

Voices Heard

STORIES OF HOPE AND HEALING
MEN TOO

...NOT ON MY WATCH

...SILENT BY SEXISM

...HURT PEOPLE HURT PEOPLE

...STOPPING THE CYCLE OF ABUSE

A thick teal border frames the entire page. The background is a light beige color with a faint, repeating pattern of stylized floral and scrollwork designs in a slightly darker beige tone.

VOICES HEARD
ISSUE III

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DAVID IRVIN ...NOT ON MY WATCH

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I'm someone who has spent his adult life fighting a low self-esteem... self-loathing... apologizing to the world... avoiding social situations so I won't feel awkward... calling myself a "failure".



I'm a professional forester, managing public land to grow forest products sustainably, to produce healthier and more diverse forests and to provide habitat for wildlife that are in trouble or losing their homes. It makes me very proud. And it doesn't end there. I have been a wildland firefighter and helicopter crew member on wildfire and have been credited with saving lives. I have been a stage actor by hobby, a Cub Scout leader, a Winter Camping instructor and a nude artist's model. I've lived in 7 states and once nearly died in a hiking accident that was the ordeal movies are made of. I have a family that I am very proud of.

But who am I really, behind the scenes?

I'm someone who has spent his adult life fighting a low self-esteem ... self-loathing ... apologizing to the world ... avoiding social situations so I won't feel awkward...calling myself a "failure" ...with suicidal thoughts dozens of times per day—per hour...Fighting anger issues with seemingly no source.

Why would a guy with such an adventurous and bold life feel like any of this?

At age 54, I have finally taken the time, during our COVID-19 pandemic, to look back and realize . . . wow, I've really had quite the run so far. It took me years –decades – to figure out why and to uncover what had been buried deep for many years.

Growing up was hard. When is it ever easy?

As a child who always looked smaller and younger than my age, right through college, I was bullied. In fact, I was bullied so badly in 4th grade that I was actually moved to a new school.

My father was probably the most strict, controlling, uptight person I have ever known. He had a 24/7 powerful hand over my life. We celebrated no holidays, didn't intermingle with extended family much and Dad was not supportive of extracurricular activities . . . or friends. I lived a life of isolation as an only child and relied on my imagination. This made me enter adolescence a bit socially inept and therefore a bit unsure of myself and vulnerable.

Any topic relating to sex was taboo in my household. You didn't talk about it - didn't bring it up - ever.

Instead, my introduction to this came from a peer when I was 11 or 12. A bigger boy who I had grown up with that I thought was my longest-running friend, introduced me to new pastimes while we shared a bed during sleepovers. This evolved from

exploration, comparison and fondling to much more. Always something new, always something more. Eventually, this turned into the only thing that interested him in our friendship. I no longer was interested in hanging out.

This was my first experience with such a betrayal. I felt he wasn't my friend anymore, just someone who developed singular motives and uses for me.

As I progressed through the teen years, a pattern began to follow me there. I was propositioned, groped, stalked—one stalking while jogging at 17 turning into an attempted kidnapping. It ended well for me only because in those days, I was one of the fastest sprinters around and few could keep up with me. If you can, picture Ferris Bueller's Day

Off, running through backyard after backyard to get back home. **I didn't ask for help. I never reported any of it.**

I didn't report it because this was the 80s and not as enlightened an era where sexual assaults are concerned, but most importantly, because I was a male.

These things happen to women, not men. I could just imagine the derision. The blame. The humiliation. If they believed it at all. A young person's life is already so full of pressure and angst, it was the last thing I needed. No one would ever know, if I could help it.

These perpetrators were men. ALWAYS men. Was it any wonder that most of my friends over the years were girls and women? They had never done anything to me. They hadn't exactly wanted to date me either, so they really hadn't done anything to me. But, that's likely a story for another time.



I remember looking at myself in the mirror and wondering what was so wrong with me that these things kept happening to me. Why me?

Am I the only guy who's treated this way? How unbelievably humiliating.

