

Free of fear, thrilled with life  
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More than 100 African violets, one for each of Richard Follett's students, brighten a side of his classroom at Warren County Junior High School in Front Royal.

In Room 910, the freshmen, like the plants they grow, are given the space and warmth needed to blossom.

For the students, Follett also dispenses humor. Aware that most ninth-graders are conscious of body image, he pokes fun at himself.

"On the first day, I tell them to call me TFFM, the fuzzy fat man," said Follett, the first teacher in Warren to receive National Board Certification, his profession's top recognition.

"If I can say that about myself, what do they have to worry about?" asked Follett, who teaches English, speech, forensics, theater and creative arts.

Making a connection and creating a safe, nurturing climate are priorities for Follett, 45. He spent his childhood often feeling alone, fearful and unprotected.

Follett said that until the age of 14, he was sexually abused by three neighbors: a popular father and his two sons. For Follett, sharing his story is a lesson in courage for other victims, especially boys, who are less likely to report being abused for fear of being labeled weak or homosexual.

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Follett's silence took a serious toll for half of his adult life. He attempted suicide at ages 18 and 24, flitted in and out of unhealthy relationships and suffered from depression. His first marriage ended in divorce.

Years of counseling and therapy helped reverse the emotional and psychological damage he endured as a boy and let him move toward healing. So did his second wife, Mary Ruth, and other loved ones who form his "family of the heart."

"I'm more than a survivor, I'm a thriver," said Follett, who is known for his cheerful disposition.

But thriving takes a great deal of work, especially since painful memories and feelings linger.

"You can never heal, but you learn to embrace the act of healing. That's where my joy comes from, the journey. If I can start a day and finish in a better place, it's been a good day," he said.

"It's a little bit like a priceless vase. If it falls and breaks, you can glue it back. But you can always look at it closely and tell where it was broken. That's me. My wife can see the cracks, see other things other people don't. I'm grateful I have someone who can do that and take that journey with me."

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The cracks began forming on Long Island in New York.

His abusers were part of a nice family that included many children in a house where all the neighborhood kids hung out, a place where parents felt safe dropping their little ones off while running errands.

In that house lived his three abusers: the father and the two oldest sons. A younger sibling, who was Follett's best friend, also lived there. Follett loved his friend, who never harmed him and protected him when he could. Sometimes he met Follett at the door and said, "Things aren't good, go back."

"He knew what was happening," said Follett, who suspects his friend was abused, too.

Despite being forced into sexual activity, Follett also loved his friend's father and older brothers. They encouraged him to join them in playing softball, miniature golf and other activities. They shared meals with him and were fun and friendly most of the time.

Because he was so young when the abuse started, Follett had difficulty understanding what was happening and why.

"I knew my problem was not that I wasn't loved, but the people who loved me showed it in unhealthy ways."

Still, he has never hated his abusers.

"That's probably fairly typical. I think the reason abuse exists is because we love the people who abuse us."

Once, as a child, he did speak up. At age 9, one of the older brothers nicked Follett's penis with a knife. Follett ran home and told his mother.

"She said, 'You must have gotten it caught in your zipper. It's OK, you don't have to be embarrassed, you don't have to tell a story.' From that moment on, I felt utterly alone in the world," Follett said.

He confided in a friend when he was 12. Five years passed before he told an adult.

The inconsistency of the abuse further confused Follett.

"It came in clusters. A month could pass and nothing happened, and then there'd be five incidents in the space of three days. There were times when the searchlight fell on me."

His abusers often worked together. One watched at the door, another held him down, and the third abused him.

"It was like, 'Lock the door, we will have some special fun Mom shouldn't know about.'"

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He coped in part by escaping into a world of books, riding his bicycle 5 miles to the library to check them out. He also found peace in nearby woods. When troubled, he hid there, like he did the day he found the strength to resist his tormentors.

While one son restrained Follett, the father unzipped the youngster's trousers and threatened to burn him with a cigarette lighter if he didn't comply.

He recalled the shock of "choosing to fight back, that caused my abusers to let me go. I was screaming inside. I didn't scream outside because I ran and hid in the woods and didn't want anyone to hear me and find out where I was. I stayed silent and still for several hours."

For weeks he looked over his shoulder as he went to school, fearful he would be beaten up or killed.

He was 14 when the abuse stopped. But the emotional and mental anguish continued.

When Follett was 24, the father who had abused him died. A flood of memories surfaced.

He joined his first support group for male victims of sexual abuse a short time later. He was an adult when he started therapy. Four years ago, he was diagnosed as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the abuse.

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For Follett, the hardest aspect of his abuse is the lack of proof. If a person is never charged, no record exists.

“That has been a tremendous handicap in term of my wellness. You start at a place of, ‘Please, God, someone believe me.’ The only validation I received is when the daughter [as an adult] said she knew it had happened and it happened to her. It all exists in the shadows. That makes it hard to step into the light.”

Support groups, counseling and loved ones strengthened him. His brother’s suicide five years ago also persuaded him to live life to the fullest.

He credits his wife for much of his success and a happiness unimaginable during the bleakest days of childhood.

“I would not be who I am and doing what I am without her,” he said, hugging her.

“I wouldn’t have had the courage to pursue teaching. I had no model for a healthy relationship. None of it would have happened. It’s like an enchantment. It gets frustrating to Mary Ruth - I walk around in a state of euphoric wonder because I have so much more than I ever thought I would have.”

Being the spouse of a victim of childhood sexual abuse is challenging, Mary Ruth said.

“Intimacy is sometimes like a minefield to walk through.”

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The couple met in 1993 at a community play she produced and he performed in. Still, years later, she learns new details about her husband’s exploited childhood.

She urges spouses to join a support group and constantly work on communicating with each other.

Humor helps, too. She joked that she avoids the basement where Richard grows 2,000 common and rare varieties of African violets because “it’s a bit like ‘Little Shop of Horrors.’ I don’t know what I’ll find there.”

Follett, the vice president of the Richmond African Violet Society, is as passionate about his plants as he is about teaching, a profession he began eight years ago after working as a singer, songwriter and actor for 20 years.

In that short time he has stood out among his peers. In 2004, he was chosen to visit Japan for three weeks as a Japan Fulbright Memorial Fund scholar.

“I think it’s a very important part of who he is because even when he was making his living as an actor or singer, he always taught, through what he was doing or teaching classes,” Mary Ruth said. “Since I’ve known him, I think he’s been mostly in his space comfortably teaching.”

Follett’s parents were educators. His mother taught English and his father taught tennis. He always knew he wanted to teach. He waited until he was 37 because by then, “I had my stuff worked out.”

He is confident “I could never abuse another human being because I know what it’s like to receive that energy. It took me many years before I could learn I could be a wonderful educator of children.”

That’s exactly what he is, said Andrew Keller, the school’s principal, who backed Follett’s decision to tell his story.

“I think ultimately if teaching is about learning, then we have all kinds of venues for learning, and certainly this is one of them. Richard is a unique teacher and gives a lot of himself. His class is an interesting environment” that students of all abilities enjoy.

“We get so caught up in SOLs and stuff we don’t take the time to consider what is important, and this is certainly something that impacts our kids,” Keller said. “We have to deal with some of these issues, and it’s tough on the kids. I think the kids in our community are ready to hear these stories.”

MEMO: THE SECRET CRIME