

After the Abuse

Doug Gildea was sexually abused at age 5. The neighbor went to prison. But the pain didn't go away. It changed a life – and a family – forever.

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Jan Gildea opened the front door and shouted for her son.

“Doug!”

Then again, louder.

“Doug!”

She told herself not to panic. Doug was 5 years old and already a force: stubborn and fearless and full of joy. Sometimes he wandered off to explore their neighborhood or to chase his two older brothers, but he never went far.

Still, Jan worried. It was October 1979, an early Saturday evening on their quiet street in Springfield Township. It would be dark soon. She was about to call him again when the door across the street popped open and Doug sprinted out.

“What were you doing over there?” she asked as he ran inside.

“I can't tell you. You'll punish me.”

His answer startled her. So did the quiver in his voice. Sullen and sweaty, his eyes fixed on the floor, Doug barely resembled the boy who'd bounded happily out of the house 20 minutes earlier.

“What's wrong?” she asked. “Tell me.”

He looked up then, and the words flew out of him. Words a 5-year-old boy should not speak, describing acts he should not know.

Doug Gildea's neighbor sexually abused him that night.

His attacker didn't harm him in any visible way. No bruises. No torn clothing. Yet he inflicted wounds that would remain a constant presence in the life of the Gildea family for generations.

Doug's story began as many do. He knew his attacker, he was very young and the abuse occurred close to home.

He was similar in another way, too: Doug's suffering didn't end when he ran to the safety of his mother's arms that night.

Jan paced the kitchen that October evening until her husband, Larry, returned from Saturday Mass.

The Gildeas are Catholic, born and raised. They believe in good and evil, and they know bad things sometimes happen to innocents. Still, they struggled to wrap their minds around the words their son spoke that night.

Could it be a mistake? Could Doug somehow have misunderstood a harmless gesture?

The neighbor, Robert Cooke, was a family man. He worked for the phone company. He led a Cub Scout troop. He was the "neighborhood representative" who greeted the Gildeas and their four children with handshakes and a warm welcome when they moved in a few months earlier.

But this was no misunderstanding. Doug's description was specific. Graphic.

And there was this: Doug's pockets were stuffed with big pink pieces of Bubble Yum, a "gift," he'd said, from his abuser.

That almost put Larry over the edge. He marched to the front door but thought better of it. He worried what he might do if he tried to talk to Cooke face to face. So he picked up the phone and called instead.

"My son just told me an outlandish story," Larry said, "and let me tell you, I believe Doug."

Then he told Cooke exactly what Doug had said. Every awful detail.

Larry waited for the denial, or for the line to go dead. He didn't know what a man should be expected to say when told such a thing.

"I'm so sorry," Cooke said. "It will never happen again."

Larry and Jan weren't sure what to do next.

If they called police, the neighborhood would know. Everyone would know. This was 1979, before the clergy abuse scandal, before Jerry Sandusky. People didn't talk about this sort of thing.

Larry thought he probably could handle it himself. He was a tough guy, not so many years removed from his days as a star quarterback at Roger Bacon High School. He figured a few minutes alone with Cooke would guarantee he never messed with Larry's kids again.

Jan wondered about other kids, though. There could be more, she told him.

Her brother was a Cincinnati police officer, so Larry called him for some advice. "If you think Doug is the only one, you're sorely mistaken," he told Larry. "Call the police."

Larry didn't need more convincing. He wanted to do the right thing for Doug, for all the kids. He wanted this guy behind bars.

He picked up the phone again.

The next day, at her older son's soccer game, another mom in the neighborhood asked Jan what was going on. She'd seen the police cars at the house.

Jan told her Cooke molested Doug. Exhausted and frazzled, she couldn't think of any other way to say it.

"That cannot be true," the woman said, shaking her head. Everyone in the neighborhood knew Cooke, she said. No one would believe it.

A day later, when the kids had gone to school, she knocked on Jan's door. "It involves my son, too," she said.

Doug squirmed on the wooden bench, hands in his lap. He was having a tough time sitting still.

He sat beside his mother in a long hallway at the Hamilton County Courthouse. It was a few weeks after the abuse, and they were waiting their turn to testify before a grand jury, which would decide whether to indict Cooke on felony charges.

Three other boys also would testify. Their parents went to police in the days after Doug was abused with similar stories. Cooke now faced multiple charges of rape and gross sexual imposition.

