

Men Speak Out

Spring/Summer, 2005
Volume 9, Issue 2

Men Speak Out

THE SECOND OF 3 ARTICLES

My Musical Career

I find sometimes that starting an article can be the hardest part. I have ideas for the story and lots of thoughts about what to say, but that opening line, and how best to hook the reader in, I find to be quite challenging. Yet I wonder if it is the subject matter itself and the reluctance to tackle it that cause this dilemma. Though I agree wholeheartedly in breaking the silence and speaking one's truth, it still can be a very difficult process for me. The urge to stay silent is still imprinted upon me mentally, physically and spiritually. So that in and of itself still has a very powerful impact, added to the affects upon me as a survivor of extremely perverted and sadistic sexual, physical, and emotional abuse. That abuse came from both of my parents and some of their friends.

Music has been a godsend for me and I do believe that it has helped to save my life. I don't voice that statement lightly, for until the age of ten I had my mind set upon a military career. I was bound and determined to attend West Point Academy, to join the Army's Rangers, and then the Green Beret. I wanted to learn all that I could about covert military action, become a proficient sniper, schooled in all types of weaponry. My plan was simple: to come back and destroy those who hurt children. First on my list were my parents and their circle of friends.

But then the Beatles arrived and suddenly a new path was opened.

Seeing the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan Show was truly one of those magical life-changing moments. They brought such joy and happiness into my life just from seeing them perform. Like thousands of others across the country I too wanted to be in a rock & roll band. Oh how I wanted to play the guitar and sing like them and be famous! Unfortunately, I shared those thoughts and dreams with my parents who immediately set about ridiculing and reminding me how stupid and lazy I was. Sadly I believed them and did not pursue that avenue.

Fortunately I had another magical moment, an epiphany while tapping along to some songs on the radio. I was keeping time and could anticipate what was coming next in the song. So now I had found a new direction to pursue, I was going to be a rock & roll drummer. This time I did not share those thoughts with my parents. After hard work and a lot of practice I joined the local neighborhood band. We became quite good and soon found ourselves in demand, performing at parties, teen centers, school dances, and the Battle of the Bands contests. Within a few years we were winning those contests and we had a steady stream of gigs and were making decent money and also having a blast. By the time I was eighteen that was my vocation and I wore the label of professional musician with great pride. Eventually the core musicians of the band went on to live and tour in Great Britain for two years with great success. Later on I moved into the business end of music and became quite successful as a manager and talent agent for rock & roll bands. By this time I was happily mar-



ried with five beautiful daughters and I was the owner of a company that made more money than I would have ever envisioned possible. I was living the American dream, besides having a great family, a nice home, and a successful business, I still followed my muse and my passion of playing the drums. I was a member of a rock & roll band "The Classics" who played out on weekends and we did quite well for ourselves. Oh, but how soon things were to change and not to my liking.

In 1992 things were starting to happen to me that did not make sense to me at that time. I have always been a hard worker and I did fit the typecast of a workaholic. I had been taking steps to slow down and become a better husband, dad, friend, and human being for several years and now at the pinnacle of success with everything going for me I was starting to feel run down, tired all the time, and had great difficulty making decisions of any kind. Feelings of uselessness and being lazy were becoming even stronger and the thoughts—memories—that I had tried so hard to keep contained were now coming at me quite frequently. They were the little snippets of what appeared to be snapshots of truly disgusting, perverse sexual activity between adults and children. I was repulsed, I

was sickened because these snapshots had been with me for my whole life and now they were becoming a daily event. I loved and valued my wife and children above everything else and now I was sure I was becoming a pervert because these snapshots of the past were appearing all the time. All my life I have always felt dirty, no good, and so full of shame; now with these pictures coming into my head all the time I truly felt that I was indeed a sick pervert. Though I did not feel the urge or have never felt attracted to children in an abusive sexual manner, just the mere fact that these images were appearing were only re-affirming the deep held beliefs that I was tainted and no good.

So many changes were taking place inside of me and I was baffled and confused about what was happening to me. The physical things that I did for my peace of mind and health were also not bringing any relief. My involvement with the martial arts, swimming, walking, and hiking were not bringing about the changes I was hoping for. I thought that if I did more and worked harder at these activities it would bring peace. Peace was a rare commodity now, for my head was filled with clutter and confusion. I was making decisions around my music business that I now can see were a result of the depression I was experiencing. Each week had become a just-get-me-through-one-more-week pep talk to myself that things would go back to what I knew. This eventually became a daily thought process. I even had high hopes that the new year of 1993 would bring relief and a change for the better. But it wasn't meant to be, January 1993 brought on what I was working so hard to avoid: a complete collapse. I suffered a nervous breakdown. Sadly, those images, those snapshots of abuse

had now become a full-length movie and all that I had done throughout my life to repress those memories no longer kept them at bay. My walls had collapsed and all that I had tried so hard to keep contained and buried within the recesses of my mind came flooding in. I was hospitalized. I was not only benumbed from these memories of the past but also overcome with fears of what was ahead.

