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Survivors' Story

awareness and accountability came from, #Justiceformarksdrive. It was a speech and statement for not only Chris Swanson's multiple victims, but a statement of solidarity with all survivors of sexual abuse.

Looking among the crowd that gathered to support the strength of this family coming together and coming out to speak their truths, I did not see a single dry eye of any of the women standing in the parking lot. Women in their 20s to women in their 80s wept as this speech seemed to hit a chord in the grief, anger, and loss that so many women face in being survivors.

Nancy Christenson, clearly an amazing mother, joined by her daughter Melissa, Jen (Marquardt) Brostrom and Steph Lee, stood tall and made a statement speaking out against the perpetuation of this abuse and requested the lasting pain and suffering be recognized that the actions of Mayor Chris Swanson has left on not only their family, but several others in the community.

"When you have a child you give a hostage to the world, every parent has known the fear and the sense of helplessness the moment they realize that no matter how protective or how careful they are, and no matter how much you love them, bad things can happen to their child and there's nothing you can do to stop it. Thirty years ago my husband and I were thrust into every parent's nightmare," Nancy begins. "We entrusted the care of our daughters to a family that provided childcare directly across the street from us." She went on to explain that the family were christians and seemingly trustworthy enough to leave their children in their care.

"One day our 5 year old daughter broke down and was inconsolable. A boy had taken her into the bathroom and on an ongoing basis, been undressing her and doing inappropriate things. Though a 5 year old hardly has the words to describe it, what she told us was that she was sexually assaulted. We filed a police report, and the boy was arrested, this young boy's name is Chris Swanson. Your mayor. While the juvenile records are sealed, I'll tell you this, our family went through a lengthy court process before a judge and it was determined that Christopher Swanson had indeed sexually assaulted our 5 year old daughter during that hearing process. We were told we had the option to request that he be tried as an adult for the sexual assault of a child. We agonized and prayed over the decision, and in the end my husband and I decided to accept his claim of remorse and agree that he be charged as a juvenile. We have since learned more about the extent of his abuse of our daughter as well as other neighborhood girls that have made us whole heartedly regret this leniency we showed him so long ago... Let me make this crystal clear, these are not rumors, (she begins to cry, while the crowd shouts words of encouragement and support) that Christopher Swanson repeatedly sexually assaulted our daughter when he was 15 is a fact. That Mayor Chris Swanson was arrested and punished for it when he was 16, also a fact. That Mayor Swanson robbed my daughter of her childhood, her self esteem, her carefree personality, and her chance to live a happy life, is a very, very sad reality. For those that say that was a long time ago, he's a different person, a man of God, people can change... Consider this; in the 30 years that followed, Chris Swanson has NEVER contacted us to find out how our daughter is doing," said Nancy.

"He never learned of the depression, the suicidal thoughts, and the years, the years of therapy, the hospitalizations, and the decades of hell that she still battles to this day, as well as our family." Nancy goes on to explain that the crimes against her daughter were certainly a significant factor in both her and the family's struggle for peace and wellness all these years.

"I'm here to tell you Mayor Chris Swanson sexually assaulted my sister when he was 15 and she was 5 years old. With permission, I can no longer spare you the details, she was raped and defiled. It happened multiple times in the home...he told her that he would hurt her family if she ever told. It was not childhood experimentation, it was malicious abuse. I remember many family therapy sessions around this time. I remember blaming myself for not stopping it the time I walked in on him hurting her... I still carry this burden of

guilt... I remember that everything should be kept secret so as to not inflict more pain. Eventually my family moved on, but it was damaged," stated Melissa Giles, sister of the survivor.

The family stuck together through these storms and after a lot of therapy and support, eventually were able to reach a place of peace and stability. That was until Chris Swanson campaigned for mayor in 2016, and just like that, his face and his voice were everywhere. Radio advertisements, yard signs, etc. This opened all of the wounds to these survivors and their families. The family tried to come forward with their story while he was campaigning to alert the community of Two Harbors and was told by media publications that they could only publish positive things about the candidates. They contacted his office and asked him to not put their sister/daughter through this. They assured him they had no desire to ruin his life, but that they "didn't feel it was too much to ask that he not pursue this position of power and access after ruining hers". According to the Christenson family, Swanson has admitted to the family of his abuse and pretended to make amends.

In November of 2021, Mayor Swanson contacted the Center for Restorative Justice and Peacemaking and reportedly had convinced the professionals there that he was genuinely remorseful for his wrong doings and wanted to move forward in his accountability. The family requested 2 things; that he make a public statement apologizing to his victims facing the hardships and trauma he had caused all these women and their families, and step down as mayor. The center agreed that those terms were acceptable considering the permanent damage he did to so many young people in the community. "For a year he led us on with insincere promises," the family says. He never held up to his end of the bargain. Using excuses like, "He has to get his head on straight, or now's not a good time, etc... Last month he terminated with the Center for Restorative Justice program and ghosted my family," says sister Melissa Giles.

