

Child sexual abuse survivor Linda Crockett nears retirement from career aimed at helping others like her



- JOHN WALK | Features Writer

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The odds were against 68-year-old Lancaster County native Linda Crockett as she laid on a gurney in the back of an ambulance speeding down the highway. Moments earlier, an ascending aortic aneurysm had ruptured inside Crockett's chest. In most cases, aortic aneurysm ruptures are fatal.

"I'm not dying," Crockett told the emergency medical technician by her side.

"I've never had a patient with blood pressure this low who is still conscious," the EMT replied.

In an effort to stay alive, Crockett told the EMT to keep talking to her.

"It's interesting in that as a survivor of sexual violence for so much of my life I lived apart from my body," Crockett told LNP | LancasterOnline. "But after a lot of healing and a lot of help from God I finally came to a place where I fully inhabit and love my body. I had finally gotten to that place and now I didn't want God to take this body from me."

COLUMN FROM LINDA CROCKETT: ["Our system often fails victims of domestic and sexual violence"](#)

Crockett was molested by a teenage cousin and his friends when she was 5 years old. She was raped by a family acquaintance when she was 12. She was drugged and gang-raped by several men when she was 15. During that same span, Crockett was sexually abused and physically tortured by her mother inside their West Cocalico Township home.

She has since healed and gone on to help others like her, eventually launching a non-profit, Safe Communities, aimed at ending child sexual abuse. That organization was in year four when the rupture of an aortic aneurysm inside Crockett put her on the brink of death last summer.

“I just recall praying with my whole being, ‘God, please let me live. You’ve given me work to do. You’ve given me people to love. I’m not done,’” she said.

What has happened since then has led Crockett to re-evaluate and change course on her future.

‘A strong sense of Jesus’

Growing up with a mother who abused her and a father who turned a blind eye to it, Crockett went with those same parents to a Lutheran church every Sunday.

Combine that with the brutality of what she endured early in life and it explains complicated feelings Crockett has towards church today.

Her faith in Jesus Christ, however, has not wavered.

Why?

For the answer, Crockett revisits the gang-rape she endured at 15, alongside a female friend inside a nightclub in 1970.

“As the men were doing these things to her body and my body I had such a strong sense of Jesus just sitting very near us,” Crockett recalled. “He was looking down with love and compassion. He locked his eyes with mine so I could get through that ordeal. He didn’t save us but he was there.”

Crockett’s Christian faith led her to be the chairperson of an evangelism committee for a local church in 1987. The committee was charged with sorting through a mailbox stuffed with appeals for help from around the world.

One of those appeals came from a Salvadoran bishop who asked for Americans to come to his country and provide accompaniment of his people amidst a war in which thousands of innocent civilians had already been killed.

Shortly thereafter Crockett, then 32, boarded a plane for El Salvador. It’s there she listened to Salvadorans share their experiences from the ravages of war.

While she heard those stories, the childhood trauma Crockett had buried deep for so long began bubbling to the surface.

“God called me to El Salvador for a reason,” Crockett said. “That was the start of my own healing.”

[READ: Local organization creates resource guide for churches to help members who have experienced sexual abuse](#)

‘A very wounded person’

By 1991, Crockett had taken several trips to El Salvador and felt ready to pursue therapy back home, ready to unpack what happened to her so many years earlier.

She came across an article in a Lancaster newspaper about the Rev. James Hanna, who founded the Lancaster-based Samaritan Counseling Center in 1987.

Hanna also established the Lancaster branch of Habitat for Humanity, which resulted in him making trips to the Central American country Nicaragua as it was mired in war, trips similar to those Crockett had taken to El Salvador.

“That as much whatever therapy skills I may have had is what drew her to me,” Hanna recalled. “She felt I would understand that world and something of her.”

Hanna was a little overwhelmed by Crockett early on.

“But she was very articulate, capable and intelligent,” Hanna said. “She had thought a lot about this. But she was also a very wounded person. Trying to understand somebody’s situation when you haven’t experienced it yourself is not easy. But that’s the therapist’s role.”

Hanna, who retired in 2009, counseled Crockett over the course of nine years. In essence, Hanna had Crockett remember the abuse from childhood in order to later find healing from it, then got Crockett to wean off of the dreamless sleep-aids she purposely consumed to avoid nightmares, then connected her to a physical therapist to release traumatic memories in order to get Crockett to be more comfortable within her own skin.

All of the above is unpacked in a harrowing 350-page book written by Crockett titled, “The Deepest Wound.”

The book was published in 2001, the same year Crockett felt a calling to leave her high-paying job in banking and carve out a lower-paying position on Hanna’s staff at the Samaritan Counseling Center.

“That was an indication she had come a long way,” Hanna said. “She was able to objectify her own experience enough to talk about it with others.”

One experience in particular came in the days leading up to her 12th birthday, when she was nearly rescued from the abuse.

