

BUILDING HOPE

By TOM HOLM
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Matt Morgan, owner of Morgan Construction, is ready to move past the abuse he suffered as a child

An uncle raped Matt Morgan.

Terry Morgan abused Matt when he was 12 and 13, kicking off Matt's lifetime of repressed memories, alcohol abuse and what he hopes, one day, is redemption.

The 49-year-old owner and manager of Morgan Construction, a local design and construction business, buried the memories of the abuse for three decades.

Matt became a rare statistic. He is among the few men who speak out against their abusers. Although research shows that one in six men have suffered sexual abuse before the age of 18, Matt became a rarity because he spoke out about the abuse. He sued his uncle, won a judgment and is now moving forward, trying to be more than a statistic.

Now Matt wants to bring some good from the years of pain he suffered. He won

a civil suit Dec. 2 against his uncle under a fraud claim instead of a sexual abuse claim, court records show. (For more on the legal battle, see Page A3.)

He never wants another child to go through what he endured. That's what his nonprofit organization Building Hope Today is for. Matt wants to have the organization bring awareness to the sexual abuse of children.

Matt wants to give a voice to the voiceless and help them shed the pain of abuse.

"You want to find guys like me? You can find them in the cemeteries and the jails," Matt said. "I have these emotional wounds that I'm working on to become scars and not wounds."

■ Matt was suffering from dissociative amnesia and post-traumatic stress disorder
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"I'd give every hard earned penny I got today if I could just help one person not have to go through that and experience that." — MATT MORGAN

Matt Morgan talks about how being sexually abused as a child has impacted his life.

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HOPE

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Young, confused, angry

Matt said his parents split up when he was 12 and his father took him to live in a home two houses away from his uncle, Terry Morgan. Terry frequently stopped by the house when Matt's father was at work, court records show.

Terry stepped into the void left by an absentee dad. Court records show he brought pornographic magazines and showed them to Matt. Terry told the young boy the women depicted in the magazines were his mother. Terry reportedly told Matt to pay attention as if he were receiving instruction in school.

"He had me convinced that was my mom in those magazines," Matt said.

Terry called Matt's mother a slut and a whore, blaming her for breaking up his parent's marriage, court records show. After forcing Matt to view the pictures of these women having sex with multiple men, he made Matt view gay male pornography. His uncle said this is how they should show their affection toward each other.

After showing him the pornography, Terry molested Matt, court records show. He raped and fondled Matt all summer. The abuse only subsided when Matt went back to school in the fall.

"I just closed my eyes when he did that to me," Matt said. "I just friggin' left ... I didn't let any of it rent any space in my brain."

He said he spent the next three years flunking school and getting into trouble. He didn't know why he was so angry. He tried to escape his demons by moving to California.

"When I got down to California and I found that set of nail bags and that hammer. It gave me, I found a purpose. It made me feel good about me. I was good at it. It made me feel good.



Monte LaOrange / mlaorange@postregister.com

Matt Morgan holds his wife Lynne's hand while talking about being sexually abused as a child by his uncle.

"I was frustrated and confused, I struggled for a number of years. I took a hold of that hammer and just decided I wanted to be good at it. I gave it everything I had and I threw myself 100 percent into it and it became my craft."

Matt repressed the thoughts of the abuse for 30 years until night terrors of his uncle raping him ravaged his sleep.

"I was 44 years old suffering from insomnia getting maybe one or two nights of sleep a week," Matt said. "I'd wake up in a cold sweat and say 'My god where did that come from.'"

The memories came back in bits and pieces. Matt was suffering from dissociative amnesia and post-traumatic stress disorder. Dissociative amnesia is the inability to retrieve memories from a stressful situation such as abuse or war, according to the Cleveland Clinic website, an academic Ohio hospital.

After being diagnosed in 2010, Matt began counseling.

The memories of dissociative amnesia sufferers are not entirely wiped from the mind and can be recalled through therapy or triggered by someone's surroundings. Tom Tueller, a licensed clinical social worker in Idaho Falls, said as memories come back they can be very overwhelming for a person.

"It's not their choice but they start to remember things and it puts them in

a very distressful state," Tueller said.

Coming to terms

Matt said he used alcohol to help press down the memories. He said he began drinking alcohol to excess at age 14 or 15.

"I've had a problem with alcohol since the first time I put that bottle to my mouth," Matt said.

Matt said he is now four-months sober. But before and during the trial his drinking brought him to a low point.

"I started to tailspin," Matt said. "I was going straight down and straight down fast."

One day Matt looked down at the glass as he was drinking alone and decided he needed to change. Matt got clean.

"I got something the majority of people who are abused don't get, the opportunity to have or have the money to pursue that vindication," Matt said. "Here I sat and thought how ungrateful I am to keep on drinking myself to sleep."

Matt's son, Travis, said he used to worry for his father especially when Matt became more aware of his buried memories.