There followed period of time when I was hospitalized again and put into day treatment programs. Every time I tried to run my business I was lost, I was so scared because I could not function even at the simple task of taking a phone call. With time the effects of the post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD], depression, and dissociation caused me to be unable to work at my job. My business failed and this only exacerbated my feelings of uselessness, laziness, and being no good. But I was not prepared for what was to happen next. Up to this point in my life I had been drumming for close to thirty years and I was very good at my craft. I had worked really hard to be able to say that. I constantly practiced and never stopped learning all that I could about being a drummer. The effects of my childhood abuse were about to show me how truly damaging its long-term impact was to be.

Though I had come to the realization that my business was now in ruins, I still could take some comfort in the fact that I could start over and what better place to do that than by going back to full time status as a drummer. Those skills were still highly valued by many, so when I put the word out that I wanted to join or start a band I received several offers. I made my decision and then went to a rehearsal with great excitement and anticipation of better things to come. We started off with a song that was a basic rock & roller that I could ordinarily do in my sleep. But I struggled with just the simple task of keeping time. The next few songs found me disjointed, lost, and so damn confused. It felt as if I wasn't holding a pair of drumsticks, but instead I was holding a pair of 2 x 4's and one cannot play with any sense of rhythm and panache while holding 2 x 4's in your hand. I sunk to a new low. I did not know what to do. This scared me so much. Something I knew so well I could no longer do. It didn't matter to me that all of the literature and counseling I had received relative to PTSD and depression would explain this disability. All that I knew was that I couldn't play the drums anymore and my fears of what was to become of my life and what was I to do brought me to an even lower level of depression. How can you lose something that you had been doing all your life? I was not getting any answers. Even the joy of listening to music was gone, it only seemed like so much noise to me, it grated upon me. Why and how it came to this was beyond my understanding. The impact and the effects of

Sadly,
those images,
those
snapshots
of abuse
had now
become a
full-length
movie



the abuse and how it was playing out in my life felt as if I was being punished for the abuse. Though only a child and a young teenager when the abuse took place and that it was done to me, I still felt responsible and took the blame. The losing of my business because of my inability to work and now the loss of my drumming skills reverberated into my very core of who I was—or thought I was—as a person.

Despite 1993 and 1994 being some very difficult years there is a silver lining to this tragic turn of events. I kept trying at different times to tap along to songs on the radio or to albums when I could handle listening to the music. My sense of rhythm and timing were starting to creep back into my life, there were even times I found myself harmonizing to a song. This was quite profound and significant to me. Just these simple acts started to give me back some hope for my life. That hope soon transcended itself into taking a big leap of faith and a new belief in myself once again to entertain the idea, the long held dream of playing the guitar, singing, and writing songs. There was a lot of nervous apprehension and fears but I took the chance and took it upon myself to start the process of learning to play the guitar. It was indeed a very difficult and arduous endeavor. I was still limited with what I could do because of the effects of the PTSD and depression.

There were times when my efforts at practice were limited because of the dissociation going on and how sometimes holding the guitar felt like holding a block of wood and not a musical instrument. But I must give some credit to myself to help erase some of those old tapes of my being useless, stupid, and lazy. I have worked very hard at learning to play the guitar, sing, and write songs. It is with a great sense of joy that I can share with the readers that my practice efforts have paid off. I am now in the process of recording my third album release to be entitled "WAITING FOR A TRAIN". My first two album releases ("TRAIN OF TEARS" & "PIRATES") have been sold in every state of America along with several other countries. I have also set up a website (www.mskinnermusic.com) devoted to the theme: Hope, Healing, & Help for Trauma, Abuse, & Mental Health through music, resources, and advocacy. The site has now been visited by several hundred thousand people throughout the world. Through patience, hard work, perseverance and the support of some great friends I have been able to overcome some of the effects of my abuse. I have come to believe that it will be a life-long process in learning to deal with these effects but I do have a sense of hope again and that in and of itself will help to keep me going.

Michael Skinner

singer/songwriter/guitarist, advocate, educator.

141 English Village Rd. # 11

Manchester, NH 03102

mikeskinner@comcast.net