

Kiara's Story

My life and experiences show that abuse does not have to be physically severe in order to be severely damaging. Most people who know my family assume I grew up in a sheltered Christian environment and are surprised when they learn that I understand the pain of childhood abuse. In reality, even loving and protective parents cannot always protect their children from abuse.

Stolen Innocence

I grew up in a loving Christian home with two committed parents. I am the oldest of four children, and my little sister and I are only 6 years apart. My Dad grew up here in Arizona, and we often spent time with his side of the family while we were growing up. My mom is from Scotland, and our family would save and save so that we could visit our relatives there as often as possible.

When I was in middle school, we flew to Scotland for a visit and my parents sent my younger brother and me to a Christian adventure camp for a week. The camp was in the country, and we spent much of our time there hiking, sailing, and swimming in the indoor pool on campus. It was a wonderful experience in many ways, but it was also my first experience with sexual abuse. Less than an hour after I arrived, another camper noticed me and sent his friend over to find out more about me. Soon after, he asked me to be his girlfriend. I was flattered, but not at all interested and told him so. For days he teased me and tried to flirt with me, often using sexually inappropriate language. The staff either never heard him or was reluctant to step in, which left me feeling vulnerable and uncomfortable. I was far from home and had never experienced this type of situation before. The attention from this young man was flattering, but I remember feeling very uneasy around him.

One afternoon, he was angry and embarrassed when an intricate plan that would force me to spend time alone with him was not successful, so he threatened to rape me. I was shocked that he would say that, but assumed he was just angry and trying to scare me. A night or two later, I left an evening worship service to get my camera. I ran into him in a dark hallway near my room, where he aggressively forced me against a wall and again told me he planned to rape me. I struggled and was able to get away, but the fear of being attacked was firmly implanted in my mind after that night. The staff seemed so unaware of how he had been treating me that I never mentioned the incident. I was afraid to draw more attention to myself, and I did not know how they might respond. I was already a novelty there as an American, a foreigner with an interesting accent, and I didn't think I could handle it if the other kids my age found out what had happened. After that night, he acted like he was interested in another girl and barely spoke to me.

When I returned home from Scotland, I felt different somehow, like my eyes had been opened. I didn't feel as safe, and had so much to sort through in my mind. Shortly thereafter, our pastor's adult son, Shaun (not his real name), started to single me out from the other girls my age, flirting with me and complimenting me excessively. He bought me a

diamond solitaire necklace, and told me not to tell my friends because he only had one for me. I was 14, and he was a very intimidating man who seemed to like it when I was uncomfortable with him. I reminded him once that he was married and shouldn't talk to me that way, but my resistance only seemed to encourage him.

Shaun always seemed to know where I was and when I was alone. While my parents taught Bible club for the younger children before the evening service, I would find a spot nearby where I could sit and do homework or read a book. Sometimes he would come to church early and find me. He would stand over me and massage my arms and shoulders and stroke my hair. Feeling cold and numb inside, I would stare at a bench or a spot on a wall and just get through it until he stopped. Afterward, it felt like I could still feel his hands all over me, and I felt violated. Sometimes I would be trembling terribly and would go into the bathroom and cry. My parents knew there were times I was anxious to leave after church, but I never told them why.

When I was fifteen, I wanted to be baptized. I had to meet with our pastor several times to talk about the commitment of becoming a church member, establish my understanding of baptism, and share my testimony with him. At one point, I was in such turmoil over the interactions with his son that I shared what was happening. Our pastor completely invalidated my experience and used his position of authority to protect his son rather than the young girls in our church, even though he knew that his son had a history of molesting other girls. He asked me questions about what had happened and then tried to convince me that it was no big deal and that I must be exaggerating. He implied that I was just trying to get attention and told me that I needed to forgive Shaun for acting inappropriately. Later, he read me a letter that Shaun had written. In the letter, Shaun explained that he was sorry that I was so sensitive and misunderstood his attention, and that he never meant to hurt me. I was devastated, and I promised myself that I would never tell anyone what I had been through. I didn't think anyone would believe me, and I could not risk feeling that kind of humiliation again.

