

*As featured in the April, 2011 issue of Points North, a leading Atlanta magazine-
Written by Sara Shelton*

When I met Lin Seahorn for the first time at her Alpharetta, Ga. based office, I was overwhelmed with the amount of comfort with which she welcomed me in. She greeted me with a hug as she ushered me into her office, striking up conversation with a genuine ease. She eagerly shared stories about her husband Bill and their menagerie of pets, grabbing pictures off the wall and out of desk drawers to provide me with a visual of the cast of characters in her life. Hers is a home of warmth and laughter, an inviting and welcoming asylum from the outside world- and a stark contrast to the home she knew as a child.

“I don’t remember a lot of happy times,” Seahorn explains. “I didn’t have books or dolls or things like most little girls. Times that should’ve been happy like Easter or Christmas were always scarred by domestic violence.”

She waits a beat and adds matter-of-factly, “I don’t remember a time when there wasn’t severe abuse in my life.”

Lin Seahorn was one of what is an estimated 9 million children who suffer from child abuse each year in the U.S. The Department of Justice says nearly 6 million cases go unreported. Studies indicate that 1 in 6 boys and 1 in 4 girls will be sexually molested by the time they reach 18, most by a relative or trusted family friend.

The fourth of six children, Lin grew up with a mother who she believes struggled with addiction and undiagnosed psychological issues. After her parent’s divorce and mother’s subsequent remarriage, the family began a series of moves that kept the family unsettled. They would go back and forth between housing projects, subsidized housing and sometimes better homes.

“There wasn’t a day that went by that our house was not filled with screaming or madness,” Lin says. “This would always escalate from shouting into throwing things which led to the physical, the punching and kicking. My mother would turn her rage on us and she was just brutal.” I would fall asleep each day in school from being exhausted from the night before, and then I would be chased home from school for being “different”. I don’t remember any of my teachers except for one, in 3rd grade, who told me I was beautiful and to never give up.

At around age 11, her mother abruptly booted her from the home, put her on a bus and sent her to live with the father she had never known. What could have been a safe haven from the abusive home she had left behind was instead a return to the fear and vulnerability she had already known.

“The violence and sexual abuse began almost immediately,” she explains of her time living with her father, “I was horrified.”

Soon, Seahorn mustered up the courage to tell a teacher what was happening behind closed doors at her home. As a result, she was taken out of her father's custody and introduced into what she calls "the revolving foster care system." Initially there was no place for her in this system and as a result, the state placed her in a juvenile detention facility. Here she found no haven from abuse.

"I was put with these girls who were in trouble for stealing or drugs and they beat me up on a daily basis. I knew I didn't belong there. I wasn't delinquent- I was just unwanted."

Eventually, at her stepfather's imploring, her mother consented to take Lin out of the center and back into their home. Upon returning, Lin found no reprieve from the abuse she had previously known there. She was continually berated and beaten. On the worst nights, she was shut up in the tiny crawl-space attic of their home. Here she was left all night and instructed not to move for fear she would fall through the floor. This particular experience Lin recalls as "one of the worst emotional abuses I ever endured."

Her life continued in this cycle until her mother, again, made the abrupt decision to have Lin out of the house.

"She just decided she didn't want to deal with me anymore," she recalls. "With my little brother crying in the backseat, my stepfather dropped me off on the front steps of a local orphanage and left me there to stay."

In that Ohio orphanage, Lin was just one of 500 other unwanted children, many of whom came from more dire situations. Seahorn began to realize that she was not alone in her circumstances. It was in this place that the seeds of her current mission were planted.

In time, Seahorn went to North Carolina to live with a sister and then back to Tennessee where she had accumulated enough credits to graduate from high school at age 16 (she is the only one in her family to boast this accomplishment). She entered college and set about the work of overcoming her past. This was a task easier said than done.

"I had now had a taste of good things in my life but still, I was plagued by so many feelings- emptiness, loneliness, constantly wondering why no one wanted me. I was plagued by insecurity and trust issues. I entered into my own cycle of addiction and abusive relationships because this was all I knew."

She sighs and continues with confidence, "But then I rediscovered my faith in God. I realized one day I deserved better things and I just knew I would not let anyone else control me, abuse me anymore."

