

Letter to the Editor re: Lupe Almaguer

While it was completely by chance that Lupe Almaguer's sentencing coincided with Sexual Assault Awareness Month and Child Abuse Prevention Month, we cannot refrain from the opportunity to take a closer look. Mr. Almaguer, once a well known, well liked and respected day care provider in Mammoth Lakes, California, was convicted on four counts of child molestation and received a sentence of 60 years to life in State Prison.

Child sexual abuse is a difficult and uncomfortable subject to think about, let alone discuss. It is simply one of the most horrific and repulsive crimes perpetrated against children. However, if we choose not to talk about it, then we unconsciously support the myth that it does not exist in our community. The reality is that it *does* exist, in our homes, neighborhoods, and our communities. We need look no further than Lupe Almaguer to confirm that.

Children who are sexually abused are most often exploited by someone they know and trust. A relative, childcare provider, friend of the family, a neighbor, teacher, coach, or a clergy member are all potential abusers. The emotional damage caused by child sexual abuse is powerful and far reaching. Children almost always believe that the abuse is their fault, they feel extreme shame and guilt, and worry that no one will believe them or that they will be in trouble if they tell.

As a community, we ask ourselves, "What can we do?" A good start is to know the facts which are nothing short of alarming:

- Only 5% of sexual abuse is perpetrated by a stranger; 90% of child sexual abuse victims know their perpetrator;
- 68% of perpetrators are family members;
- Most abusers are heterosexual men, although women can also be abusers;
- 90% of the time, abusers are trusted friends, family, neighbors, and community members;
- Abusers are not scary, dirty, "crazy" individuals who "jump" out bushes to catch their prey. Abusers are charming, caring individuals who go out of their way to be helpful, seemingly loving people.

Next, report suspected child abuse; you can do it anonymously if needed. By doing so, you just might be the person who is responsible for a child receiving the intervention services needed to keep them safe. STEP UP! If you won't, who will?

Lastly, if a child comes forward and confides in you, believe them! Children need to be believed. Is it hurtful and embarrassing to feel like you need to question someone you have always thought well of? Yes! But what we're talking about is not a stolen cookie or a bike. These abusive behaviors steal lives.

To report suspected child abuse, or to receive more information, please contact:

Inyo County Child Protective Services, 760-872-1727
Mono County Child Protective Services, 1-800-340-5411
Wild Iris, 1-877-873-7384
Missing Children, 1-800-235-3535
National Child Abuse Hotline, 1-800-422-4453

With Regards,

Lisa K.Reel, Wild Iris Executive Director

Susi Bains, Wild Iris Child Abuse Program Coordinator, Mono County

Suzanne Cook, Wild Iris Child Abuse Program Coordinator, Inyo County

IF YOU WANT TO TALK TO SOMEONE

(From Mammoth Times Newspaper, April 29, 2011)

There are three main resources in Mono County available to parents and possible victims of child sexual abuse. They are private counselors, Mono County Mental Health and Wild Iris Womens' Services.

In addition, Deputy District Attorney Todd Graham told the Times that parents or children who may have been victims of Almaguer, even if they are now adults, can contact the DA's office and their situation will "be reviewed," although Graham also said that with Almaguer already sentenced to life in prison, it is unlikely that another criminal case against Almaguer would proceed.

Here's a list of where to start if you are a parent with concerns, or you believe you were a victim of Almaguer, or of sexual abuse in general:

Mono County Mental Health: (760) 924-1740

Ann Gimpel, director of the county's mental health program, said mental health has one "very qualified" child sexual abuse therapist who specializes in talking to young and underage minor children, and many other staff members who can deal with those who are now adults who believe they were sexually abused – by Almaguer or someone else.

"Treating children who are victims of sexual abuse is a very specialized area," she said. "We are lucky to have someone here who can do this."

She cautioned that sexual abuse that occurs when a person is a child is also something that takes time and commitment to transcend. "It's not like you can take an eight-hour workshop and walk away and hold it together," she said. "To do it, you need fairly long-term and fairly specialized treatment."

If mental health cannot help, Gimpel said they will work with the client to find the right resources that can help the victim.

Wild Iris Womens' Services: (760) 934-2491 or (760) 872-1727 or go to www.wild-iris.org or call their 24-hour toll-free hotline: (1-877) 873-7384

Although the name doesn't state it, Wild Iris can help all members of a family, not just women and children, after child sexual abuse occurs.

The non-profit organization provides always free, always confidential counseling and referrals and has a 24-hour hotline for emergencies.

Lisa Reel, the executive director for Wild Iris, said that for reasons she is not totally sure about, the number of reports of child sexual abuse turned into Wild Iris have risen 30 percent compared to last year.

"Maybe it's the visibility of the Almaguer case, maybe it's the economy, but yes, this is a big increase," she said.

Wild Iris can help parents and/or victims figure out their next step free of charge, although they generally refer child victims to specialists, for the same reasons mentioned above by Gimpel.

Private practice therapists can be reached via their websites, the phone book, and by talking to community members, mental health and Wild Iris staff for references and referrals that are appropriate to your circumstances.