



## Daniel Monfried: You can help ease the nightmare of child sexual abuse

By DANIEL MONFRIED

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FOR JUST a moment, I want you to close your eyes and re-imagine the first time your child or grandchild wrapped a tiny hand around your finger. It may well be the first time as parents that we truly appreciate how precious life is; how innocent, vulnerable and utterly dependent our children are on us for their safety and well-being.

I want you to now imagine that same hand dipped in red or blue or yellow paint and pressed to the white wall of Nashua's Child Advocacy Center, signifying that your child has been the victim of a sexual assault; that the world has changed and that childhood as you both know it is now over.

To view the kaleidoscopic scattering of prints on the CAC's Hands of Hope Wall is to have your heart broken hundreds of times over. It is to witness in arresting color the stories of countless children, some barely old enough to talk, recounting the worst moments of their lives so that justice can be pursued and life can finally move forward.

The children dip their hands in the paint for one reason: to let the next child who walks through the center's glass doors know that he or she is not alone.

Last November, state Sen. Ted Gatsas encouraged me to join the board of directors for the CAC of Hillsborough County. Like so many important causes, any surplus of purpose and vitality the center enjoyed was undercut by a deficit in funding and public awareness. On any given day, the center's leadership must juggle trying to help as many families as possible with trying to find the resources needed to keep their doors open.

Before November 2004, when the CAC opened in Nashua, child victims in Hillsborough County faced unbearable odds. Before a case could make it to trial, a child might endure eight interviews -- some with teachers, others on camera with social workers. For most, it began in the backseat of a squad car. The holster, the gun, the badge, the blue lights, the metal cage, the questioning by an officer who had spent the day arresting criminals, and was now asked to show the sensitivity required for a 5-, 6- or 7-year-old.

For victims, this meant continued pain. For prosecutors, it often meant compromised cases, as a child's story might change slightly under pressured and prolonged questioning.

To tour the center is to witness law enforcement, prosecutors and child advocates all working together to complete in one interview what previously took eight. It is to enter a comfortable, quiet, non-threatening setting where kids can finally tell their stories to a trained professional, take home a teddy bear for the courage they showed, and dip their hands in the paint so that other children will know they are not alone.

It is to see successful prosecutions skyrocket by nearly 40 percent, to see families begin the process of moving forward and to see kids once again be kids.

Yet despite logging more than 400 interviews last year and being on pace to nearly double that number in 2008 between offices in Nashua and Manchester, the center's future is uncertain.

Attorney General Kelly Ayotte has formed an advisory panel charged with finding sustainable public funding. Elliot Hospital has shown incredible faith and generosity by donating space for a Manchester branch. Both are a tremendous boost to our mission. But right now, what we need more than anything is you.

Each of CAC's centers across the state needs leaders, volunteers, donors and board members to inspire others and to galvanize support (they can be reached through [www.cac-nh.com](http://www.cac-nh.com)). They need computers and office equipment. They need you to take tours and to see the handprints in person.

As a community, it is our greatest obligation to protect the most vulnerable among us. It is estimated that one in four girls and one in six boys will be abused before their 18th birthdays. Of these cases, 95 percent will be sexual. Just one in 10 will come forward with their stories.

Today, the wall stands as a living reminder of that evil, and of the justice and compassion we can accomplish together.

I want you to now close your eyes again and to imagine the center shuttered, the burden shifted back to police and families and the handprints painted over by a new tenant. I want you to imagine a child coming in and seeing a blank white wall. The problem is not going away. Neither can we.