"He always had this poor image of himself," Travis Morgan said. "We would always tell him 'This isn't who you are, why do you have those feelings.'"

In the summer of 2011 Matt drove by his uncle's home. He saw a swing set out front which stirred

feelings of disgust in him, thinking Terry was inviting children with the swing. Matt said he stewed in the feelings and then went to his uncle's door and demanded he take down the swing, apologize for abusing him and explain why he abused him as a child. The two began to argue and Matt said Terry refused to apologize or to remove the swing. The verbal argument escalated and turned physical, Matt said.

"I'm sorry I did it, sorry I went there. I didn't get what I was looking for," Matt said.

Months later Terry sued Matt for battery. During the trial Matt figured if he was going to be in court with his abuser he may as well counter sue. Matt consulted with his attorneys and ultimately came to the decision to file a suit claiming fraud, court records show. This led to Matt ultimately winning his case against Terry.

Repeated efforts to reach Terry Morgan were unsuccessful.

Matt's decision to con-

front his uncle makes him an outlier.

In a 1988 clinical study of 25 men who had been sexually abused, only one man reported the abuse when it happened. A 1990 study found that 44 percent of the men sampled had never told anyone about being abused, compared to 33 percent of women who had never disclosed the abuse. In a separate clinical study, 31 percent of men abused as a child had told someone about it when they were young, compared to 61 percent of women.

Travis Morgan said after the jury verdict, his father changed. He said his father regained his sense of humor. He carried himself better and saw his self-worth.

"The judicial system said 'You're not crazy, you have been wronged,' " Travis Morgan said. "(He's) better than ever, it helped him feel comfortable in his own skin again."

Travis Morgan, 25, said now that the trial is over, and though it's a victory

the emotions, haven't subsided.

"It's strange sometimes I'm not sure how to feel, we've been fighting so long," Travis Morgan said. "It's nice to move on. Nice to work on Building Hope Today and move forward."

Building a new life

Despite the alcohol, Matt built a multimillion dollar construction company from the ground up in his free-time. He was working for the Idaho Falls Fire Department and building things on his days off. Eventually he was doing more building than fire fighting and he said he resigned in 1995.

"Kind of unintentionally it blossomed," Matt said.

Morgan began his business by building and designing homes in the early 1990s. Now the company focuses on business projects. Matt said he built his first home in 1991 and from there the

■ Some of Matt's profits help victims of abuse

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Civil suit allows prosecution on decades old sexual abuse

By TOM HOLM
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Matt Morgan's effort to punish his uncle for sexual abuse three decades ago has traveled a unique legal course.

After exhausting traditional legal avenues, Matt Morgan's legal team used claims of fraud to bring Terry Morgan to justice, winning a \$395,000 judgment Dec. 2.

It is a legal tactic that could be used more extensively in the future, especially for those trying to press sexual abuse cases that can't be prosecuted because the statute of limitations has expired, said Boise attorney Andrew Chasan.

Chasan said the pursuit of Terry Morgan under a fraud claim is innovative and could open doors for other victims. Chasan is currently utilizing a fraud claim against the Boy Scouts of America, alleging that the Idaho branch of the scout group knew scouting posed a danger to young boys.

He said pursuing a single abuser for fraud is inventive.

"It (Morgan's case) doesn't have the strength of precedent as if it came from the (Idaho) Supreme Court," Chasan said. "But



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Matt Morgan and his wife Lynne are starting a nonprofit, Building Hope Today, for children who have suffered sexual abuse.

it helps prop the door open for others."

Legal relief

Matt Morgan approached Clint Casey and Dan Skinner in September 2012.

They decided to take a two-pronged approach to the case.

First, they attempted to overturn the state's statute of limitations for child abuse, which provides a

case can't be prosecuted after five years.

Court records show District Judge Dane Watkins Jr. ruled July 9, 2014, that he would not allow the child abuse claims to proceed. Idaho Code 6-1704 says criminal child abuse claims can be brought forward if the victim is over 18 and becomes aware of the abuse "within five years of the time the child discovers or reasonably

should have discovered the act, abuse or exploitation."

When that claim failed Matt's attorneys endeavored to find a new route. They argued fraud, basically claiming that Terry Morgan had lied to his nephew.

Watkins allowed the fraud claims to stand. Watkins said the theory behind fraud was not restricted to claims of financial harm and that

Terry lying to Matt could be considered fraud, court records show.

"Nothing in Idaho expressly confines fraud to commercial transactions," Watkins said.

The lawyers argued Matt was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and dissociative amnesia in 2010. Dissociative amnesia causes a temporary wipe of the memories of abuse. The diagnosis made litigation possible under a fraud claim. Matt's affliction opened the door to a fraud claim. Testimony from Matt's family members saying Terry Morgan groomed Matt for abuse bolstered the case.