COLUMN FROM LINDA CROCKETT: "[Justice for Pennsylvania child sexual abuse survivors is delayed yet again](#)"

'Redeeming her own experience'

Crockett's mother beat her so badly Crockett was hospitalized in March 1967.

Crockett's injuries didn't line up with what her parents were telling doctors. Crockett's mother badgered the hospital staff so much that a doctor suspected the woman to be paranoid schizophrenic.

But after three weeks in the hospital, Crockett was returned to the care of her parents.

"A doctor today might use the power of the courts to protect an abused child from being returned to a seriously mentally ill and dangerous mother," Crockett wrote in her book. "But on the week of my 12th birthday, there was no one to intervene and protect me. The medical establishment, the school, the church and my father turned away from a child who could do nothing but scream at the unrelenting violations of body and spirit that were a staple of her existence."

Signs of sexual abuse in children

One in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused before they turn 18.

Children who have been sexually abused may display a range of emotional and behavioral reactions, many of which are characteristic of children who have experienced other types of trauma. These reactions include: An increase in nightmares and/or other sleeping difficulties, withdrawn behavior, angry outbursts, anxiety, depression, not wanting to be left alone with a particular individual(s), sexual knowledge, language, and/or behaviors that are inappropriate for the child's age.

If a child discloses abuse, stay calm, listen carefully and thank the child for telling you and reassure him or her of your support. If you know or suspect that a child is being or has been sexually abused, call the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1.800.422.4453) or visit childwelfare.gov/responding. If you need immediate assistance, call 911.

Source: United States Department of Justice.

That experience influenced Crockett, a Cocalico High School alum, in her work at Samaritan in the first two decades of the 2000s.

At Samaritan, she launched Safe Church, a nine-month program in which teams from five to eight churches at a time undergo 21 hours of training to recognize and respond to child sexual abuse.

“If you want to change culture you can’t disregard all the people of faith,” Crockett told LNP | LancasterOnline. “We believed people of faith would be especially equipped and inspired to take the lead in helping to keep kids safe from sexual harm. No matter your theology all of us can agree that the sexual violation is not only a crime but a sin.”

Crockett also created Safe Places, which worked with organizations serving youth, such as schools.

“I’ve had teachers and guidance counselors tell me, ‘If only I would’ve understood some of the signs, this kid has always puzzled me,’” Crockett said. “So it’s equipping professionals and the adults in kids’ lives, then teaching kids themselves to be the boss of your body.”

Other programs spearheaded by Crockett offered support for survivors of domestic violence, or for those who experience trauma secondhand, such as a case worker.

Crockett’s work has come during a span in which voices of sexual abuse survivors have been heard prominently across the country over last 20 years, such as in the Sandusky case and later through the #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements, for example.

“It’s been astonishing how much has changed,” Andrea Stoner Leaman said.

Stoner Leaman, who has expertise in nonprofit management, has known Crockett for 20 years and briefly worked alongside her.

“When all the church stuff started coming out and churches wanted to do something about it, Lancaster County had an engaged organization churches could turn to for information,” Stoner Leaman said.

That engaged organization is Safe Communities, the nonprofit launched by Crockett in 2019, taking the programs she had implemented at Samaritan and branching out on her own.

Safe Communities: What is it?

A Lancaster-based nonprofit launched with a mission to end child sexual abuse through prevention education, survivor services, consultation and congregational policy making.

Since its founding in 2019, Safe Communities claims to have improved the lives of more than 52,000 adults and children. Another 50,000 have been reached through radio shows, media articles, and collaborative campaigns with other nonprofits.

For more information or make a donation, visit safecommunitiespa.org.

In 2023 alone, the organization hosted a full day retreat for 25 survivors of child sexual abuse, helped 10 people become certified as interpreters of Pennsylvania Dutch language for the court system, trained more than 150 religious leaders on sexual ethics and boundaries and on the intersections of pornography, child sexual abuse and sex trafficking and provided eight free public workshops.

Linda Crockett career

Assistant Vice President for Susquehanna Bancshares, 1986 to 2002.

Samaritan Counseling Center in 2003.

Created non-profit Safe Communities in 2019.

She's also been a member of the following groups:

Plain Communities Task Force of Lancaster County, aimed to prevent child sexual abuse and offer victim support in Amish and Plain Communities.

Trauma-Informed Care for Survivors of Sexual Violence Work Group as part of the PA Governor's Office of Advocacy and Reform initiative

Lancaster County C.A.S.E. Task Force on ending child sexual abuse and exploitation.

Safe Communities seemed to be just getting going when Crockett's health took a turn last summer.

Before she underwent emergency surgery on that mid-summer day last July, Crockett called her two adult sons. In case she didn't survive, she wanted to say goodbye to them.

READ: [Sexual abuse in Plain communities is the target of task force from judge, nonprofit leader](#)

'You're going to live'

To numb the trauma she experienced in childhood, Crockett turned to drugs and alcohol when she reached high school. She often slipped out of the house to attend parties, where trays of drugs were freely available like bowls of candy.