Soon, Doug's name would be called, and he would go inside alone to tell what happened that night. Then a room full of strangers would decide whether they believed him.

Jan shuddered at the thought. She wanted to be with Doug, but she wasn't allowed. She had to testify, too.

She looked down at him and put her hand on his shoulder. She could tell he was scared, so she tried to act as if it was no big deal, as if he was just going in there to talk about baseball or his favorite cartoon character.

"It's OK, Doug," she said. "All you have to do is tell them what you told me."

Doug nodded. He was wearing a red, white and blue striped shirt with the word "hero" sewn into alternating stripes.

It was his favorite, the same shirt he wore for his kindergarten class picture.

The judge walked in and everyone stood.

It was May 8, 1980, seven months after Cooke's arrest. The grand jury had indicted him, and now it was time for a judge to spell out his punishment.

Larry stared across the courtroom at Cooke, who sat quietly at the defense table. He looked as if he was ready to head off to work or church. As if this day was like any other.

He'd pleaded no contest in April, meaning he would not challenge the charges but would not admit to them, either. When a probation officer explained a few weeks before the hearing that Cooke might not go to prison, Larry got angry.

"That would be great," he snapped. "Then I could do what I should have done that night and kick his ass."

The anger returned as he listened to Cooke's lawyer ask Judge Robert Kraft for leniency, describing Cooke as an "exemplary employee" and a good father to his three children. He needed counseling, the lawyer said. Not prison.

Larry fought the urge to scream. The court was supposed to put things right, but too little was being said about the boys. They weren't in the room, Larry thought, but they shouldn't have to be here to be heard.

Finally, the judge spoke. "You committed a despicable act," he told Cooke.

He said prison was the only suitable punishment: Seven to 25 years.

Not long enough, Larry thought. But at least it was over.

Weeks later, Jan watched Doug chase some friends around the front yard.

Cooke was in prison. His family was gone, a "For Sale" sign in the yard.

Yet Jan felt uneasy. She wondered how the ordeal might affect Doug months or even years later. She wondered how a child adapts to the world when he realizes monsters are real.

So she watched him as he ate and played and ran around the house. She analyzed every outburst and mood swing, anything that could be a sign of ... what? She didn't know.

Jan had asked the family doctor months earlier if Doug needed counseling, and he just shook his head. At the time, many physicians believed talking too much about abuse could do more harm than good to children. "He's young," he said. "He probably won't remember what happened."

Maybe he's right, Jan thought. Maybe it all will fade away, like a bad dream.

"He's going to be OK," she told herself.

And then she repeated the words, like a mantra, until she dared to believe them.

"My son is going to be OK."



Summer 1990

Brandi Brown heard the laughter crackling over the intercom and rolled her eyes.

“Heeeey, Brandi! Is that you?”

Only a few hours into her late shift at the Arby’s drive-through, and already she had to deal with a car full of teenage boys more interested in her than the curly fries.

Then she heard a voice she recognized: “What time you off tonight?”

It was Doug Gildea.

She’d known Doug since their freshman year at Roger Bacon High School, and they’d dated on and off for a couple years. Now, in the summer of 1990 and heading into their junior year, it looked like they might be on again.

Doug was easy to like. He was a good-looking boy and funny, too, the kind of kid who’d gleefully prank his friends or belt out “Brown Eyed Girl” at the top of his lungs, even though he couldn’t sing worth a lick.

He also was a tough guy, an undersized linebacker who hit like a freight train. Brandi liked that about him, too.

The boys’ car pulled up to the drive-through window and Brandi handed them their order. She spotted Doug in the car, smiling. It was the same big grin he’d flash whenever he passed her in the hall at school.

Brandi smiled back.

“I’m off at 11,” she said.

September 1991

Doug lowered his shoulder and smacked the ball carrier. Hard.

Up in the stands, Jan watched to make sure her son got to his feet quickly. She still winced a little with every tackle, but on this Friday night she was grateful for the game.

The Gildeas were a football family – all three of her sons played – and Doug’s embrace of the sport affirmed for her that all was right in his world.

They hadn’t spoken of the abuse in the decade since the criminal case ended, and there never seemed a need. Doug was a senior now, a team captain. His coaches and friends loved him, he got good grades and he was dating Brandi, a beautiful cheerleader. It would have been hard to draw up a better life for a teenage boy.