I began to resent my own reflection. Even the sound of my voice. I disliked who I was. I was a loser and a failure. This didn't seem to be happening to anyone else, so I had to be doing something to bring it on. I had a lame personality and everyone could probably smell the "loser" on me. **Eventually my resentment and hurt developed into an anger that followed me into my adult life, always present, but often**

quietly creeping in the background and waiting for its moment. Anger enveloped the question of why I was never good enough to love on other levels, but obviously perfect to use and fondle. My self-worth tanked alongside the value my world seemed to place on me.

Once in high school, my father told me, "You'd better keep getting good grades, because it's all you'll ever be good at."

Like any other great parental-failure moment in history, that stuck with me. I immersed myself in books and studying, as a distraction from personal



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life and myself as an individual. And I got pretty darned good at academics from early in high school and all the way through college. I stayed busy. And I stayed away from a lot of people.

I had been bullied a lot over the years in grade school, so when I made it to college, I was disappointed to find that the universe thought this pattern was worthy of continuing. **As the young oddball student of my small graduating class, I was viewed as more of a mascot than a classmate and was picked on and even sexually harassed during a field trip.**

At 21, college was put behind me. Beyond the era of childhood, living with parents and institutionalized education, I was really hoping for a fresh new beginning, to leave these chapters behind. But I had no job at first, so I continued living with my dad as he moved into a new small town in Tennessee for a teaching position. There were going to be new starts all around. I did have a possible seasonal job lined up for the winter season, but this was

late summer, just the hint of crisper, fall air trying to edge into the Tennessee mountains. So I was possibly going to be home with Dad until winter, unless something else came along meanwhile.

It was late August 1988 as our moving truck headed up the Main Street of what I decided on the spot was the sleepest and most desolate small town I had experienced. It was not hard to spot our rental house, it was bright purple, the only one of its kind. We didn't even need to look at the address.

I helped Dad unload furniture and boxes and had become a real pro at moving, something we had done all too often. A man from next door walked over, curious and introduced himself as Rennie. He was more than a full head taller than me and very heavysset, with glasses set down on his nose, making him squint over them. **Rennie was a very large man in every respect and I guessed a pretty happy one, because he was smiling the whole time. He smiled a lot...at me.** I was polite and

continued to unload, making trips in and out of the house while the men conversed outside. **Whenever I passed, Rennie would stop and peer at me again. It was enough to make me shiver in the muggy August air.**

