

Chapter One

Episode One: After #MeToo in Waterloo Region Transcript

[Elizabeth]

Hello, I'm Elizabeth Heald, President and CEO of Kitchener Waterloo Community Foundation. In 2019 it is such a pleasure to live in this region because there are so many positive "things" going on - after 4 years of construction we have light rail transit, the downtown core is populated by cranes building new condos, the technology sector is booming and we even have a Nobel Prize winner at the University of Waterloo!

However, underneath this rosy picture is a systemic and tragic problem of epic proportions that affects us all, sexual violence. Now before you tune out thinking this is someone else's problem, consider the fact that 1 out of 3 women in Canada will experience sexual assault at some point in their lives. You know a survivor, we all do. They are our mothers and sisters and daughters, our friends and co-workers and it is time we address this together. My guest today is Sara Casselman, Executive Director of the Sexual Assault Support Centre of Waterloo Region, a fearless advocate for dealing with this issue. Sara, what is going on here? Is this really a problem for us locally?

[Sara]

Hi Elizabeth. Sadly, this is a massive problem in our region. Earlier this year, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives released the fifth edition of their report "The Best and Worst Places to be a Woman in Canada 2019." That report generated A LOT of dialogue locally; it said that Waterloo Region's combined rates of sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and criminal harassment were the highest out of Canada's 26 largest cities. The highest!

[Elizabeth]

How can that be? We have progressive institutions like the universities and the technology sector.....

[Sara]

Well, the reality is that university aged women are four times more likely to be assaulted than any other age group.

And, women in professions that have been traditionally male-dominated, like the tech sector, report higher levels of sexual harassment than the general population.

In the last five years we've experienced a cultural shift; people are talking about sexual violence, and reaching out for support, like no other time in history. First the Ghomeshi story broke. Then, allegations against Cosby resurfaced. Shortly after, a report exposed a culture of sexual violence in the Canadian Armed Forces. Similar stories made headlines about the RCMP. Next there was a storm about the level of sexual violence at Canadian universities and colleges. Then, the Globe and Mail released their series about police responses to sexual violence nationally. At this point, Weinstein was exposed in Hollywood and the #MeToo Movement was born.

[Elizabeth]

Obviously I have heard about all of these incidents in isolation. But now, as I hear them all together like this – We can no longer deny the pervasiveness and horror of sexual assault. How are we dealing with all of this locally Sara?

[Sara]

Our Centre is on the frontlines of this cultural shift locally. In the post-#MeToo era, we've been flooded with calls for support. We used to think we were in crisis if we had 40 survivors waiting for counselling, and this year our waiting list at times topped 200 survivors! We're in crisis when it's comes to sexual violence, and locally we really need to prioritize this issue.

We're reaching out to folks in Waterloo Region for help. We have an incredible community. I'm confident that people would support us if they spent an afternoon answering calls in our office. They'd be outraged by the injustice they'd hear. The stories are heartbreaking.

[Dianne]

My name is Dianne and I am a survivor of childhood sexual abuse.

Today I'm going to share a little bit of my story with you. When I was about two years old, my mum and dad split up. My mom was a single mother of three for a number of years. When I was around eight years old. She met a man and she quickly developed a relationship and he moved in our rather quickly based on

information that I know now. The grooming process started with me really rather quickly.

My mother's new boyfriend was very attentive to me, specifically paid a lot of attention to me, which is something I didn't really have. I didn't have a steady relationship with my biological father. Not long after my mother's boyfriend moved in. He began touching me. I did not have any real context as to what was happening. I was about eight years old.

Sometimes. after he touched me, he would talk about how the responsibility of what had happened was mine. He talked about it being a secret and how other people wouldn't believe me if I told them and I want said, told them what I needed, words to, what had happened. I didn't like what had been happening to me. And so my eight year old mind decided one day I would set up a trap. So I got my Barbie House and I planted it in front of the door and I got my skipping rope and I took my rope and wrapped it around closet doors in the Barbie House and my bedroom door. And I felt like I was going to trap him to catch him and then the abuse would stop. And so I got everything ready, went to sleep that night and I woke up to hearing a crash. It worked. My skipping rope and Barbie House tripped him as he drunkenly entered my bedroom. I closed my eyes with, you know, all my mind and, and I listened for him to get up and go away, but he didn't. He got up and I could hear him get closer and he walked over to my bed and I froze.