Still, Jan worried about what she couldn’t see. She remembered those first weeks after the abuse, when Doug acted pretty much like the same boy he’d always been.

From the outside looking in, nothing had changed. Yet Jan knew her son had to be hurting, and it bothered her then that she felt blind to his suffering. How could she mend a wound no one could see?

As she watched Doug now, though, playing on these Friday nights, surrounded by friends and cheered by classmates, she felt confident the life her son had built was no illusion.

He was doing great, she told herself. The proof was right before her eyes.

October 1991

Gravel crunched beneath the tires as Doug pulled off the road and cut the engine.

He and Brandi had been driving around for a while, maybe an hour. Maybe more. They’d ended up near the old Paul Farm off McKelvey Road.

The trees were changing colors. It was a beautiful spot. On weekends, they’d come here with friends to build a campfire and drink beer on the edge of the pond.

“What are we gonna do?” Doug asked, turning to face Brandi.

She was pregnant. She’d told Doug a few days earlier, after working up the nerve to take a home pregnancy test.

Her mind was still racing. Would they get married? Could they go to college? Would they consider adoption? And there was another, more immediate, question: “How do we tell our parents?” she asked.

Brandi could see the worry on Doug’s face. When the week began, his biggest concern had been getting ready to play football Friday night. Now, they were trying to plan the rest of their lives in a car parked on the side of a gravel road.

They sat there together for a long time, key in the ignition, staring out the windows. They had no idea where to go next.

Doug didn’t speak on the way home from the doctor’s office.

His mother kept asking what was wrong, but he just shook his head. “It’s nothing,” he said.

It was late fall and Doug had gone in for a routine blood test because of Brandi's pregnancy. He was fine physically, but his agitation was obvious. Jan knew he'd been stressed about the baby, but this was different.

He was angry.

Jan didn't know why, but the old worries suddenly flooded back. Maybe it was the trip to the doctor, the same one who'd told her all those years ago that Doug probably would forget the abuse.

Jan had followed that advice, but what if they'd all been wrong? She gathered her courage and asked a question that had been gnawing at her for more than 10 years.

"Doug, do you remember being molested when you were younger?"

His answer took her breath away.

"Yeah," he said. "I do."

November 1991

Brandi could tell right away something was wrong.

"I need to talk to you," Doug said.

They were at a friend's house, hanging out with classmates before a senior retreat. Doug seemed fine when they arrived, but he looked almost stricken as he took her hand and led her to a room upstairs.

Brandi thought maybe he wanted to talk about the baby. They'd been going back and forth for weeks about what to do, whether to get married, whether to look into adoption. They'd argued, too.

But it wasn't any of those things.

"I was abused when I was a child," he said.

Doug told her it was a long time ago, when he was a little kid, and he'd started remembering it. He said he was worried that something might be wrong with him and that he couldn't be a good father, or that maybe that being abused by a man would make him gay.

He sat down and started crying. "I don't know what to do," he said.

For a few moments, Brandi froze. Doug was strong, one of the strongest people she knew. Yet this memory, this awful thing from his past, hurt him like nothing she'd seen before.

She didn't know that Doug's anxiety was common to abuse survivors, or that many spend years trying to push away thoughts of it until they're overwhelmed.

So Brandi hugged him, crying herself, and said the only thing she could think to say: "It'll be OK. It'll be OK."

April 1992

Doug came to the hospital as soon as he heard about the accident. Brandi had been in a fender bender. Nothing major, but she got jostled around and went in for an ultrasound to make sure the baby was OK.

She was glad to see him. They'd been arguing more and had broken up a few weeks earlier. To Brandi, who was now eight months pregnant, Doug hadn't been himself for a while. He was more anxious, restless. Even angry.

Here, though, in the hospital, he was her Doug again. They watched together as the nurse ran the ultrasound wand over Brandi's abdomen and studied the image. The baby was fine, the nurse said.

"Do you want to know what you're having?"

Doug and Brandi looked at each other. In all the stress and excitement of the past few months, they hadn't really talked about whether they might have a son or daughter. Suddenly, it felt important.

They both nodded.

"It's a boy," the nurse said.

A smile spread across Doug's face, the biggest Brandi had seen in a long while. "I'm going to have a son," he said.

