

Boulder journalist hopes her book helps end sex abuse of children

By Sheba R. Wheeler

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Tracy Ross shares her story of childhood abuse in "The Source fo All Things: A Memoir." (Presented by Julia Vandenoever)

Tracy Ross hopes her third child, due in August, will be the daughter to whom she can give all the things her parents didn't give her — empathy, validation and safety.

"I want a little girl because I can teach her how to be an empowered person that will stand up for others," says the Boulder journalist, whose book, "The Source of All Things: A Memoir," is the wellspring of her renewed confidence as a woman and mother.

The book hit stores this week. It chronicles Ross' harrowing tale of recovery in the wake of childhood sexual abuse, confronting the stepfather who abused her from ages 8 to 14 and forgiving the mother who didn't believe her.

Ross wants her courage and candor to open a dialogue about reconciliation and address fissures in the child welfare system.

"The advocacy piece and hoping my life and experience can be an example for others is healing to me," says Ross, 40. "I want people to discuss what is forgiveness and how to grapple with it. And I want offenders or parents who let it happen to their kids to realize how truly damaging it is."

Her sons, now 8 and 9, are too young to grasp the full extent of their mother's experience. Through general talks, they know something bad happened between her and their grandfather and that the adults are trying to work it out.

"The important thing for me is to keep asking them questions about what's happening in their lives so the door is open for them to tell me anything," Ross says. "I really push that children should be seen, heard and believed."

Her stepfather was not prosecuted for the alleged molestation. Even though she didn't cut ties with her family, to protect herself, Ross put herself through boarding school and later became a writer for and contributing editor to Backpacker magazine.

She took on outdoor experiences and challenges, pitting her determination against harsh wilderness environments ranging from Alaskan glaciers to the deserts of southern Utah.

By all appearances, the ambitious outdoor enthusiast has recovered from her past.

But years of suppressed depression and fear finally burst through her armor when she realized she was afraid to leave her sons alone with her stepfather. More work needed to be done.

True recovery began for Ross in 2007 when she and her stepfather hiked into rural Idaho's Sawtooth Mountains — the very place where the abuse began during a family camping trip. While there, she confronted him and demanded he explain what happened.

"He knew it was time to go back to the source," Ross said.

Her stepfather, she said, admitted to the abuse, to the fact that he occasionally drugged her with sleeping pills and that he lied to her mother and authorities. Now her mother must cope with the truth and the role she played in the abuse. Part of Ross' story appeared as an essay in Backpacker magazine in 2009. It was expanded into the book and will reach an even wider audience when People magazine runs an article on Ross next week.

"While the truth didn't set me free, it did give me insight," says Ross. "There is value in confronting the people who have harmed us."

Ross also has partnered with the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children to process the pain of her past, educate herself about prevention and give voice to others. She hopes to add a writing component to teenage personal-growth programs like Outward Bound and Denver's Big City Mountaineers so others can find catharsis in nature and the written word.

"When I had my kids I was afraid of them because I had this storm living inside me," she said. "But now I know you can love something so much and it doesn't have to cross over into inappropriateness."

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