The betrayal by my pastor and his refusal to protect me and the other girls in our church were just as destructive as the abuse at Shaun's hands. My world felt like it was falling apart, and I decided that if I couldn't trust my pastor to protect me, I couldn't trust anyone. I felt completely alone and thought I must not be important enough to protect. I began suffering from terrible nightmares where I was being abused and could not escape. I became self-destructive, developing a severe eating disorder and exercising compulsively. I felt so much pain and anger that I began scraping my arms with razors. I felt like I was punishing myself for being weak and allowing myself to be abused, and I didn't know how to stop hurting myself. I was burying so many awful and confusing emotions, and the stress I was under started to show in my behavior at home. My parents were baffled by my mood swings and upset when they realized I had an eating disorder, but they didn't know how to help me, and they had no idea how much I was really struggling. I refused to tell them what was wrong. I cringed and felt sick when my Dad would try to hug me or touch my shoulders, and I resisted spending time alone with him or my mom. It was an incredibly difficult time for all of us.

Shaun seemed to get a thrill out the fact that he and his dad had successfully intimidated me into self-imposed silence. He never abused me again in the same way, but he made it clear that he felt he had 'won' and continued to intimidate me in subtle ways.

During my junior year of high school, our youth group was away on a week-long mission trip in Mexico when Shaun was arrested for abusing other girls in our church. When my parents heard the news, they thought about how my personality and behavior had changed dramatically a couple of years before. They took me into their bedroom as soon as I got home and convinced me to tell them what had happened. I was then interviewed by the detectives assigned to the case, but they determined I did not have enough of a legal case for them to recommend we press charges. They were concerned that Shaun's attorney could scar me even more if I were cross-examined in court. My parents wrote a letter to the judge explaining all that our family had been through in the last few years because of what had been done to me, and they begged the judge to protect other young girls by giving my abuser the maximum sentence and keeping him out of society for as long as possible. The case eventually went to a plea bargain and he was sentenced to 10 years of prison time with lifetime parole upon release.

A New Hope

After Shaun was arrested, I began seeing a wonderful Christian counselor who helped me begin to face what had happened to me. My time with her was invaluable, and I learned so much about myself during my journey to healing. For the first time, my experiences and conflicting feelings were validated, and I had a safe environment where someone was ready to hear me explain what had happened. She helped me to understand God's love for me and His pain and anger over what had been done to me. Rather than run from God or shut Him out, she taught me to wrestle with Him and search the scriptures for answers to my questions. During my senior year in high school, I reached the point where I had a choice to make. God impressed upon me the need to choose whether or not I would believe that He is who He says He is, even when the circumstances in my life seemed to contradict His Word and His promises. When I made the choice to believe in Him no matter what, and asked God to reveal His true character to me and heal me, He began an amazing work in my life. For the first time in years, I began to feel hope that I would not be scarred by this forever.

A year after my abuser was imprisoned I met Andy, and two years later we married. I was challenged in new ways as I tried to apply what my counselor had taught me during this new stage in my life. I longed to be free of self-protective habits that were necessary to help me feel safe as a young teen, but now kept me from fully experiencing close relationships. It was very difficult at times, but I was determined to keep moving forward. I knew what it was like to feel imprisoned and without hope, and I wanted to be free to be who God intended me to be.

When we were newlyweds, I realized I had been legally molested, and it was devastating. We were watching a movie one night and I was sitting in front of Andy while he massaged my back and shoulders. His fingers brushed lightly against me as he rubbed my arm, and suddenly it all came together. I began shaking and felt sick to my stomach. No wonder the shoulder and arm rubs felt like such a violation. All of those unasked-for massages were opportunities to touch me

over and over, and yet I wasn't able to understand at that age why I felt so violated. I was not familiar enough with my body to recognize exactly what he was doing, and yet the sensations and fear that I felt during those interactions matched what he was physically doing. It was devastating to put the pieces together, but it was also a relief to realize that I had not been over-reacting when I felt the way I had. I was challenged in new ways as I faced the pain from my past again in such a tangible way, but I now had the support of my husband and I knew how to work through the emotions in a healthier way.

A Heart for the Hurting

Throughout all of this, God was growing within me a desire to minister to others who were hurting. During my high school years, when I was being abused and battling an eating disorder, I had served as a small group leader in the Neighborhood Ministries Kids' Life program in downtown Phoenix. I had six or seven young girls in my group each year, and almost every Monday night at Kids' Life I had opportunities to show love to these girls and tell them about God. I also visited them a couple nights a week in the government housing projects where they lived. A lady from Church on the Street and a young man from Neighborhood Ministries also came to the projects one night a week, and I teamed up with them as they sought to share the Gospel with the broken families and homeless adults living in the area. I often thought of the irony in my situation. Here I was, ministering in an atmosphere of brokenness and pain, and the lives around me mirrored my own internal pain. I was grasping for hope and healing in my own life at the same time that I was praying for hope and healing for those around me. I soon found that I felt more comfortable with these young girls in downtown Phoenix, in gang territory and on the doorsteps of homes struggling with poverty and domestic violence, than I did in my church or school. I was not the sheltered Christian teen that many people imagined I was when they saw me at school, at Youth Group on Saturday nights, or at church on Sunday mornings. I was a broken person, and I felt most at home when surrounded by others who understood brokenness.