From here, Seahorn never looked back. With this newfound faith in God and a renewed sense of self-esteem, she moved forward to achieve the success and peace she now enjoys. She became a successful entrepreneur and, later, an Executive Sales Trainer for a Fortune 100 company. She met her husband Bill some twelve years ago and together, they embarked on the most important journey of her life: the development and growth of her organization, Children Without a Voice USA (CWAV).

Founded in 2007, CWAV is a national organization dedicated to raising awareness of and preventing crimes against children, child abuse, and neglect through advocacy and education. Lin and her staff of close to 70 volunteers work diligently to raise awareness about and advocate against crimes committed against children. Together they offer classes to both parents and children as well as provide educational materials on all subjects affecting children such as bullying, teen dating violence and shaken baby syndrome.

“There are four types of abuse: physical, emotional, sexual, and neglect,” she explains. “Typically, one form does not occur without another and it is our goal at CWAV to educate parents and children about each of these in an effort to prevent them from occurring.”

Along with education, the team at CWAV serves as advocates for abused and neglected children around the U.S. Just last year they followed close to 400 cases of crimes against children, emailing state prosecutors and judges on a regular basis to appeal for tougher sentencing on the abuser.

“People who commit crimes against children in the US typically face about 25% of the sentence of someone who commits a crime against an adult. We appeal to the prosecutors, the judges, anyone involved in these cases to fight against such a light sentence. And almost always, we get a response.”

When she speaks about CWAV and the work to change the child abuse statistics in this country, she does so with an infectious passion. When asked why she wanted to start the organization she states simply, “One day I just knew that this was the purpose of all I’d been through.”

The main goal of the organization is to break what she calls the “bubble of silence” that exists in communities and neighborhoods in the US today.

“When I was growing up, my neighbors always knew what was going on in our house and no one ever said a word,” she says. “Nothing has changed today. People are living in their own bubbles. We don’t want to get involved with our neighbors. We don’t want to offend or insert ourselves in their business for fear of embarrassment or retaliation. What people don’t understand is that it is not their job to investigate, to judge, or persecute. It **IS** their job to file an anonymous

report with the police. It may feel uncomfortable to report suspected abuse or neglect, but consider how great and uncomfortable the cost of not reporting.” CWAV’s emphasis on abuse prevention through education extends from inner city neighborhoods into the more affluent, suburban areas where many think this kind of abuse and neglect of children would never occur.

“Child abuse crosses all socio-economic lines. It’s not just in the projects or in the impoverished, struggling communities. It is a silent epidemic, hidden all over our neighborhoods. Almost all social ills we see in society today can be traced back to some form of child abuse which has no geographic or financial boundaries.”

Lin and her team at CWAV are hoping to raise up an even stronger team of volunteers to take on the work of fighting the war against child abuse. Through this combination of education and advocacy, they are training adults to recognize the signs of child abuse and encouraging them to speak up, to shatter the silence that covers this epidemic. In 2011, they are looking to obtain much-needed seed money(enough to establish a small paid staff) and recruit more volunteers across the nation to serve as a voice for the vulnerable children in the US.

“We need more voices, more advocates,” Seahorn asserts, “We are failing our kids in this country by not raising up our voices and not doing our job as adults to protect them. Imagine what our country could look like in the future if we started taking care of our children and speaking up for the vulnerable rather than ignoring them.”

Though she has come so far from the vulnerable child she once was, Seahorn is quick to state that the affects of child abuse still linger and will undoubtedly last a lifetime. In her own life, she looks to her faith as an anchor and tries to actively exercise the compassion to others that was lacking in her own childhood.

“Everyday I wake up and am thankful. I want to focus on the positive, on what I do have instead of what I didn’t have for so many years. I want children and families to learn the importance of values. About what it means to truly care for others and what compassion looks like in action.”

Looking around her office littered with pictures and stories of the children she has helped, I think it’s safe to say Lin Seahorn is doing just that.

*Featured story in Points North Magazine, April, 2011, Atlanta, Ga.
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For more information on Children Without A Voice and how you can donate or get involved, visit them online at www.childrenwithoutavoic usa.org