"We expressed that true amends are more than words, they are actions. It became clear that his attempt to make amends was actually an attempt to manage and mitigate us."

"Chris Swanson would be wise to understand we are not afraid of any threats. Believe me Mr. Mayor, there is nothing more you can do to us that we cannot overcome. For our daughter, we are seeking a public apology and acknowledgement for the pain and suffering that he has caused and continues to cause to this day. For other survivors of sexual assault and their families, we are seeking accountability. We want those that think they can dominate and abuse young women and little girls to understand someday those little girls will grow up to be grown women and will be surrounded by friends and loved ones...and we will hold you accountable," Christenson said.

"One thing has become clear, throughout all the events that transpired since the mayor abused my sister, it has never been about what she needed to heal, it's always been about Chris Swanson and his aspirations. I'm asking that this stops today and he finally makes a true amends," concludes sister Melissa.

As this speech was going on the city council members, including Swanson, filed into the building using a separate entrance. When the meeting was called to order, council president Redden gave the entire council the opportunity to speak up to share any thoughts or feelings about the women who were cut from the agenda list to speak at the meeting. The room was SILENT. Not one council member spoke. The room immediately had the wind knocked out of its sails. Members of the community sat in disbelief, nauseous with shock that not one city council member spoke on this matter and double standard for #Justiceformarksdrive.

Following is a list of Two Harbors city councilors' emails if you would like to let them know how you feel about this injustice:

mayorswanson@twoharborsmn.gov
councilorwoodruff@twoharborsmn.gov
councilorredden@twoharborsmn.gov
councilorerickson@twoharborsmn.gov
councilorpasse@twoharborsmn.gov
councilorglaser@twoharborsmn.gov
councilorrenwald@twoharborsmn.gov
jdhein@twoharborsmn.gov

"If you were ever wondering when it would be a good or appropriate time to talk to your

children about their rights to their bodies and the rights others have over their own bodies, the answer is right now," says Steph Lee. "Having men speak out against sexual abuse is absolutely needed in order to ever put an end to it," she adds.

Another survivor of Chris Swanson's purported childhood sexual abuse posted recently on social media, "Chris Swanson has a dark past in which he has preyed upon children... some have written off as hearsay or rumors. But no. It's true... and happened on Marks Drive in Silver Bay. Perhaps all is forgiven now because he is a man of god. Well not in my book until some accountability is taken. Accountability that we deserve and need. I also was victimized by Chris Swanson at the age of 8... This has been ongoing since 2016. 30 years ago we all tried to move on... but he chose to come back to the area and into the "line of sight" of his survivors.... Perhaps, if Swanson had not sought a position of power within his community, if he had not abused that power, none of this would have become necessary... It's time. Time now to take accountability and step down from your position of power as mayor of TH. The fact that you even ran after the victim's family came out in 2016 requesting you not (come on so close to their town) should speak volumes. You continue to allow your ego and personal interests to deflect what is right," says Jen (Marquardt) Brostrom.

Do you want to live in a world where women are silenced? Where women and young girls are robbed of their agency? Where there is no accountability for an abuse of power? Acts of violence leave lasting and devastating effects on a person's development and psyche. This violence affects everyone in our communities. Lift the voices and hear the strength of these women coming forward. Let it be known: We stand in solidarity with survivors of violence. It should no longer be tolerated, hidden, censored, or swept under the rug. Not in our communities on the North Shore, not anywhere.

(The online version of this article has been edited for name corrections.)



Local Farmers Markets



FINLAND FARMERS MARKET

Every Thursday Evening,
5:00 - 6:30 p.m.
Under the pavilion at the
Clair Nelson Center
6866 Cramer Road, Finland



TWO HARBORS FARMERS MARKET

SATURDAYS
THRU OCT. 15
10AM - 1PM
320 7TH AVE
BURTLINGTON
STATION
PARKING LOT
TWOHARBORSFARMERSMARKET.COM

Lake County Veterans Services

Assisting Veterans and their families

Are you a Lake County Veteran with a discharge above dishonorable?

If so, contact your Veterans Service Officer for federal and state benefits eligibility and details.

Two Harbors (Main) Office:

616 3rd Avenue, Two Harbors, MN 55616 • 218-834-8326

Monday/Tuesday/Thursday/Friday
- Please call for an appointment

Silver Bay Office:

99 Edison Boulevard
Silver Bay, MN 55614
218-220-6273

Wednesday by appointment only



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