Later, when she was home from the hospital, Doug called to apologize for the past few weeks. He said he wanted to be there for her and the baby. They even talked about marriage again.

"We're going to make this work," he told her.

Jason Baur stared across the campfire at Doug, not sure what to do next.

It was mid-April, a Friday night, and they were at their usual spot on the old Paul Farm, drinking beer and listening to music at the edge of the pond. They'd been friends since freshman football at Roger Bacon, but Jason had never seen Doug like this.

As the night wore on, Doug's jovial mood turned dark. When Jason asked what was wrong, Doug broke down and told him he'd been abused as a child. He said he was worried about what kind of husband and father he could be after being molested.

He said he was so stressed he'd even thought about suicide. Sometimes, Doug said, he'd drive his car straight at a tree or a telephone pole and then veer away at the last second.

"I feel like I don't know who I am," he said.

Jason was stunned, and more than a little scared. He started talking fast, trying to shake Doug out of his funk. He told him that the abuse wasn't his fault and that Brandi and the baby needed him.

Talking about the baby seemed to help. Doug's mood turned brighter as he told Jason about having a baby boy. He said he wanted to be a dad. He was just worried about whether he'd be a good one.

By the time they walked back to their cars, Doug seemed himself again. He even cracked a few jokes. Maybe Doug's breakdown was just a weak moment, Jason thought. Maybe it was the beer talking.

Jason was still on edge, though, and so before leaving he made Doug promise not to hurt himself.

Doug waved him off, as if there was nothing to worry about.

"I promise," he said. "I promise."

Jerry Gildea rolled out of bed and looked at the clock. It was a little after 6 a.m. May 2, a Saturday morning.

He was home from college for the weekend, and his mom had just gotten him up several hours earlier than he'd planned.

"Doug's not home," Jan said. "I'm worried."

Jerry was considerably less worried. He knew his little brother had gone out with friends the night before, and he suspected they went to Paul's Farm. It's what he did when he was in high school, and he knew it was still a popular hangout. He figured Doug was probably there or sleeping on a friend's couch somewhere.

"I'll go look for him, Mom," Jerry said.

He drove the few miles from his house to the old farm and turned up the road that led to the pond. He stopped near the campsite he remembered from his high school days and stepped out into the cool morning air.

Jerry spotted the campfire right away, still smoldering. But there was no sign of Doug. He walked around awhile, stepping over beer cans, calling his brother's name.

Then he spotted something in a pine tree, about midway up, hanging from a jacket tied to a limb.

It was Doug.

Three hours later, Jan stood at the back door as Jerry, a police officer and a chaplain got out of a car and walked toward her.

She stepped back, hand to her mouth. "No, no, no, no," she said, louder and louder, until she was screaming.

"No, no, no, no!"

Brandi sat in the front pew with Doug's family, hand on her belly. Sobbing.

Her baby was due in two weeks.

None of this seemed real. From the moment her stepfather told her Doug had taken his own life, Brandi refused to accept it. "You're a liar!" she'd shouted. Doug would not abandon her and their son.

Even now, at his funeral, she struggled to comprehend it all. She'd been sleeping for days with one of Doug's old shirts, and when she woke, clutching it, she almost believed he was there.

"This is not a time to judge," said the priest. "He's in God's hands now."

The words were small comfort. Brandi was scared and sad. And angry, too. Whatever his reasons, Doug had left her. He was gone and she was here, left to raise a son by herself.

Brandi listened to the priest and wept alongside Doug's mom and dad, brothers and sister, and hundreds of friends, so many there weren't enough seats for them all. When it was over, she followed Doug's casket outside and climbed into a car at the head of the funeral procession.

As they pulled away, Brandi glanced back at the line of cars following them to the cemetery. It was impossibly long, as far as she could see.

Spring 1993

Brandi knelt in the grass at Doug's grave and pulled a handful of photos from her purse.

She placed a picture of their son, Joey, near the gravestone and started telling Doug all about him. Joey was just a year old, but he was growing up fast. Already, his smile looked a lot like his dad's.

"He's getting so big," she said.

It was about a year after Doug's death. Brandi visited his grave every few weeks and spoke to him here as if Doug were sitting in front of her, listening as she caught him up on Joey's progress.

