



Breaking the ice

Sheldon Kennedy, founder of Respect Group and a devoted campaigner for survivors of violence and abuse, was sexually abused at a young age by his former ice hockey coach. An inspiration to millions, he talks frankly about the challenges he faced speaking out and the work he is doing to help others

You are a high profile victim of sexual abuse. How difficult was it for you to publicly announce the abuse that had been committed against you?

It was very difficult. Victims often don't think people will believe them and I was no different. After years of keeping silent, I saw my abuser coaching junior players in Calgary, where I had been traded to play for the Flames. I couldn't handle the thought of him abusing other kids and decided to take action.

Together with business partner Wayne McNeil, you founded Respect Group, which, in partnership with the Canadian Red Cross, has created an e-learning platform. How effective is interactive, online certification for preventing abuse, bullying and harassment?

It's very effective. It's the best way to get standard, consistent information to the masses regardless of age, gender or where people are located, and the platform is in Canada's two official languages: English and French. Doing it online also allows the message to be articulated in a safe manner, which is very important given the sensitive subject matter.

The Respect programmes cover sport, schools and the workplace. Is there a setting that has enjoyed particular success through your e-learning programmes?

Independent research, along with the feedback we receive from end-user surveys, is consistently positive across all of our programmes. That said, I think our sport parent programme, which has now exceeded 250,000 certified parents, has made an amazing impact on an audience that many thought would be difficult to access. A few leadership organisations decided to make it a requirement in order for children to play – the rest is history. It's really about making good parents even better sport parents.

The sport, school and workplace environments all have their own set of challenges in terms of abuse and harassment, but, of the three, is there one that poses more of a challenge?

In terms of the issues I would say that the challenges are equal. Obviously sport and school programmes focus on child protection while the workplace training deals with adult to adult relationships. In their distinct environments, maltreatment is an equal priority.

You are volunteer Lead Director of the Sheldon Kennedy Child Advocacy Centre. To what extent is this Centre pioneering?

It's the first child advocacy centre that is based on a fully integrated practice model, where sharing of information and open collaboration is the key to our ability to deal with victims of child abuse. We are standardising this model across the Canadian province, Alberta.

SHELDON KENNEDY: AN INSPIRATION

A former professional ice hockey player, Sheldon Kennedy represented Canada internationally at the World Junior Championships and skated for three teams over the course of his eight-year National Hockey League career. In 1996, he took the brave decision to publicly disclose the sexual abuse he had suffered at the hands of his junior hockey league coach Graham James over a five-year period.

Sheldon is an inspiration to millions of abuse survivors around the world, and has been influential in changing Canadian policies on child abuse prevention and support. In 2015, he was named a Member of the Order of Canada, one of the country's highest civilian honours.

You have been awarded an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Fraser Valley and an Honorary degree, Doctor of Laws, from the University of Calgary for your commitment to violence and abuse prevention programmes in Canada. How important are these honorary degrees to the work you do?

They help validate the work we do. When universities recognise your efforts it can only further the impact we are having on society.

Released last year, Swift Current is a feature length documentary, following your story from sexual abuse to the inspirational campaigning you do today in Canada and abroad. What do you hope this documentary to achieve?

I would like it to achieve two things: educate society on the long-term effects of early childhood trauma and demonstrate that there is hope for victims.

What is your overlying message for victims of abuse?

Disclosure is the beginning of the road to recovery, not the end. With hard work and a commitment to your wellbeing, every day, victims can lead a fulfilling and productive life.

Similarly, what key message do you have for those who abuse their position of trust?

Obviously, it's totally inexcusable. Turn yourself in; get help; distance yourself from these situations.

www.respectgroupinc.com

www.swiftcurrentdoc.com

www.sheldonkennedycac.ca