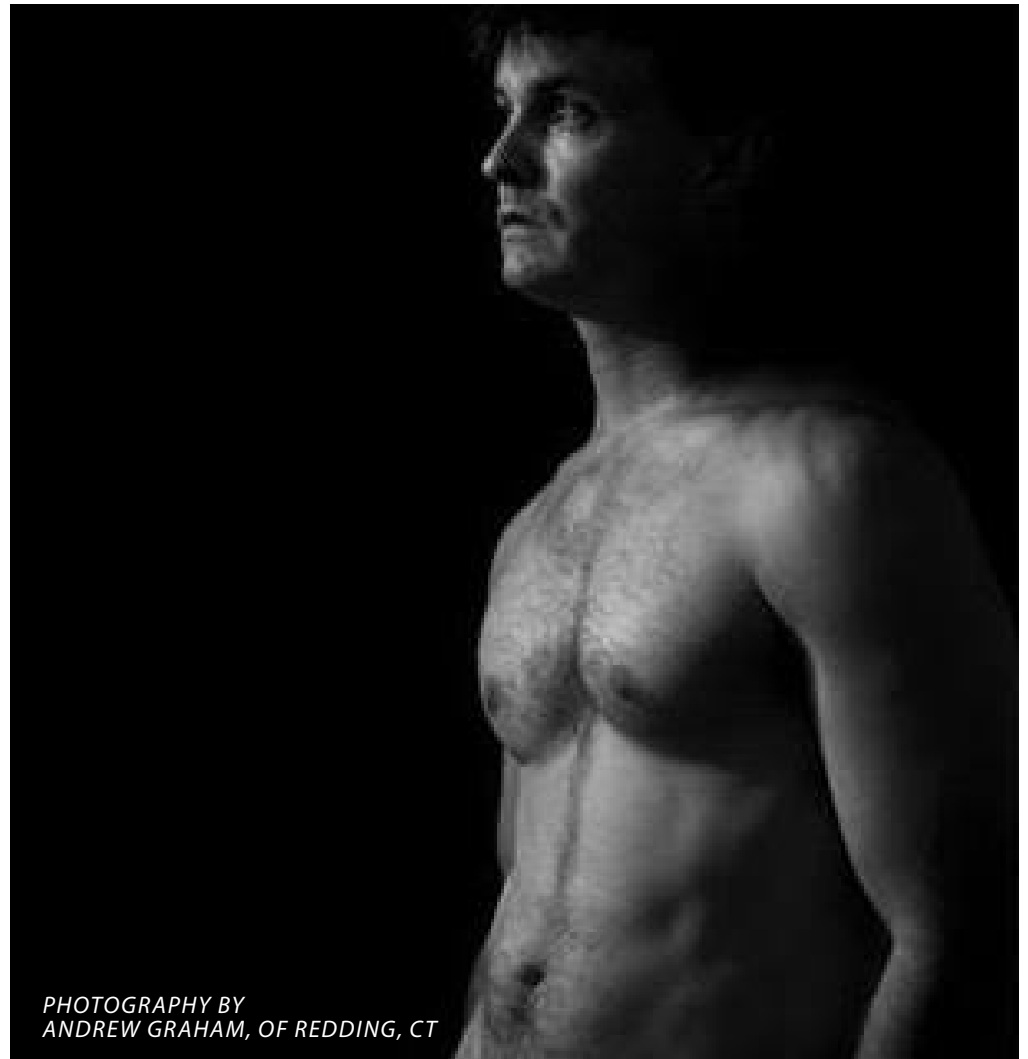
As a few days passed, I realized I would want to get a local job, if I didn't want autumn in this town to make me stir crazy. Rennie told me that the lady he worked for next door might hire a young man to help her out around the place. As it had turned out, Rennie didn't live next door, he worked there for an elderly lady who was purportedly quite well off. He helped care for her, the house and the grounds. So one afternoon I went next door and met this lovely, grandmotherly lady, who did agree to hire me. She told me that her Rennie would show me everything that needed to be done. But sometimes, she might just want to walk down the street into town and have me along just for company and to give her a helping hand.

So I started mowing, hedge-trimming, feeding the dog, doing dishes and anything else I could help with. Rennie said it would also be a great help if I joined him on jobs he did at other addresses, too. He had house cleaning jobs and lawns to mow all over town. Early fall was going to be pretty busy.

I worked on my own a lot, but sometimes one-on-one with Rennie at a job. **Whenever he got close to me, close enough to brush against me, he made the creepy and annoying point of rubbing me, touching my shoulder, mussing my hair...** I would just roll my eyes to myself and ignore it, hoping he'd knock off the nonsense soon. While a big man, he really did seem largely harmless enough, once you got to know what a marshmallow he was.



But the touching gradually escalated. I made the mistake of mowing a lawn shirtless once and found him caressing my chest and back, almost in full view in the front yard. I asked him to stop, and he just laughed.



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Then the compliments also started. Rennie was telling me I was one of the most beautiful people he had ever seen. As this seemed to quickly be ramping up, I decided to make a concerted effort to keep my distance as much as possible. It wouldn't always work, depending on the chores for the day, but if I could avoid him, I was certainly going to.

It was actually a pleasant break to be able to take the old lady for a walk. At times, she wouldn't even have any

expectations of me other than to provide some company and listen to her stories. Plus she said "the townsfolk would be envious when they saw her with a handsome young man." I'd laugh warmly and we would continue on, admiring the leaves showing early fall color. I wondered vaguely how she would view Rennie if she knew of all the uncomfortable touching.

"I got muscle," Rennie said to me one day.

"What?"

"I got muscle', that's the first thing you said to me that day at the moving truck, when I said I could take that box," he said, as if reminiscing on his wedding day.

"I never would have said that. 'I've got muscle,' maybe 'I have muscle'. I'm a college graduate, I use better grammar." At least I was able to amuse myself at a moment of superiority.