She soon became addicted to speed, the street name for amphetamines that stimulate the central nervous system. She also became pregnant at 17.

“I cut myself off cold turkey (from drugs and alcohol),” Crockett said. “I wouldn’t put anything in my body that would hurt this child.”

Not hurting her children stuck with Crockett in her efforts to be the complete opposite of her own mother, who died by suicide in 1975 at age 41 - her father died of natural causes in 2005 at age 77.

“Be as opposite of my mother as I can possibly be and never hurt them,” Crockett said. “That was my mantra for raising our boys.”

Crockett and the father of the boys immediately married when she first became pregnant - Linda and Russell Crockett have now been married for 52 years.

“I love you,” Linda Crockett told her husband before she went into emergency surgery July 18, 2023.

“Just fight,” Russell Crockett responded. “You’re going to live.”

‘It takes a toll’

A dissection of an aortic aneurysm can otherwise be described as a tear in the wall of a blood vessel in the chest. Without emergency surgery, Crockett had about eight hours to live. The estimate came from Penn Medicine Lancaster General Health thoracic surgeon Dr. Mark Epler. While he’s performed more than 1,500 cardiac surgeries over the course of his 24-year career, Epler said several hundred of them have been life-saving dissection repairs like the one he did for Crockett in what was a seven-hour procedure.

“She excelled with her recovery,” Epler said of Crockett. “Kudos to her for being nearly 70 years of age and being in otherwise great health. The better health you’re in, the better chance you have at survival from such a life-threatening event that needs emergency surgery.”

Thoracic aortic aneurysm

The body's main artery is called the aorta. When the aortic wall is weak, the artery may widen. When the vessel is significantly widened, it's called an aneurysm. Complications of a thoracic aortic aneurysm include rupture of the aorta or a life-threatening tear or rupture of the layers of the aorta's wall. This can lead to sudden death, with a mortality rate of more than 94 percent if emergency surgery is not performed within the first 24 hours of the tear occurring.

Sources: Mayo Clinic, National Institutes of Health, Centers for Disease Control, American Heart Association.

Eight months have passed since the surgery. Crockett is still slowly recovering. Before surgery, she did yoga and walked two miles a day.

“Now I can walk a couple miles but I have to stop and rest every 20 minutes because I get short of breath,” she said. “And I’m able to do some mild yoga. I’m still very fatigued all the time.”

It’s why the prospect of Crockett resuming the 60-hour work weeks she put in with Safe Communities is no longer an option.

“It’s good work. I love serving this way. But it takes a toll,” she said. “I knew I couldn’t keep doing that. Our board (of directors) agreed this is too much.”

Crockett, who moved to York County with her husband over the winter, is currently interviewing candidates to fill the two full-time vacancies of Safe Communities. One of those includes her replacement as executive director.

When those new hires are made, she will retire.

“I want to be able to hand off that ball to the right person,” she said.

Crockett once wrote in her book that survivors of childhood sexual abuse often internalize their pain and destroy themselves.

But not Crockett. The child who survived against all odds grew into a woman, got help, took the evilness of her childhood and became a change agent for good.

“God called me to do this work,” she said. “I feel that calling. ... I have also found that because of my experiences I am able to be deeply present with people who have had severe trauma, and not freak out. ... and saying I’m not going to leave you alone. No matter how bad it is, I’m here. ... Because I didn’t have anybody to do that for me when I was a child.”

Moving forward

While Crockett will soon retire, here are some things she hopes to see be done to further prevent child sexual abuse in the future:

Start at the roots by supporting organizations aimed at preventing child sexual abuse: “Many communities are highly engaged in ending homelessness or mental health initiatives or combatting drug and alcohol abuse. That’s good. But every single one of those is also a downstream consequence many times of being sexually abused in childhood.”

Changes in legislation to lower the bar as to what constitutes child sexual abuse: “The bar is, in my opinion, way too high.”

An increase in funding to agencies that are tasked with protecting children from abuse: “They don’t have nearly enough staff. ... It’s an important job and we don’t fund it enough.”

SOME OF THE PHOTOS INCLUDED WITH THE ARTICLE FOLLOW; these are shots that appeared in the LNP editions over the years.



In her office by the window at Liberty Place,
April 2, 2024



Talking in her office at Liberty Place, April 2, 2024



Column, LNP: Our System Often Fails
Victims of Domestic & Sexual Violence

Feb. 26, 2023



Standing in front of the Lancaster County Courthouse on N Duke St., Linda Crockett and Judge Dennis Reinaker, will team up again to reboot a county-wide Community Task Force on Child Sexual Abuse in Plain Communities. August 14, 2020



Linda Crockett talks about supporting victims of child sexual abuse during an interview at Samaritan Counseling Center. August 8, 2018



Linda Crockett as Director of Education and Consultation at the Samaritan Counseling Center
(From 2003 – 2019)



Linda Crockett,
(Stock photo supplied to LNP)