

Survivor: 'I will no longer be silent'

Editor's note: The following story contains graphic details about clergy sexual abuse. Please read with caution.

At 8:44 a.m. Aug. 14, Kevin-John Jobczynski posted on Facebook a photo of the previous evening's sunset near his home and art studio on Melbourne Beach, Florida. His friends commented on the beauty of the golden glow in the sky and on the water.

His post at 5:07 p.m. was not pretty, nor did it receive the same kind of responses. "I no longer have to live the nightmare alone!" he wrote. "How this institution is still standing is beyond me. And I do not want to hear 'these were a few bad apples'! This is worse than I ever thought it would be."

Jobczynski, 49, was referring to the grand jury report released that afternoon by Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro. After 18 months of investigation, the grand jury listed 301 priests named as pedophiles by more than 1,000 victims. Jobczynski recognized seven in the Diocese of Erie where he grew up, and three among them had abused him.

He had been victimized by two others, but their names were not included on the list, he said. His reaction was painfully emotional. After years of being silent when he was a child, then as an adult learning that the statute of limitations had run out; after being told that he should be quiet and not make waves; and after years of rage that he could not name, he saw his demons validated. The suffering that the other children had experienced was his pain, too.

"I will no longer be silent about this," he posted on Aug. 16. "I was prey for these beasts, as were many of my brothers and sisters. ... [M]any of us are still living with the damage and

nightmares, many will never get past this. It has affected every part of our lives.”

‘Easy prey’

The abuse started in Our Lady of Peace Catholic School, he told Our Sunday Visitor, when his family returned to Erie after living for a short time in California. He enrolled there in the fifth grade.

“I was an altar boy, and we had to show up to serve 7 a.m. Mass,” he said. “Sometimes it was just me and the priests, and they took that opportunity. I was easy prey.”

Other times he was sent to the church or rectory to do chores, or to be counseled by the very priest who was abusing him.

He never told anyone.

“It was a confusing situation,” he said. “You kind of think that this was everything from uncomfortable to wrong, but because you grow up Catholic and everything they tell you about these men – that they are second only to Christ and God himself – you don’t question it. You feel weird, but you don’t question it. I felt that the future of my very soul and whether or not I was going to be allowed into heaven was held in these men’s hands, that without their endorsement, I wasn’t getting in.”

He also suspected that his parents wouldn’t believe him, and he feared being punished.

Attempts to escape

Jobczynski formulated his exit strategy. He started standing up to the abuse. He also let his grades drop, and he acted up so that, by the end of seventh grade, he was on his way out. “There was a meeting with the faculty sitting there with little Kevin-John, and they told my parents that they were

done with me, that I didn't fit into their mold," he said. "They no longer wanted me as a student. To my parents, this was tantamount to me committing murder, and for me, they led me to believe that I was worthless and that I should go away and be someone else's problem."

The principal at West Lake Middle School had a different opinion. He looked over the boy's records, then at him. "You're not a bad kid, are you? You're not going to get in a lot of trouble for me are you?"

No, and no.

"My year there was amazing," Jobczynski said. "I made friends. I found the girl of my dreams, who has now been my girlfriend for the last 10 years."

"It changes you. I can talk to a kid for an hour and know if he's been abused."

There was no more abuse until the following year, when he started attending the all-boys Cathedral Prep School, a deal he had to make with his parents if he wanted to play football. He hoped that things would be different, but, he said, "It started instantly."

He was groped by a priest who bragged about his own genitals. He was assaulted in the rectory after a youth group project, and another time when his parents sent him to a priest "to set him straight" about dating a girl they didn't like. The priest stuck his tongue in Jobczynski's ear and told him, "Finding love with a girlfriend isn't the only way."

"He asked me to kiss him and give him a hug," Jobczynski said. "It was horrible."

That was a prelude to an assault, and so was a priest showing him photos of students that he cut out and arranged in suggestive poses. "Everywhere I went," Jobczynski said, "there

was a potential molester.” He acted up to get out again and finished his junior and senior years at a public school, free at last from assaults.

The demons today

Jobczynski left the Catholic Church when he turned 18 and is now a Christian without a denomination. He goes into a Catholic church only when he has to, like when he returned to Erie for his grandmother’s funeral in the emotionally charged “church where I was raped.”

He told his parents about the abuse when he was about 29 and didn’t get the support he hoped for. He tried to report the crimes at the courthouse, but the statute of limitations had run out. In 2001, he considered exposing the abuse, but his father advised against it.

The abuse affected him in many ways. Angry outbursts that he couldn’t explain contributed to ending his marriage. He faced trust issues and the realization that those who abused him got away with it.

The other day he looked at a lineup of his school photos: These depict both the smiling kid and the tortured-looking child with dark circles under his eyes. He can tell when it was happening.

“It changes you,” he said. “I can talk to a kid for an hour and know if he’s been abused.”

Jobczynski became a success despite the turmoil. At Kevin-John Studios, he produces art for more than 350 top athletes, celebrities and corporations, and his art is sought by collectors around the world. It’s featured on lines of chocolates, wine, coffee and apparel, and has helped raise more than half a million dollars for charities.

His passion for art has been a good distraction.

“The night terrors have been particularly bad for me the last couple of years,” he said. “I’m strong enough that I fend off the demons during the day. When they try to creep in, I lean on my career.”

Maryann Gogniat Eidemiller writes from Pennsylvania.