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TWISTS OF FATE

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'BAD TOUCH'

At age 10, Matt McGuirk was the star witness in Volusia County's biggest child sex-abuse case, helping to put away a serial pedophile for 155 years and changing laws to better protect children and victims. But Matt was never the same.

News-Journal/DAVID TUCKER

Mike and Victoria McGuirk hold photos of their late son, Matt, in the bedroom of their Port Orange home. Matt McGuirk died Oct. 8, having battled drugs for years as a way of coping with the molestation he suffered as a boy.

By DEREK CATRON
STAFF WRITER

The 10-year-old boy stepped to the witness stand, practically disappearing within its dimensions. His blond bangs nearly obscured his eyes, hiding whatever fear or nervousness was there as he raised his ... hand and swore to tell the truth.

... parts. The boy called them "family jewels," eliciting a few nervous giggles from the Justice Center courtroom.

"And," the lawyer paused, struggling for the first time to find the right words, "if someone, say a stranger, was to touch a little boy on his family jewels, would that be a good touch or a bad touch?"

The boy didn't hesitate.

... answers," he wrote in what would have been the introduction to his book. "I want my own world to have meaning, like the home runs I used to hit. I want my mother and father to finally see what they've given so much for ... the sacrifices they've made due to my INSANITY to finally pay off, and my story to be told by me to help kids who think things will never change."

In 2½ pages of self-flogging prose, Matt ...

ABUSE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1A

adding that he dreamed of celebrating the day he could mark a year of sobriety. It never came.

"I'm writing cause I'm scared to death the next time I 'use' I might not make it back."

Matt was 31 when he died Oct. 8, presumably from an accidental overdose, though his family is still waiting for autopsy results. Not that it matters. While the drugs might have killed him, Matt's family already knows what took his life.

■■■

"People thought he was a screw up."

Victoria McGuirk wasn't condemning her son, rather making a point. Her boy was tall and fit and genius-smart. He was a charmer, with an infectious personality that could fill a room. He made friends quickly and was fiercely loyal to them. He was surrounded with love, from his parents, his sister, a beautiful girlfriend.

With so much going for him, Victoria knew how it looked when Matt got in trouble with the law, again, the trips to rehab, again and again, the failures to stick to school or anything else that might help him realize that vast potential.

Outsiders couldn't understand what was holding him back, and Matt would never let them in.

As she watched the news of the child sex abuse scandals at Penn State and later Syracuse University, read about the students who rioted over the dismissal of a popular football coach, all Victoria could think about was the anonymous boys at the center of the case. Where was the outrage for them?

She also thought about the mothers. Victoria had always imagined she could surround her son with so much love that he wouldn't be able to feel the bad touch any longer. Would these boys get the help they need?

Victoria felt like she knew them, without even knowing their names. How many people looked at them, years after they'd tried to lock away the memories of what happened to them, and called them screw-ups?

Matt could have helped them, she thought. Maybe he still could.

■■■

Victoria McGuirk will never forget the morning her life changed forever.

It was September 1989. Matt was eating a bowl of Cheerios while she readied for work, the TV news providing a droning background noise until she heard a name she recognized. James Bowen, a South Daytona daycare operator, had been arrested after authorities found child pornography in his home.

Victoria froze, certain she'd misheard. She rushed to the TV and watched State Attorney John Tanner asking parents who'd had children at Bowen's school to contact his office.

BOWEN

She turned off the TV. Matt had stopped eating. It had been a year since they'd pulled him from Bowen's small private school, Fast Track to Learning. Victoria leaned down and looked directly at her son.

"Mommy really, really needs to know if he ever, ever touched you or threatened you or did anything," she said, trying — and failing — to control her voice. "You have to tell us the truth."

Matt didn't answer, not immediately. He didn't have to. Tears started rolling down his cheek.

"What did he do?"

Matt could only cry.

Victoria swallowed him in a hug. "It's going to be OK," she whispered, wondering how that would ever be true.

■■■

The rest of the morning was a blur of activity. Somehow Victoria had calmed Matt and gotten him to school, warning his teacher the boy might be upset. She rushed to the State Attorney's Office.

