

## *Strong at the Heart: How it Feels to Heal from Sexual Abuse* by Carolyn Lehman

Review by Sharon Schuman

A physician interested in comprehensive health care for patients may not be able to put down Carolyn Lehman's book, *Strong at the Heart: How it Feels to Heal from Sexual Abuse*. Its stories and photographs of emerging strength in the face of betrayal are riveting, as they capture the courage of survivors of childhood sexual trauma.

For a physician, these nine oral histories offer a shortcut to better understanding victims of sexual abuse from all socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. This book also needs to reach the nurses, therapists, counselors, teachers, ministers, parents, and friends of young people struggling to cope with experiences they may barely remember.

Carolyn Lehman has a remarkable ability to let the voices of her interviewees speak for themselves, with a natural directness that makes you want to be part of their lives.

From Jonathan, we hear how an eight year old could be drawn to, then violated by, the priest who showed such love for his whole family. After confusion, anger, drugs, a suicide attempt, and therapy, Jonathan was eventually able to heal enough to become, at seventeen, a guest speaker at high schools, reaching out to other kids. He says, "Other teenagers can see that I'm a kid just like them ... that's when people realize that sexual abuse isn't just a story in a book or a scene from a movie. It's something that happens every single day to people like them."<sup>1p23</sup>

From Kelly, we hear a chilling story of abduction and rape. Because of her remarkable memory for details, her rapist was caught, and evidence from her case led him to be charged with the rape and murder of a girl, age 14 years, one year earlier. Kelly tells about testifying at the trial, which she says, "was totally nerve-racking. But there is something incredibly valuable about getting to tell your story in your own words in an officially sanctioned room where the person who hurt you has to listen to you and so does everybody else."<sup>1p42</sup> After everything, Kelly can say, "I like the person I am now, and who I am has been influenced by the rape. It forced me to be strong, to get through it all. If I were to wish that experience away, I might be wishing away the source of my strength."<sup>1p46</sup>

The story of Tino presents us with a twisted grandmother. Remarkably, after years of alcohol abuse, nightmares, flashbacks, and near suicide, Tino is able to say, "Odd as it may seem, I bless my grandmother today. I'm not talking about that 'forgive and forget' b-s ... [but] now I think of her with compassion."<sup>1p103</sup>

In terms of forgiveness, perhaps the most remarkable story is Akaya's. Her father was an alcoholic who abused her on and off from the age of two through high school. Achievement and "going to the stars," a kind of intellectual dissociation, were her escapes. Years later she recovered her memories of the abuse, confronted her father, and faced depression, therapy, and the need to heal. Even so, when her father collapsed and was on the verge of dying, she decided to look after him. "I found him a very good place to live. I started visiting him ... I gave him the dignity I'd want any older person to have at the end of life."<sup>1p116</sup>

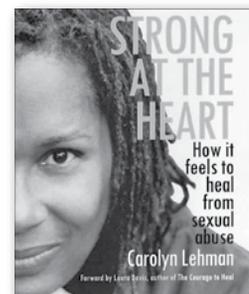
To understand where the resources come from for Akaya to care for her father, for Tino to bless his grandmother, and for all these remarkable men and women not just to survive but to thrive, you need to read this book.

This book ends with a photo from The Clothesline Project at Smith College, where members of SAFE (Survivors and Allies for Education on Childhood Sexual Abuse and Incest) hang up hundreds of t-shirts with inscriptions from survivors. On one sleeveless tank top embroidered with bright suns, we read, "You did not destroy me—you cannot. I am forever strong and proud because I am rooted in truth."<sup>1p133</sup>

For her earlier children's book, *Promise Not to Tell*, Lehman won the Christopher Award. This book is likely to draw further honors and touch more lives. It belongs in every physician's waiting room. After all, where are these once-abused boys and girls, now adults, going to appear if not their physician's office and examining room? Whose help will they seek if not their physician's—even when they bring their secret disguised as a symptom? ♦

### Reference

1. Lehman C. *Strong at the heart: how it feels to heal from sexual abuse*. New York: Ferrar, Straus and Giroux; 2005.



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