowledging the abuse and are even less likely to report it. The American Academy of Pediatrics reports that one in five adult women admit to being sexually abused, while only one in 10 adult men do the same. “I think as a man, when you’re violated in that way, you don’t know how other people are going to take it, how other people are going to view you,” Coles said in an interview with *The New York Times*. “There’s so much that comes with revealing that part of your life and story.”

“I think there’s a greater stigma for an adult male that is attacked,” says Burkowitz. “Most people look at a child as helpless. If you’re a ‘real’ man [it’s like] how could you let this happen to you? One thing we hear from counselors working with African-Americans is the fear that being molested as a child makes you gay. That’s a whole other issue.”

But with public figures like Cole openly discussing their experiences, the doors are opening for more African-American males to speak up. “I give [Cole] huge points for being open about [his abuse] and really changing the way people think,” says Burkowitz. “We need people like him who are well respected and unquestionably macho. It makes it a lot more comfortable to talk about it.”



From top: Sex abuse survivor, Laveranues Coles; accused pedophile R. Kelly

## LIFE SUPPORT

Sexual abuse survivors don’t have to suffer alone



Many of the estimated 60 million American survivors of childhood sexual abuse are in denial about their traumatic experiences. But holding the pain in can result in numerous emotional scars. Check the list below to see if you or a friend may need the support and assistance required to heal.

1. Do you abuse substances or engage in risky sexual behavior?
2. Do you have problems maintaining healthy intimate relationships?
3. Do you isolate yourself and/or suffer from depression?
4. Do you have feelings of unworthiness?
5. Do you avoid talking about the abuse out of fear, shame, or guilt?

If you answered yes to any of the above questions or suspect that you have unresolved issues from being sexually abused, realize that you are not alone. Counseling, group therapy, and hotlines can provide the necessary support to cope with the trauma of childhood sexual assault.

### FOR HELP OR MORE INFO TRY:

#### Generation Five

An organization dedicated to ending childhood sexual abuse in multicultural communities

Contact: [www.GenerationFive.org](http://www.GenerationFive.org)

#### Rape and Incest National Network (RAINN)

A 24-hour crisis hotline that provides victims of sexual assault with free, confidential service

Contact: 1-800-656-HOPE or [www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)

#### Male Survivor

A gender specific organization devoted to male survivors of sexual abuse

Contact: [www.MaleSurvivor.org](http://www.MaleSurvivor.org)

### SUGGESTED READING:

**Beginning to Heal: A First Book for Survivors of Sexual Abuse** by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis (HARPERCOLLINS, 1993)

**Crossing the Boundary: Black Women Survive Incest** by Melba Wilson (SEAL PRESS, 1993)