A unanimous jury decision on Nov. 6 found that Matt's uncle had groomed him for sexual abuse which amounted to fraud under Idaho law.

Skinner said this verdict allows accessibility for victims to confront abusers who were never pursued criminally.

"We did a little research and we realized that maybe this is something that hasn't been done before," Skinner said.

Chasan said that though this use of fraud is insightful, it has been used before. The most famous case was when

defendants sued tobacco companies for damages, claiming companies knew the danger of cancer but kept it from the public.

"The reason (the defendants started to win) was internal documents proving the tobacco companies knew tobacco was a harmful product, but they failed to warn the public," Chasan said. "That opened (the tobacco companies) to fraud."

Skinner said Matt's case cannot yet be utilized on a national level.

Terry Morgan's attorneys appealed the case to the Idaho Supreme Court on July 2, court records show. If it survives appeal, the decision could become precedent for similar cases nationwide.

"People could use it in district level courts in Idaho," Skinner said. "But as far as citing to authority in all the other states, we're not there yet."

Matt may never see the money because Terry Morgan can't afford it. But Matt said the real victory is shining a light on child abuse.

"I think the statute of limitations should be changed," Matt said. "There needs to be some good positive things that come from this experience."

Message: Sex predators defective, not the victims

“How people treat you is a reflection of how they feel about themselves. It's not about you.”

I've decided I would shout those 17 words from the rooftops if given the chance to sum up the most important message I have to share with the living.

They are the words I offered to a victim of childhood sexual abuse, who was nervous about sharing his story with the world.

They are the words that prompted me to pause and thank God for all the life experiences that have led me to be able to say those 17 words with conviction.

Matt Morgan, co-founder of Building Hope Today, tearfully thanked me. I rejoiced.

I had talked him into letting me share his YouTube video, “Building Hope Today Through One Man's Story,” for a newspaper article I was writing.

Previously, Morgan had shared his video only with small groups. Opening up his very personal story to the world was a scary venture for him.

I knew why he felt the way he did.

I quoted to him my daughter, Celeste Francis. She had told me that being vulnerable may be unnerving, but it's the most effective way to share a message.

Her words came from the comfort she gave me a week earlier when I had written a personal column, and people were reacting both positively and negatively to my words.

I had expressed to her my discomfort. She validated my fears.

I told Morgan I could write 1,000 stories and still not have the power of Morgan's video, which runs all of 2 minutes and 14 seconds. In it, he tearfully shares the pain he still experiences more than three decades



JaNae Francis

Spiritual Reflections

after he says his uncle took advantage of him.

I said I wanted the world to see his pain because only then would people realize the need for action.

I relayed to him the points I had made in my story. “People need to be aware, take action and not blame victims,” I said.

Terrie Stephenson, manager of Your Community Connection's Domestic Violence Victim Assistance Center, had said at a meeting I attended with Morgan that, in four years and 800 interviews, she and her associate had not met one sexual abuse victim who did not blame himself or herself.

I knew why that was so.

I have met many in the throes of struggling to overcome self-blame associated with sexual abuse, and I have seen how impossible they saw winning this one important fight before they died.

But I also knew victims could rise above.

I told Morgan that one day he would come to realize the truth of my words. I said he would one day separate himself from the grievous act that had been put upon him.

I know because I have met dozens of victims, both in small groups and individually, who have been able to make this very journey. They got to where they could put the blame squarely on the perpetrator — which allowed them to move on — only after much work, forgiveness and self-discovery.



JANAIE FRANCIS/Standard-Examiner

Matt Morgan, co-founder of Building Hope Today, has shared his story of sexual abuse at the hands of an uncle in the YouTube video, “Building Hope Today Through One Man's Story.” Morgan, who lives in Idaho, started the nonprofit Building Hope Today with the goal of advocating for victims of child sexual abuse and creating awareness.

I believe the New International Version of Scripture John 8:12 is one with a great explanation of how people in difficult circumstances may leave darkness behind.

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life,” reads part of that New Testament verse, quoting Jesus Christ.

I told Morgan at least a half-dozen times his abuse was not about him. I told him that had his predator not abused him, he would have abused someone else.

And, in fact, Morgan said there were other victims besides himself.

“Well, there you go,” I said.

Morgan's story — and the stories of thousands like him — was always about the perpetrators. What I believe we, as a society, need to keep working to do better is to address the perpetrators.

What are their needs? Why do

they do what they do? How do we effectively stop their behavior before they can abuse again? How do we convince their victims that what they do has nothing to do with any possible defect in the victims at all?

The problem of sexual abuse has to do with a defect in the perpetrators.

My discussion with Morgan led me to want to stand on the nearest rooftop and to not care one iota if and when men with white jackets showed up to peel me away from the public spectacle I envisioned.

In my mind, I wanted to scream a few short sentences to the ends of the Earth.

They were: “How people treat you is a reflection of how they feel about themselves. It's not about you!”

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