There were times that I had physical pain after the abuse, but I had no words to say, you know, it was in the 70s. These weren't things that were talked about in the news or amongst friends and family. And so I was forced just to learn how to really live with the abuse. It continued on for many years.

[Elizabeth]

For years survivors and their advocates have been trying to get the word out – in most sexual assault cases, the survivor knows the person who assaulted them. It's so important that people understand this.

[Sara]

Yes, in my experience, people who disclose that a family member has assaulted them, are too often retraumatized when they disclose the abuse. For a variety of reasons, people within families can respond with disbelief, over questioning, denial, and blame. They don't want to believe it for a variety of reasons. They

may love the person who's been abusive. They may be dependant on their income. They may want to preserve what they think they have. In some cases, they may believe the myths about sexual assault that exist in our culture that blame the victim. They believe she did something to entice the abuse. Let me tell you - No child can ever entice abuse. That kind of reaction is so wrong and so damaging.

[Dianne]

This was really affecting who I was and I felt like I needed to put a stop to it, but I really didn't know who to go to because the assaults got so bad. I decided that I needed to tell my mom that he was really hurting me. So one morning I stayed home from school and I, I was

16 at the time. And I sat down with my mom and I said, mom, your husband is raping me.

And she went through a series of questions. Are you sure? What do you mean? Why wouldn't you just say no? You know, how could this happen? And all I could think of is, but you walked in on it. You know, this happened. You know, this is happening. My mom asked for some time, so she asked me to stay at my grandparents house that night.

So I got up and went to my grandparents' home where basically my grandparents interrogated me. My mom was the oldest of seven children. Her brothers and sisters and their spouses interrogated me. Why didn't you say no? Why did you have an affair with your mom's husband? Why? Why did you let it go on this long? Why didn't you run away? What didn't you say? Stop. And I didn't have a defense because those were all of the things the abuser had said to me. And they were also questions that I had asked myself. So why spend the night at my grandparents the next day I got up, operated on autopilot, like I always did, went to work. I was told after work I could go home to my mom's house and I was relieved. So I went home and I opened the door and there he was the abuser's sitting in his recliner in our home. And I said, where's mom? And he said, she's in your room. And I thought, that's weird. Why is she in my room? And I walked to my room and I opened my bedroom door and everything, my hair and my makeup and my blow dryer and my sheets and my clothing were all packed in boxes and the sheets were stripped off the bed. And I looked around and I didn't really understand what was happening. And my mom said, you gotta go.

So I'm a 16. I had a suicide attempt. I disclosed that I was being sexual assaulted, sexually assaulted on a regular basis, and I'm the one that had to go.

[Elizabeth]

It's so hard to hear about Dianne's experience. We can see how people responded in her case... so we know what NOT to do if someone discloses abuse. What is it that we can do?

[Sara]

I've met a lot of people who are afraid that they'll say the wrong thing when someone discloses. I think that fear shows how much they care... and that makes me think they'll do just fine in that moment.

If a child is disclosing...

- Listen, and work hard to control your reaction.
- Make the child feel safe.
- Demonstrate care and affection.
- Let them know you're proud of them for telling you.
- Protect the child from needing to share their story over and over.
- Report to Family and Children Services.

If an adult is disclosing...

- Let them know you believe them.
- Listen respectfully. Be supportive and understanding.
- Reassure them it wasn't their fault, whatever the circumstances.
- Communicate your belief that healing is possible.
- Tell them they're not alone.
- Support their decisions, even if it is to do nothing.
- Be aware of the supports available to survivors in the community.

[Elizabeth]

And I think that point is key. Not everyone has to be an expert on how to respond. They just need some basic information, how to be as supportive as possible, and they need to know that our community has specialized supports for survivors and their families.