My heart for hurting children and families was growing through this special time of ministry. Over time, I found that my desire to shelter these children and give them more than a few hours respite from the pain and lack of stability in their lives fed my passion for adoption. When I was young, our family had sponsored children in an orphanage in Brazil, so I knew from a young age that not all children have families who can care for them. When I was in middle school, I had tried to convince my parents to adopt, and they were open to it, but God did not seem to be leading them down that path. My dream of adopting never died, and as the years went by I found that it became stronger.

When I met Andy and we first started dating, I told him that I hoped to adopt someday and that this was very important to me. He prayed about it and felt he could be open to this. A few years after we married, we gave birth to our son, Lucas. When Lucas turned one year old, we began praying for the birth family that we would someday be matched with, and we started the adoption home study process.

While researching adoption early in our marriage, we had discovered Christian Family Care Agency in central Phoenix and attended an informational meeting. We learned about open adoption, where the birth and adoptive families have the opportunity to stay in contact while their child grows up. We prayed about this and felt God nudging us in that direction, despite initial concerns about how such an unusual relationship could work. We trusted that God would work out the details, and we were excited to realize that our children would grow up knowing why their first parents had made an adoption plan for them and that they had not been rejected, as some adopted children fear. They may even have opportunities to see their birthparents and know their love for them firsthand. Hopefully unknown health histories and longings to know who they look like would be issues that our children would not face in an open adoption. We began to look forward to the journey God seemed to be taking us on.

Nine months after we began our home study, we brought our newborn daughter home. We wept over the beautiful reminder of God's goodness when we realized that, although we were not matched until after she was born, we had been praying God's blessings and protection on this precious little girl and her birthmother since the early days of her pregnancy. Her birthmother had named her Destany, and we chose to keep her name because it has great meaning to all of us.

Some people have questioned our decision to adopt and our choice to involve Destany's birthmother and her close friends in our lives, but our decision to do what we feel is best for our daughter has enriched our lives in many ways. Right now, as far as we know, we are the only ones in their lives who share God's love and grace with them. Although we do not have as much contact as we would like to have, we have had several wonderful visits and phone conversations. Every few months we send them pictures and letters sharing our lives with them, and her birthmother has begun emailing me occasionally. Over the last couple of years I have had several opportunities to share about hope borne out of desperate brokenness, and healing that comes only from God.

I have a special place in my heart for mothers who are dealing with such difficult circumstances in their lives that they are willing to endure great loss so that their child can have a life of stability and love. My heart breaks over the losses that birthmothers experience when they give up the parenting role. Although our brokenness and pain may come from different circumstances, I understand the need for healing, life-giving hope, unconditional love, forgiveness, and redemption that comes only through Christ. It is our joy as a family to have the privilege of living this out through our lives.

We invited Destany's birthmother to her first birthday party, and it was amazing to witness the smile on our daughter's face as she was held in the arms of the first person in this world who loved her. We enjoy seeing how much they look alike, and we love knowing that her birthmother cares about her very much. We pray that through the many people in her life who love her, our daughter will feel whole and complete, and that her hope will be in the God who has big plans for her life.

At night, when I hold Destany close and pray for her before bed, I am reminded of God's redemption in my life. I honestly don't know where I would be today if I had not learned to seek

God for healing instead of running away from both Him and the pain. I doubt that I would be happily married with two precious children! I am also reminded that Destany would not be in our lives today if Andy and I had not taken a step of faith and trusted God as He led us down the path to adoption. I cannot imagine my life without her, and I am overwhelmed by God's grace in blessing me with the gift of being this precious little girl's Mom.

Our journey into the world of adoption is a tangible reminder to me that we are all adopted into the family of God. Each and every one of us who trusts in Jesus as our Savior has received a rich and blessed inheritance as a part of God's family. This inheritance is a breath of fresh air and hope that many more women and men in our world need to know about. He can bring a new song into even the most broken of hearts!