At times, the lady would be taken on a drive somewhere. After all this time, I can no longer remember where she went or what she would be doing, but the house would be empty for a few hours except for me and Rennie. **The second time this was the case, I was working in the kitchen and he came up behind me and began rubbing my shoulders with slow, therapeutic motions. It did feel good.** "You've been working too much," he'd say. This progressed to a guest room where he had me lay down for better massaging, then asked me to take my shirt off to make it better. This was not going well, I thought. **I said no and protested but he insisted and I tried my best to humor him, because to my own detriment, I was that way.** I lay as he massaged my back, buttocks (to his vocal delight) and thighs. He then suddenly rolled me over and unzipped my pants. **This is when I realized the fall season was going to get a lot worse.**

Shortly after the first time I was sexually assaulted, I went into the small cottage of a post office to buy some stamps. **The postal clerk chatted me up about what I had been up to since coming to town. I told her who I worked for. She frowned, looking me over. "Stay away from that man, Rennie, you hear?"**

"Why?"

"Because you're a nice young man, just trust me, he's no good, stay away!"

She knows about him. So there was maybe even a pattern. What if I wasn't the first, but the latest in a long line? Maybe I could be the one to finally stop it.

I would stay up late at night and think long of what I could do.

Under absolutely no circumstance could my dad know. He would kill him, most likely. And disown me. Regardless of the actual end result, it would not be a good ending for me. The old lady, what if she knew? It would be very personally disturbing to share something like this with her. I couldn't do that to her. Police? And what exactly would I report? I'm not a minor anymore. They'd probably ask me why I didn't just leave or tell him to stop. I couldn't leave, I had nowhere to go. It was hard to quit, how would I explain it to my dad or the old lady? I really seemed to be in a logistical and moral trap.

Sexual boldness continued to rise. I would be washing dishes and he would come up behind me, pull my shorts down and begin stroking me, without even a word. I was told to continue my work. He began complimenting my lips and wanting to kiss, which grossed me out most of all and still brings a shiver to this day. What he wanted most was to be kissing me at the moment I climaxed. He would get out of hand in his excitement and hold my head so he could French kiss me. He held me so hard that I noticed hand impressions on one side of my face after going home and looking in the mirror. I had to make sure my Dad didn't see that when he got home, so I took a bike ride.

Then he brought condoms.

The first time I was raped, the most painful and humiliating day of my life, I went home and threw up. And cried like I was a little boy all over again. To hide blood in my underwear, I threw away two days' worth. I stuck them in the trash under other items when it was

nearly full so that my dad wouldn't see them. **My showers became long and I would find myself staring into the spouting water, losing complete track of time. I wouldn't know if I'd been in there 10 minutes or an hour.**

The rapes coincided with the advent of the psychological games. Especially his favorite statement, "You can't rape the willing." He pointed out that since I was erect and had ejaculated, it meant I enjoyed it and wanted it. I would have no case. It's mutual, consenting adults. You can only rape women. I wouldn't want Daddy to find out, would I? What would our poor old lady think? What if that were enough to put her over the edge and give her a heart attack or something? It became routine to reinforce these questions and statements daily with each entry of this nightmare.

He was also a very strong man and I found out on multiple occasions that his full weight on my 140 pounds very effectively made me powerless.

I imagined Rennie as Renfield from Dracula, catching and eating flies around the room. Anything to amuse myself during these times. I began to always call him Renfield in my head.

I pondered hopelessly every day, as fall trudged onward like a slow moving funeral march. The leaves had begun to lose color and drop to the ground.

I felt truly trapped, although maybe not in the traditional or literal sense.

Near the end, Rennie forced me onto all fours on the floor of an abandoned house that was in his care by the owners. There was no heat and he enjoyed having me there because the cold made nipples hard and genitals so “cute and boyish”. The next day I was tied to a bed.

It was then I had a special panic attack, wondering since I had so underestimated him a while back, maybe I had still been doing so. This would be a perfect time for him to slice and dice me, while I couldn't move.

It could all end for me right now and I wouldn't be able to do a thing. I tried to relax so he could have his way. Being afraid and unaroused would only drag it all out that much longer. I had learned to focus and force myself to become erect and ejaculate as soon possible—the quicker I could get it over with, the sooner I would probably be freed again for the day.