This year the Sexual Assault Support Centre of Waterloo Region is recognizing it's 30th Anniversary. For thirty years, they have been a lifeline for survivors in Waterloo Region.

[Dianne]

Just to kind of back this up a bit, the day that I called SASC and, and reached out for help, the counsellor returned my call and she was already immediately building my self esteem. She'd ask me some questions about my kids and they were very young and she was, you know, talking about how, you know, what a supermom I was because I had little young kids and was balancing what I was going through. I only had to wait I think a few short weeks for the counseling session to the group counseling sessions to even start up. I can't imagine what would have happened if they told me it would have been months. I probably would've chickened out. I probably would have felt like they didn't believe me or it wasn't important or it wasn't urgent enough, but there was room for me to join in the group counseling. And then when it came time for me to reach out and ask for one on one counseling, I also didn't have to wait. I was able to access that also within a few weeks. I feel like SASC understands the, the, the demands perhaps or the needs that a survivor of childhood sexual abuse has. There's a lot of a lot of bad things that needed to be undone. Not just the abuse, but the response from family, the response from other people, the blame and shame that other people put on me that I accepted. And a lot of my counseling focused on undoing what those people had done to me. Not even just the abuse.

Oh, SASC provides the sexual assault support center provides very counseling especially for you know, recent sexual assault and also for survivors of childhood sexual abuse, which comes with some complexities that not everybody understands. I was in counseling alone long time. I started with group counseling because I didn't really trust the system and although it was all female counsellors, I was still weary.

I kept thinking at some point someone there is going to tell me we don't believe you are your story. And that never happened. So after several sessions of group counseling with other women who had similar experiences, I started to realize that this wasn't actually something I had done or it wasn't my fault. It was actually a theme between women who had experienced historical abuse. Many of the things that were said to me were said to these other women and that was quite validating. The person that lead the group sessions was also the person that the counsellor that, that led the group sessions was also the counsellor that provided one on one counseling for me.

[Sara]

As a community-based Sexual Assault Support Centre, SASC provides a safe place. We walk beside survivors. We bear witness. We advocate. We understand the complex systems impacting survivors' lives; we help navigate. We use an intersectional approach, which means we respect how survivor's unique social locations impact their experiences, how people respond to them, and what resources they have access to. We celebrate the amazing resiliency of those that use our services. We facilitate healing. We offer hope.

[Elizabeth]

It breaks my heart to hear Dianne talk about how it would have felt for her if she'd had to wait months for support after she reached out. In the post #MeToo Era, a wait is the reality many survivors are now facing.

The #MeToo Movement was a watershed moment in the advancement of gender equality, giving a powerful platform to women and demonstrating the extent of sexual assault and harassment across society. It's encouraging that more survivors, of all genders are coming forward, but the next step is ensuring we as a community are making the resources available for those survivors. We often tell survivors of sexual assault that "they're not alone." We need to stand together to ensure we're saying this with confidence.

Survivors languishing on waitlists is not ok. The idea that there is no money to either end violence or support those impacted by it should be challenged. There IS money, when something is a priority for an individual, a community, a province, or a nation.

There is so much to be done and so much that you as an individual can do

- become a monthly donor
- establish an endowment fund with Kitchener Waterloo Community Foundation and have the
- grants go in perpetuity to charities doing this work.
- talk to our politicians
- work to amplify the voice of your community-based Sexual Assault Support Centre
- and help us make all residents of Waterloo Region understand this issue and take action

[Sara]

Imagine the horror of being assaulted. Then imagine the courage it takes to come forward and seek help. Then imagine being added to a list of 200 other survivors awaiting help...

Visit www.sascwr.org to learn how you can make a difference.

[Elizabeth]

Once a survivor engages the criminal justice system to hold a perpetrator accountable to stop the abuse of and assaults on others, we imagine justice will be served. Tune in to our next episode to discover what really happens. This is Elizabeth Heald from the Kitchener Waterloo Community Foundation speaking today with Sara Casselman of the Sexual Assault Support Centre of Waterloo Region. We are brought to you by the Kitchener Public Library Community Conversation Podcast Initiative. Thank you for listening.