

When we met her, Maria was a 5-year-old little girl who was the victim of sexual abuse. With her petite frame, big brown eyes and long, curly brown hair, she was the poster-child for an all-American kindergartener. However, Maria was being abused in her home by an uncle who cared for her in the evenings while her parents worked. One day after school, after months of being robbed of her innocence, Maria finally told her mother what had been happening to her.

And so, the grueling process begins...

Her frantic parents took her straight to the emergency room where she could be evaluated and cared for. Per protocol, hospital staff contacted the Citrus County Sheriff's Office and a detective responded to the ER. A detective spoke with a very frightened Maria and determined that she needed a forensic examination in order to determine the extent of the abuse.

Unfortunately for Maria, the hospital did not provide pediatric, gynecological services; Maria needed to be seen by physicians with the Florida Department of Health Child Protection Team who have specialized training just for tragic situations like this. After about 6 hours in the emergency room, Maria and her family were transported to a neighboring county's Child Advocacy Center, about 45 minutes away. Maria then experienced a forensic exam. Exhausted and afraid, she was transported back to her home very late that night.

The next day began Maria's journey through the complex system of agencies, people and experiences. Maria was required to give an official interview to law enforcement where she told them what happened in her home at night. She later spoke with the prosecuting attorney where she told him what happened in her home at night. She also spoke with the child protective investigator where she retold what happened to her at night. Different agencies, different people, but the same story our little 5-year-old told over and over again.

Thanks to Maria's bravery and unwavering re-telling of her story, charges were filed against the uncle. This meant that Maria had to give a deposition for court. Maria went to yet another strange office building, where she was supposed to tell what happened to her at night. Maria sat down at the head of the conference table, surrounded by 2 defense attorneys, the prosecutor, the court reporter and the videographer, she decided that she did not want to talk to anymore. She had told her story many times. Why did she have to talk about this again?

With the defense unable to take the deposition of the victim, the prosecutor was forced to start negotiating a plea deal for probation. Maria's uncle never saw any jail time for the horrible things he had done to her.

What If?

"If Jessie's Place had been opened the day that Maria disclosed her abuse to her mother, her story may have ended very differently. What if she didn't have to stay at the emergency room for hours while services were coordinated at another county's facility? What if she had been able to go somewhere in her own neighborhood for her exam? What if she didn't have to tell her story so many times, to so many strangers, in so many places? What if she could have told her story once, to a specially trained interviewer, in a child-friendly location where all the necessary parties could watch and listen? What if she had come back to that same child-friendly location for her therapy and follow-up services? What if she were familiar and comfortable with the location where her deposition was taken? What if Maria would have received justice that day? What if we had one less child abuser on our streets?"

For you to understand how important it is that we have Jessie's Place you need to understand how the system works without a Child Advocacy Center (CAC). As a Victim Advocate with the Citrus County Sheriff's Office, I have worked with many of these children. I've transported them out of our county, scared, confused and tired, in the wee hours of the morning for their forensic exams. I have traveled with these children to one strange office building after another for the necessary interviews. I have listened to them tell their stories over and over.

I have also seen what a difference Jessie's Place can make in the lives of the children that must come through our doors. I have seen the forensic medical exams provided in our own county. I have seen the collaboration of multiple agencies; collaboration provides the victim with better services, makes stronger cases and most important, decreases the number of interviews the victim must endure. I have seen the children in our waiting area playing games and watching movies. Even though the reason for their visit is not a pleasant one, the children seem to have a sense of safety and comfort here. It is a common occurrence to hear parents telling children that "it really is time to go."

Melissa Bowermaster, Victim Advocate