A Church Redeemed

When the pastor's son was arrested, our church was thrown into turmoil. Even though it was a small and close-knit congregation, most people knew only parts of the story because police involvement and a possible trial led to a gag-order that prevented the families involved from talking about the investigation or what they had been through. It was a very confusing and painful time for everyone as people tried to sort through what had happened and make sense of it all. Several families in the congregation were related to the pastor and his family, which made it even more complicated. Many people left, seeking a fresh start in other churches around the valley, and the remaining congregation was without a pastor for a time.

Things must have seemed pretty bleak at times, but God used that time to stir up the men in the church and draw them into closer dependence on Him. Over time, God began to heal the families that had stayed and bring some of the men into new positions of leadership. The leadership also began to understand the importance of their role in protecting women and children and they grieved their lack of knowledge about how to handle what had happened. The renewed spiritual focus breathed new life into the congregation, and new families began to attend. In time it became obvious that God was bringing about a new stage in the church's history as the congregation began to grow again and new ministries were started.

I was a junior in high school when my abuser was arrested, and once my parents knew what I had been through, they understood and supported my desire to attend church elsewhere. When I left, I planned to never step foot in that church again. I attended several different churches over the next few years, but no matter where I went I felt unable to trust the leadership. I doubted that anyone was who they seemed and it was a struggle to feel safe and connect with others.

I never expected that God would use the church where my trust was destroyed to help me learn to trust again, but when our son was about six months old, my husband and I began to feel that He was leading us to return to the church I grew up in. When we could no longer deny that God was calling us back there, we took a step in faith and began attending the Sunday morning services.

Although the church had changed a lot, and they now had a child protective policy in place, it was very difficult to be there. Sometimes I was overwhelmed by vivid flashbacks from when I was younger. There were times that I walked out of the service and sat in the car and cried, unable to deal with the difficult emotions that were stirred up. I often grew discouraged, yet we still felt strongly that God was calling us to be involved there, even when it didn't seem to make sense for me to be in an environment where I had been hurt so badly. Over the next couple of years I gradually adjusted to being there again, and eventually I could appreciate the opportunity to attend church with friends who had known me all my life and would now support me as I raised my children alongside their children and grandchildren.

Three years after we returned, it became clear that God had a much bigger plan in mind than Andy and I could have imagined. As Mending the Soul Ministries grew and I became more involved, God impressed upon me the need to share with our new pastor and his wife what He was doing in my life. Specifically, I needed to ask for prayer and support with some challenges I was facing emotionally as I became more involved at our church. God had recently led Chris and Rachael to our church, and the consistent teaching from God's Word, combined with our growing friendship with them, was stretching me and helping me heal in new ways. I was learning through my involvement in Mending the Soul Ministries that I was wounded in community and my healing must happen in community, but I still resisted letting them into that part of my life. I felt it wasn't necessary for anyone at the church to know what I was dealing with, but God made it obvious that this was the next big step in my journey to healing, and I finally gave in. It was very painful to share what I had been through when I was younger, and I struggled deeply while trying to adjust to the openness in our friendship, but God used that experience to help me begin to trust someone in a position of leadership for the first time in many years.

Soon after I shared about my connection with Mending the Soul Ministries, the elders at our church began praying together about whether they should get involved also. Soon after, several of our elders attended MTS trainings and read *Mending the Soul*, by Dr. Steve Tracy, in an effort to better understand the effects of abuse and the biblical path to healing. Since then, our church has become a hub church for Mending the Soul Ministries, and I facilitate abuse recovery groups for women at our church and one of our elders facilitates groups for men. We see this as incredible evidence that God can turn even the most hopeless of situations into a story that brings glory to Him!

It is challenging to share my story, but I also feel a sense of freedom I have never felt before. I am no longer hiding my past, fearing that someone will find out what I've been through and invalidate my pain the way I had come to expect them to. And now that I have learned that the shame I felt for so long was not mine to carry, I am free to encourage others as they walk through their own painful past.

*For you, O Lord, have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling,
that I may walk before the Lord in the land of the living...
O Lord, truly I am your servant...
You have freed me from my chains.
Psalm 116:8-9, 16*



Kiara's life and experiences show that abuse does not have to be physically severe in order to be severely damaging. Sharing the power of God's redemptive love is her motivation for embracing her story and sharing it with others. Kiara is now facilitating Mending the Soul healing groups, and she feels blessed to be able to encourage others during their journey to healing.

Since writing her story, Kiara and her husband have adopted their third child, Keandre. They are excited that God has blessed their family with this amazing little boy, and thankful to have had the opportunity to spend time with his birthmother and share God's love with her and her family. They have also become foster parents for two young children (not pictured) and are challenged daily with opportunities to share God's love with them and help them recover from their own painful experiences.