

'It thrives in the darkness': Four Utah women share stories of the abuse they survived

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By [Tiffany Caldwell](#)

She was sexually abused by her step-grandfather until she was 12 years old. She was raped in the desert as a 15-year-old. And when she was a 16-year-old witness in a trial against a white supremacist who killed two of her friends, she was sexually abused by a federal prosecutor.

Terry Mitchell didn't understand why it kept happening, why she was repeatedly sexually abused.

"It's very easy to blame yourself and say, 'What is it about me that this stuff keep happening? Why does this always happen to me? I must [have done] something to deserve this,'" Mitchell told an audience at Salt Lake Community College.

Tuesday afternoon was not the first time she has publicly told her story. Nor was it the first time ABC 4 News reporter Kim Fischer, her fellow panelist, told her own story, that she had been sexually abused as a child and as an adult.

And it likely won't be the last time either of the women tells her story.

“It thrives in the darkness. It thrives in silence,” Fischer said. “When we’re not talking about it, it continues to happen.”

Fischer, Mitchell and two other panelists talked about the abuse they survived and how they’re coping now.

“If somebody ever comes to you to disclose that they have been a victim of abuse — whether it’s sexual assault, violence, whatever — I would love you to start by believing,” Fischer said.

Even though she didn’t have bruises to prove it, it happened to Psarah Johnson, an activist for people with disabilities, who was psychologically abused by her father.

Johnson’s father made her feel that she was less-than. Even though she had high self-esteem, he convinced her that nobody else could see what she saw in herself, she said.

“There are so many ways you can be harmed, and if you don’t understand the language of victims ... abuse is tricky because it can be subtle,” Mitchell said. “It starts out like a whisper but by the time it’s a roar, you don’t know where to go and a lot of times victims just fold in.”

Lesia Bird, who works at the Thayne Center for Science and Learning at Salt Lake Community College, was abused by her mother when she was young and physically abused by her husband.

The abuse started when Bird got pregnant and continued when she tried to leave him. The couple remarried twice before she escaped for good.

“We had such a good relationship when we were dating,” she said. “I just don’t know where it all went wrong.”

Fischer had been abused by her mother’s brother. When she finally told her mother, the woman said, “Good little girls don’t talk like that,” Fischer remembered.

She eventually told her father, who brought the information to police. Her abuser was sentenced to probation.

“I wish I could tell you that it is well-prosecuted now, but it’s not,” Fischer said. “I’ve done several stories on rape in Utah courts and how we’re just missing the mark, over and over again. And it’s because we don’t do a good job as a community, of believing someone.”

Mitchell accused a federal prosecutor of sexually abusing her before, during and after a 1981 civil rights trial in which she was a witness.

White supremacist Joseph Paul Franklin killed the two friends with whom she was jogging in Liberty Park. Her 16-year-old mind shut down and buried the alleged abuse for years. The prosecutor, Richard W. Roberts, who became a federal judge in Washington, D.C., announced his retirement the day the allegations were publicized by Mitchell's March 2016 lawsuit against him, and never faced judicial discipline.

Accountability, Mitchell said, is crucial.

"It's OK to ask for accountability," she said. "You deserve an apology. You deserve to have some reciprocity when it comes to respect."

And to process the abuse and move on.

How have you coped? Fischer asked panel members.

Writing. Art. Crying in a hot shower.

And each woman said she talks to someone.

Fischer talks to a counselor every two weeks, she said.

"If there is anyone in this audience who has experienced abuse of any kind, there is help out there," Fischer said. "There's always somebody out there available to speak with you if you need the help."

Free, confidential resources are available through the Utah Coalition Against Sexual Assault hotline at 801-746-0404 and the Utah Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-897-LINK (5465). More information can be found at ucasa.org and udvc.org.