

Child abuse survivors reach out with monument

by Sophie Tolias

Elementary school teacher Kenneth DeLuca was given good references by his employers and moved from school to school. But beneath his handsome charming appearance he was every parent's nightmare. He attacked little girls in closets, bathrooms, hallways and even in the principal's office. He kissed and fondled them, used filthy language, rubbed against them, put his hands under their clothes and made them touch his genitals. Nobody believed complaints dating back to 1973. However, in 1996 he pleaded guilty to 14 sexual offences against 13 victims.

A teacher? Yes. Alleged child abusers include babysitters, family friends, teachers and other professionals – people parents trust. But according to a report released by the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics in 2001, 93% of alleged perpetrators are family members or relatives.

For weeks, I have followed the story of the criminal trial of Tony and Marcia Dooley, charged with the second degree murder of seven-year-old Randy Dooley. I am horrified as I read that autopsy photos showed the child's body covered with welts, cuts, bruises and scars. I shudder trying to picture an innocent child who had 14 broken ribs, a broken vertebra, a sliced liver, pneumonia and four separate brain injuries. I can't imagine a stepmother who, as his brother testified, would put her unconscious stepson in a bathtub filled with cold water and force ice into his mouth. Physical abuse turned deadly.

These are just two cases – two that made the news. What about the cases hidden behind closed doors? What about the survivors of child abuse who grew up coping with nightmares while the rest of us played with Barbies and G.I. Joe's? It is these survivors artist and psychotherapist Michael Irving had in mind when he decided to sculpt a monument for child abuse victims.

Irving himself is a survivor of childhood prostitution and pornography. "I could deal with my wounds," he said. "But I needed something external to deal with the hurt I saw inflicted on other kids." Working as a clinician, he had clients who had been profoundly abused. "Being an artist," he explained, "I wanted to do something that was caring, addressing, validating and acknowledging them."



Artist and psychotherapist Michael Irving

People began talking about the need for a monument to child abuse, Irving explained. "I decided in 1990 that I would do it." The idea of the Child Abuse Survivor Monument Project was born.

The real work began seven years ago in the carriage house behind Irving's Beach-area home. Two years later, the project moved to a Summerhill studio. 'Reaching Out,' the national monument honouring survivors of child abuse and dedicated to awareness and prevention, was well on its way. The bronze healing monument features two androgenous human figures. The figures' curved tilt, up and forward, creates a sense of the sculpture embracing the viewer. Their arms outstretched upward imply nurturing and safety, victory and celebration, presence and inclusion. Ten feet above the ground the figures' hands meet, forming an arch high and wide enough for three people to walk under side by side.

Composed of sculpted 'quilt' squares, bronze shawls reaching the ground draping the arms and shoulders of the figures. Nearly 200 of the 300 quilt squares were created by survivors of child abuse and their supporters. Each of these squares has a person's cast hand with personal art work or writing. The hands reaching out create a powerful image, making real the presence of the survivors.

Quilt square workshops took place across Canada and survivors came to Toronto to join ongoing workshops.

The art work is professional, even though most of the people had never sculpted before. "Child abuse is inseparable from the soul, so when somebody's doing artwork...they're connecting with their spirit," Irving explained. "And then the idea that the messages will be a public voice...and will address this issue so significant to the lives of the people involved, that brings out the passion."



Barbara Peer Cavin made a square (left). She read about the project in the Toronto Star and came to Toronto to attend a six week workshop. "It brought back a lot of memories," Cavin said quietly. Cavin sculpted a little girl burdened down. 'Sexual Abuse is too heavy for any child to carry through life,' she wrote on the square. "[The project] gave people a voice," Cavin said. "The whole thing speaks out loud, doesn't it?" she asked, pointing to the figure in the studio.

Yes, it does. I stand up and walk to the figure. All the hands reach out to me. I can't help but touch them. One quilt square artist said, "I would like the monument to tug at people's hearts..." It tugs at my heart.

"Each one is a novel and there's an incredible story behind all of them," Irving said. "These here are men from Maple Leaf Gardens who were abused as boys," he pointed out. The monument is also dedicated to those who did not survive. One artist made a square dedicated to Farah Khan, the five-year-old whose dismembered body parts were found in garbage bags in a Toronto park.

The 'Give Us a Hand' Campaign allowed Canadians everywhere to be a part of the endeavour. Tracings of hands on a sheet of paper along with messages are still being collected for inclusion inside the hollow monument. This is how the voices of many children made it on the monument. "Seeing the quality of those kids' hands [and messages] the decision was made to [transfer 72] of them right on the monument," Michael said. Michelle, age 8, wrote, 'If child abuse won't stop, war won't stop and there will be no peace in the world.'

Visitors can leave their mark by resting their hand upon an adjacent fountain wall, then placing their wet hand on one of 24 smooth squares. The damp outline of their hand on the smooth bronze creates a temporary hand print allowing them to directly participate in this epic monument.

After years of work, after the contributions and ideas of hundreds of people, after a possible tour across Canada on a low flat-bed truck, the monument will find its final resting spot at the Air Canada Centre in 2003. There it will stand for years to come – each quilt square, a window into the struggles of children – society's most innocent.

I told you about little Randal Dooley. His brother, just eight-years-old at the time, carried an unconscious Randy out of that ice cold water, changed him into dry pajamas, tucked him into bed and lay down beside him and slept. Randy slept too. But his sleep was eternal. In the morning, Randy was dead. 'Goodnight little Randy.' That's what I would write on a square dedicated to him. 'Goodnight.'

For further information contact Michael Irving at (416) 922-8955, or check out www.childabusemonument.org. To Give A Hand for placement inside the monument, draw an outline of your hand on an 8 1/2 x 11 paper with a written or drawn message, and send to: The Child Abuse Monument Project at 274 Rhodes Ave., Toronto, Ontario, M4L 3A3.

If you participated in the project, have changed your address, but would like to receive the newsletter, contact Lynn Pearson at (416) 922-8955.

-30-