This is when I called my winter employer. I had been hired a long while ago as a winter camping guide for a Boy Scout program in Maine. But instead of bringing me on board in mid-December as planned, I asked if there was something I could do in early November? With one quick phone call, I discovered there was! I was hired to help out with preparation of the program and facilities for winter and found my excuse to get out immediately. I packed up and left for the northeast without a goodbye or a look back. As it turned out I never lived with my dad again or returned to this town, so this dark episode was behind

me.

But like so much darkness, it does its best to hide the light for a very long time afterward, until the light is actively sought.

Flash forward 30 years.

The nation was in the middle of the #MeToo movement and the Brett Kavanaugh confirmation hearings. Social media was alive with opinions and daily updates.

I found myself getting curiously more and more drawn into the discussion. I began to get vocal myself. **It hit a nerve when victims of sexual assault were disregarded because they had spent years to decades not reporting the crimes. This was very familiar and I became incensed that anyone could be so shallow as to assume this was cause for disbelief.**

I was also hypersensitive that women always seemed to be the points of this discussion, but men, I knew fully, could easily be victims as well.

It was at this point that a local friend of mine spoke up on Facebook and asked me if there was anything I needed to talk about myself?

This floored me at first.

Was there?

She told me there were groups out there that advocated for survivors, including one she supported, Jane Doe No More (JDNM). Maybe I would like to check this out. This is when it began for me, in September 2018. I was invited to



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PHOTOGRAPHY BY
ANDREW GRAHAM, OF REDDING, CT

join a Facebook page for sexual assault survivors created by JDNM, which felt really strange to me at first. **I had never thought of myself as someone who was sexually abused, raped or assaulted.** In fact, I used to maintain that these are things that had never happened to me. **I had blocked it from my mind for so long, that this false narrative almost became a new truth.** In addition, I still did not believe I qualified as a survivor because I was a male and because of the "non-traditional" nature of my assaults. It was from another kid and then the ordeal with Rennie was while I was a legal adult. **No one was going to care. I did not know how I could bear to tell those embarrassing stories, either.** Just what I needed, one more reason for people I don't know to instantly judge me for the worst. And as

a guy, I automatically felt like a creepy intruder and one that would never be welcomed. After all, most survivors in these groups were women who were wronged by men.

I didn't plan to tell my "story" completely, or at all. But I was told I would be welcome when I was ready.

Within days, I had told it all. It began to pour forth in a therapeutic stream. Suddenly, something that I had sworn no one would EVER know, that I would take to my grave, was not only exposed but was the source of an outpouring of love and support that I had never experienced anywhere.

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I still did not believe I qualified as a survivor because I was a male and because of the "non-traditional" nature of my assaults.

As I began to collect books and articles and read more of what other survivors experienced, it became abundantly clear how much we all had in common and how oddly normal my weird and hidden past suddenly seemed.

The traits so common to survivors, were the laundry list of my own habits, behaviors and quirks. It was all falling into place like long missing puzzle pieces.

So much was becoming clear — my years of increasing anger and touchiness. My marriage. So much. It didn't even occur to me until the past year that even my nude modeling for

art classes and professional and hobby artists was a way for me to reach out and grapple with some of this, before I consciously knew of the problem. For the first time, I could feel that I had complete and total control over my body and how it was seen and used. I could be in charge of myself.

When all this began to overwhelm my psyche, one of the first things I did was disclose what happened during my youth to my wife . . . and then apologize profusely to her for years of issues that were likely MY issues. It had all nearly ended in divorce just a half-dozen years prior. How much of this took away from fatherhood, from my career effectiveness and upward mobility? From pastimes that I loved? I promised myself it would happen no more and I will end my tenure in this world on a much higher note, realizing there will



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always be times of backpedaling.