She was met there by two women and a young attorney, Dennis Bayer, who would prosecute the case. They handed her a box of Polaroid photographs, about the size of a large shoebox. There were more than two dozen images, all young boys. Matt was in more of the photos than any other boy. He was naked.

Victoria cried and cried until someone came in.

"Are you going to be OK?"

"No!" she blurted. "I still can't believe this."

She called her husband, Mike, at work. He came home and they cried together.

Before Mike got home, Victoria had time to leaf through a dictionary, seeking the word she'd heard all morning but, in 1989, wasn't familiar with. She found the word — pedophile — and closed the book.

"You bastard."

■■■

"Do you remember any bad touches while you were at Fast Track?"

"Yes." The boy spoke so softly that the judge had to ask if the jury heard his next response.

"We were — whenever we would go to the beach we would be changing and he would come over and start rubbing our family jewels.

"And then he just wouldn't say anything. Sometimes he would and sometimes he wouldn't. But he'd just stand there acting like it was fun for him."

The lawyer asked how often it happened.

"Lots of times, lots."

"Would it happen like once a month?"

"No. Like sometimes five times a week. Sometimes one time a week. It just was depending on where we were changing."

McGuirk family

Matt McGuirk, left, and Jordie Hoeck were good friends for most of their lives, with Jordie joining the McGuirk family on a vacation when this photo was taken. But they shared a dark secret; both were victims in the child molestation case against James Bowen, and both testified in the case that led to Bowen's sentence of 155 years in prison. Both would later succumb to drug addictions as ways of coping with the emotional trauma of their youth.

The lawyer asked Matt if he was old enough to change himself and whether he changed himself at home.

"Yes."

■■■

At first glance, James Bowen was a busy parent's dream.

He was by all accounts a brilliant teacher. One parent called the thin, snowy-haired man "a Mr. Rogers type." His grade-school kids were doing algebra years before their public-school peers. The school grounds and classroom were immaculate. The children took frequent field trips to the beach and YMCA. Parents could drop off their children early or pick them up late at Bowen's home.

Only in retrospect was it an obvious trap, to fall into "that rut of easiness," as Mike McGuirk called it. With a commute from the Kennedy Space Center where he worked on the space shuttle launch team, McGuirk valued that flexibility just like the other parents who had their children there.

"If you were late to pick them up, all you had to do was call," Mike said. "You can't do that with a public school."

Like Matt, Jordie Hoeck was also a "teacher's pet."

"He could easily pull the blanket over anyone's eyes," said Hoeck, who attended the school with his sister and remembers Disney trips with the Bowens and frequent sleepovers at their house.

"He was like a grandfather figure," Hoeck said. "We had our own room at his house. We had our own clothes there."

Later, when Hoeck started fifth grade at South Daytona Elementary, he found that he was grade levels above his age peers in reading, spelling and especially math, Bowen's favorite subject.

"I was doing seventh- or eighth-grade work," Hoeck said, recalling his reaction when he was given class work he'd mastered years earlier. "Are you kidding me? Times tables?"

But Bowen was more like a character from a Grimm fairy tale than a parent's dream. He was first arrested in Michigan in 1966 for taking "indecent liberties" with a 10-year-old student. He confessed that he "touched the private parts" of the boy and was sentenced to five years probation but released less than two years later.

The bad touches continued. Prosecutors would later show Bowen molested children for more than two decades, touching them while supposedly helping them change clothes or applying ointment for sunburn or poison ivy, taking pictures of the boys while they were naked. Inviting the boys to touch him or do things to each other while he watched or took photos.

Bowen was fired from schools in Maryland and South Florida after being accused of molesting young boys, but no charges were filed. Florida law at the time didn't require background checks for the people who opened private day cares — a law that would change following Bowen's conviction.

After opening a school in South Daytona, Bowen was arrested in 1981 on four counts of lewd and lascivious assault. A former aide at the school testified she found Bowen on the floor of the school's nap room with a naked 3-year-old boy between his legs.