Sometimes, she even asked him questions. Why did he leave her? Could she have helped him? How will she explain all this to a son who's bound to someday ask about his missing father?

Brandi didn't understand it herself. Doug had mentioned the abuse to her more than once, so she knew it weighed on him. But thousands of people are abused and never hurt themselves. Doug had been drinking. He was stressed out.

It was impossible to know what was going through his head when he tied that jacket into a noose and climbed that tree.

Yet Brandi still wanted an answer. She thought she deserved that much. She thought everyone did.

Before leaving the cemetery, she scooped up the photos she'd placed on Doug's grave and used her hands to carve a little hole in the ground. She said goodbye to Doug and laid the photos in the hole so they'd be close to him.

Then she covered them with dirt and grass to make sure the wind didn't carry them away.

Doug Gildea's gravesite at Saint Joseph's Cemetery. The Enquirer/ Amanda Rossmann

Fall 1993

The house felt empty. Doug had been such a presence, loud and funny and always in a hurry, that it was impossible for his parents, Larry and Jan, not to notice his absence the moment they woke in the morning.

Life was big when Doug was around. It was undeniably smaller without him.

Jan grieved quietly, still waking in the middle of the night, face soaked with tears.

Larry was angry. He wanted to fight. Even now, he wanted to find a way to somehow put things right. So he called an old friend who was a lawyer, Charles Milazzo.

“I want to do something for Doug,” he said.

Weeks later, he filed a wrongful death lawsuit against Doug’s abuser, Robert Cooke, who was free now after serving almost seven years in prison. The lawsuit blamed Doug’s suicide on the stress and anxiety of the long-ago abuse.

Convincing others, though, would be difficult. Suicide is a complicated, desperate act. It defies simple explanation. A history of abuse or trauma is a risk factor, but it’s just one of more than a dozen, including depression, heavy alcohol use, social isolation, impulsive behavior and others.

The judge quickly dismissed part of the lawsuit, and Milazzo told Larry the remaining case was a long shot. He said no one but Doug knew for certain why he did what he did. There was no fingerprint or DNA test to reveal the psyche of a teenage boy.

“How do I prove this?” Milazzo asked.

Larry didn’t have an answer. He told him to drop the suit.

Mid-1990s

No one talked about it. Not really.

That’s what Mike Steers noticed every time he ran into a high school buddy or one of Doug’s brothers. They’d say hi and catch up and spend the next five minutes desperately trying to avoid talking about Doug.

Most didn’t know about Doug’s anxiety in the months before he died, or about the abuse. And those who did weren’t sure if anyone else knew the whole story.

So each kept the secret, thinking he or she was alone. It was as if the burden Doug had carried for most of his life had now become their own.

Mike suffered more than most in that silence. He was Doug’s best friend and had seen or talked to him almost every day for years, including at the party the night he died.

He missed him. And he blamed himself. A few months before he died, Doug told Mike about the abuse, and Mike had assured him he’d be OK. “I’m worried something might be messed up with me,” Doug had said, crying.

Now, more than two years after Doug's death, Mike was the anxious one, the one pacing the house at night, unable to sleep. He told himself he should have known Doug was desperate. He should never have left the party that night without him. He should have been there to save him.

As he wandered his house, Mike tried to shut out those thoughts, but he couldn't. He started to think that maybe this was how Doug felt the night he ended his life. And that scared him.

Exhausted, Mike walked upstairs to his parents' room, where his mom was sleeping. He knocked on the door until she woke. He wasn't sure what to say, but the words came anyway.

"Mom, I think I need to talk to somebody."

Kelly Gildea slowed down as she drove past Robert Cooke's house.

It was a few years after Doug's death, and Kelly was curious. She was in high school now and wanted to know more about the man who abused her brother. So one day she found herself driving by the house he'd moved to after prison, just a few miles from her own.

She didn't know why, exactly. But she wanted to see what he looked like, how he acted, how he lived.

Kelly was three years younger than Doug, too young to remember the night he was abused. She found out about it when she was on her way to see a counselor to help her cope with Doug's suicide.

Before she went inside for her appointment, her mom turned to her and said, "There's something you should know."

For a while, that knowledge changed everything.

Kelly became obsessed with the idea that something that happened so long ago could touch so many. Her parents, her brothers, Doug's friends, Brandi and Joey. It was like a spider's web, she thought, snaring anyone who got too close.