The following is the “short list” of what I want all men everywhere to understand, who have had the misfortune of experiencing sexual assault or abuse — just from my experience:

- **It’s never too late to begin healing**, regardless of how long ago this happened. As long as there is still life, there is hope!
 - **Healing. Takes. Time.** There will be challenges and pain along the way.
 - **In the end, YOU WILL NOT REGRET IT.** Actually, in the beginning you may not either.
 - **You are not alone.** You never have to be alone. Find a therapist, support group, close friends who you believe will understand. It doesn’t take many, just that special person or two. Anti-anxiety medication or an anti-depressant may help your state of mind immensely as you try to work through things. Only you and your doctor can decide if that is appropriate. The JDNM Survivor Facebook page and a mens’ therapy support group found many new friends for me that have been invaluable getting me through two years of awakening and renewal.
 - **All sexual assault is trauma, but I believe men experience a particular degree of this because of the stigma of society on males.** These are things that happen to women, right? An incredibly large percentage of men won’t report or speak up because of the shame, the humiliation, the perception of being less of a man, the innate hesitation of many men to confront emotion and pain in situations like this. But literature states, 1 in 6 males will be sexually assaulted and some say as high as 1 in 4. That is a lot of trauma and a lot of
- silence that no longer needs to be.
 - **It isn’t your fault.** It doesn’t matter if you were grown at the time.
 - **Your assaults don’t have to fit a textbook mold.** Everyone has different experiences from everyone else and most could use that argument. The common thread is that something happened to you that was damaging because it happened wrongfully without your consent. No means no, regardless of sex, age and circumstance.
 - **Forgiveness is up to you.** Forgive perpetrators only if you consider that a critical part of your healing. I didn’t. Don’t listen to advice that says you must forgive or forgive “first”. Even if that advice comes from a counselor or religious clergy.
 - **Confront your past.** Tell your story (when you’re ready, you will know) to someone. If it helps, write it all down first just for yourself. If you don’t face down this past, then recognize that this was not your fault in any way. I think it will be hard to begin the healing climb. Think of it as Luke not being able to take the next step as a Jedi until he faced down and defeated Darth Vader. You have your own darkness to confront, which cannot be defeated if you are hiding.
 - **Start being kinder to yourself, including taking breaks from all this reflection.** Schedule and follow through with treats just for yourself. Get a massage, go skiing, have a marathon of your favorite movies, grab some ice cream, go on exploratory drives, read a good book. If you aren’t used to doing so, begin exercising and getting outdoors in the sun and fresh air more. This will help you to develop a new beginning and the endorphins and vitamin D will do wonders for your state of mind.



For the first time, I could feel that I had complete and total control over my body and how it was seen and used. I could be in charge of myself.



*You will be heard.
You are worthy of the
love and acceptance
you will receive. The
world is waiting and
your future is here.*

A recurring regret of 30 years ago is not making that stand and reporting then. I realized at the time that the same thing may have happened to others before me. And most regretfully of all, it may have happened after me. Could I have stopped this from happening again, even if that meant just one more boy or young man that would not have to fight these demons all his life? So I made a personal moral commitment 2 years ago—never again.

I have vowed to myself and the world that nothing like this will ever happen to any other child or adult on my watch.

Not if I am around. Even to my own detriment, I will not allow it to happen. Ever.

It's my intention not only to heal myself but to help other men out there in any way I can. To me, this is a "gap" in the #MeToo movement that is still too large and the number of men coming forward is still too small.

Please take that first step toward healing. Today is a great day for a new beginning, even better than tomorrow. **You will be heard. You are worthy of the love and acceptance you will receive.** The world is waiting and your future is here. Make it a better one.

I will sure be there to cheer you all the way, my friend.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David S. Irvin is a professional forester by day and a proud and devoted family man. He enjoys hiking and anything outdoors, and hopes to return soon to his favorite hobby, stage acting. David was introduced to Jane Doe No More (JDNM), a nonprofit organization devoted to survivors of sexual violence, in 2018, and began his journey to the past in order to bring forth a brighter future. He hopes to share his awakening with others so that more will be inspired to tell their story and heal in their lives, especially other men.

You can reach David [here](#).



the
*Empowered
Voice*
INTERACTIVE EZINE

Voices Heard shatters the long held silence of sexual abuse survivors through story-telling and expressive arts.