Now that she was here, though, driving past Cooke's house, Kelly found no answers and no comfort. She didn't see him. But even if she did, she realized, he couldn't tell her anything meaningful about her brother.

She doubted he could explain his own actions, let alone why Doug did what he did.

She tapped the gas and drove away.

Early 1996

Brandi watched and listened as the doctor took her son through the paces of his annual exam, checking his eyes and ears, asking about preschool and letting Joey chat away happily.

Joey was 4 now and always had plenty to say.

As they prepared to leave, Joey turned to the doctor to ask one last question.

“Will you be my dad?” he said.

For a moment, Brandi and the doctor just looked at each other, stunned. They didn’t say anything. She’d told Joey a few years earlier his dad died after falling out of a tree. She didn’t know what else to say to a little boy about something she still struggled to understand herself.

Brandi knew Joey would have more questions someday. She just hadn’t seen this one coming. She regained her composure and did her best to answer.

“Oh, Joey,” she said, forcing a smile. “How about I’ll be your mommy and your daddy?”

Joey nodded and said he thought that would be OK.

2008

Jerry Gildea was in the backyard with his mom when the conversation turned to Doug and child abuse.

Jerry rarely talked about what happened to Doug, but not just because he was the one who found him that morning more than 15 years earlier. There was something else. And this time, when his mom mentioned Doug’s abuser, Jerry spoke up.

“I never told you this,” he said. “He molested me, too.”

Jerry could tell his mom was shocked, and hurt. She’d spent so much time worrying about Doug’s abuse, and all the while another son had been dealing with it alone, never telling anyone.

Jerry said he almost told them after Cooke’s arrest, when Doug and the other boys talked to police. But as the days went by, he figured people would question why he waited so long. He worried no one would believe him.

He was 7 years old, and he was scared. After it happened, Jerry explained, he ran home and hid in a hall closet for what seemed like hours. He never talked about it with anyone, including Doug.

As an adult, he knew he was a victim. But as a child and, especially, a teenager, he felt embarrassed, as if he’d done something wrong.

Jerry assured his mom he was fine now. He was working. He’d married and started a family. He was in a good place.

He sometimes wondered, though, why Doug’s story turned out differently. And as he talked that day on the patio in his parents’ backyard, he also wondered if things might have been different if Doug had known he wasn’t alone.

Jerry thought about that question from time to time, and it bothered him. But he knew he’d never get an answer. He’d survived and Doug hadn’t. He’d struggled at times, but he’d found a way. That was all he knew for certain. Everything else was a mystery he could spend a lifetime trying to solve.

October 2012

Larry opened The Enquirer and stared at the headline.

“Local Scouts kept abuse secret.”

The article was about files on accused child molesters that the Boy Scouts had kept for decades. The Scouts had just been ordered by a judge to release those files.

Larry skimmed through the list of local cases until he came to Cooke’s name. His arrest on charges of molesting Doug and three other boys had ended his career as a Scout leader. The case was summed up in a few paragraphs, and there was a quote from Cooke reflecting on the abuse.

“I was wrong,” he said. “I would say I’m sorry.”

That was it. To Larry, it seemed that, as far as the rest of the world was concerned, his son’s suffering ended that night. The case was over. Someone went to jail. Life went back to normal.

Except that it didn’t, Larry thought. Not for his family. Not for Doug’s friends. Not for Doug’s son. It might be impossible to find a reason for Doug’s suicide, but Larry knew memories of the abuse had stayed with his son for years and had become part of the lives of everyone who loved him.

Larry felt the frustration and anger creeping back, and the sadness, too. But for the first time in three decades, he knew exactly what he needed to do about it.

December 2012

Brandi was surprised when she got the call from Jan.

She’d kept in touch with the Gildeas for years, but there had been less to talk about lately. Joe was 20 now, all grown up. There were no more birthday parties or football games to plan with the grandparents.

Brandi was even more shocked when Jan explained why she was calling: She and Larry had decided to talk publicly about Doug.



She told Brandi they wanted people to know what happens after a child is abused. They wanted them to know the pain doesn't go away when the abuser goes to jail. The memories don't vanish, and the silence that so often follows is a trap.

People need to talk about this, Jan told Brandi. They need to get their kids help.

Doug's parents, Jan and Larry Gildea. They wanted people to know what happens after a child is abused. They wanted them to know the pain doesn't go away when the abuser goes to jail and the memories don't vanish. The Enquirer/Amanda Rossmann

"We'd like you to talk about it, too," she said.

Brandi didn't know how to respond. They hadn't talked about any of this since Doug's death, and now she was being asked to tell the world. "My God," she thought. "We're allowed to talk about it?"

She was willing, but there was a problem. She'd never told her son how his dad died, and she'd certainly never mentioned the abuse. Joe hadn't asked about it since he was little, and Brandi never felt the time was right.

She told Jan she'd think about it.

At first, Brandi was terrified. She was married now and had two little girls. Joe was working and doing well. She questioned whether talking about the past might do more harm than good.

When she began reaching out to some old friends, though, a strange thing happened. After years of uncomfortable silences and long pauses in conversations, they started talking about Doug again.

Some spoke of how he'd confided in them about the abuse and how they'd struggled with guilt and anger for years. Some said they'd tried to use their grief to help others: Mike became a police officer, Jason became active in his church, Doug's brothers and sister became the attentive, involved parents Doug never got to be.

The experience still colored their lives. They saw it in the way they raised their children, always vigilant, always asking the extra question. And they felt it in the sadness that some days crept up on them, without warning or reason.

They'd thought they were alone. Now, suddenly, they weren't. This didn't make the pain go away. It didn't answer the question – why?

But it felt like a start.

May 2013

Brandi sat next to her husband at the kitchen table and poured another glass of wine.

She'd decided to help Larry and Jan tell Doug's story. But first she had to have a conversation with Joe that she'd been dreading for the better part of two decades.

They practiced what they would say for a while, until the bottle of wine was empty. And then they headed downstairs to talk to Joe, who was sitting on the couch watching TV.

"Can we talk to you?" she asked.

Joe eyed them nervously. "Sure," he said.

Brandi was struck, as she sometimes was, by how much Joe reminded her of Doug. That crooked smile. His nose. His voice. The way he talked with his hands. The physical resemblance wasn't overwhelming, but Doug was there. No doubt about it.

"Something bad happened to your dad when he was younger," Brandi began.

Then she told him all of it. Doug's struggles with memories of the abuse. How he died. How happy he was the day he found out he was having a son. "He fought and fought and fought until he couldn't fight anymore," she said.

Brandi explained to Joe why she hadn't told him sooner and said it was OK if he was angry. She worried a lot about that. She wanted him to know she loved him and was only trying to protect him.

Joe sat there, silent for a long time, just taking it all in. "It's OK," he said. "I understand."

Joe tossed Brandi's 7-year-old daughter into the air, caught her in his arms and launched her into the air again. The two of them laughed, her hair flying, until Joe's arms tired and enveloped her in a bear hug.

Brandi watched them from the kitchen. She was proud of her son. He was a good kid, a good man. She'd worried for so long about him, about the life they'd led without Doug, that sometimes she overlooked how well he'd turned out.

She was his mom, though, so she never stopped worrying.

It had been a few months since their conversation about Doug. Brandi felt good about it now, but she made a point, every so often, to ask Joe how he was doing. She wanted to be sure. She wanted him to know he could talk to her about anything.

And every time, Joe flashed a familiar smile and said, "I'm good, Mom."

He knew she was there for him.

He'd always known.

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About this story

The reporting on this story began more than a year ago after a phone call from Doug Gildea's father, Larry. He wanted to tell the story of how victims and families struggle after a child is abused. The scenes in this story are based on extensive interviews with Doug's family, friends and others who knew Doug, were associated with the case or are involved with the treatment of child abuse victims. It also draws from court records, prison records, published articles about the case and other supporting material. Robert Cooke, the man convicted of abusing Doug, was asked whether he also abused Doug's brother, Jerry Gildea, and said he did not remember. When asked about abusing Doug, Cooke said only this: "That's way behind me now."

Where to get help

- To report abuse or neglect, or to seek help, in Greater Cincinnati, call 513-241-KIDS.
- For referrals regarding abuse or suicide prevention, call 211 to reach a United Way specialist.
- For a list of United Way resources, go to www.uwgc.org/211.
- Go to www.nctsn.org for resources from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network.
- Go to www.rainn.org for resources from the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network.