But Bowen was acquitted after a judge ruled that the aide's statement and others about Bowen's alleged fondness for small "fair-haired boys" couldn't be heard unless they were relevant to the specific charge. (A judge's decision to allow such "similar fact evidence" in the later case would prove crucial to Bowen's conviction.)

The Bowens sold the school in 1986 after the state shut it down because of the Michigan conviction. They opened a new school, Fast Track to Learning Center in Daytona Beach, in Lulu Bowen's name.

What tripped up Bowen in the end, at least in part, was his practice of allowing the kids into his home. On an August night in 1989, a mother who was running late picked up her 7-year-old son at Bowen's house. While using the bathroom, she found a small book containing photos of young boys engaged in sexual activity. The woman reported Bowen to authorities. Bowen and his wife were charged with 84 counts of possession of child pornography, and he remained in jail while the state built a more serious case against him.

In the end, Bowen was convicted on 12 counts of child molesting. The court found that he fondled and otherwise abused boys between the ages of 3 and 9 from 1983 to 1989.

Bayer, the prosecutor, called Matt the star witness for his ability to recall telling details and an unflappability on the stand beyond his years. At Matt's memorial service in October, Bayer — now in private practice in Flagler Beach — called Matt a hero for daring to face his abuser in court.

Circuit Judge Oliver Green, on temporary assignment from Bartow, called Bowen "a very sick man."

"The lifetime of scheming by the defendant exceeds that of any other case in which the undersigned judge has been involved," Green wrote in his sentencing order in May 1991.

McGuirk family photos

Krissy Reed was 4 years older than her brother, Matt McGuirk, and tried to protect him from the taunts he heard from boys who knew he'd been victimized.

Matt McGuirk poses with his sister, Krissy Reed, at her wedding in July 2010. At 6-foot-4, the little brother had grown up to become his sister's protector.

"It is sad to know he has done these criminal acts for years and has not been successfully prosecuted for the bulk of his misbehavior," Green added, concluding "the only way to keep this man from access to children is that he be incarcerated for the rest of his life."

Green sentenced Bowen to 155 years in prison — 115 more than the state guidelines recommended. An appeals court upheld the sentence.

Bowen was still in prison when he died just after Christmas in 1995 at age 57. The family was told he died of "unnatural causes." They imagined what that meant but drew little comfort in suspecting Bowen's death was unpleasant.

■■■

As part of the counseling that preceded the trial, Mike and Victoria were warned that puberty could be a particularly troubling time for the victims of child sex abuse. Difficulty with authority figures was common.

Victoria wondered: Don't all teens have problems with authority figures? The teen years can be difficult for any family dynamic, but the McGuirks, forever racked with guilt, had it worse than most.

Matt quit football and the other team sports he'd always excelled at, preferring to spend his time surfing. His sister, four years older, remembers how other boys who'd heard what happened called Matt cruel names. She fought those who were foolish enough to say it in front of her.

"I would beat the living daylights out of them," said Krissy, who's now a grade-school teacher in Palm Coast. "I would jump on them and punch them."

Matt was 13 when he was caught with drugs and arrested for the first time. He was 15 when he had his first stint in rehab.

His parents pushed him to get more counseling, but they couldn't make him talk about what had happened. Victoria remembers times Matt would just stand in a corner, refusing to face the counselor. Another time he was put in group therapy with all girls.

The family paid for all the counseling, and when funds were low, they sought reimbursement through a state program for victims. Victoria was dismayed to learn those costs were covered only within a few years of the trial. Some kids, like Matt, weren't ready to talk that quickly. She fought to have the laws changed, but the changes came too late to help Matt.

Among the papers he left behind, Matt wrote that he knew he needed help, that he wanted help, but at the same time may have revealed why it never took with him.

"I have huge trust issues," he wrote, "especially with older 'teaching' men, which is exactly what a sponsor is in recovery."

Sponsors, counselors, teachers, none of them could get through to Matt, not for long anyway.

Every time he seemed to have his act together, something would happen to put him into a tailspin. Often, it was of his own doing.

"He never thought he deserved anything good," his mother said. "When things were too good, he'd say, this is too good for me."

"He'd sabotage it," said his longtime girlfriend, Michelle Duffy. "Build it and break it down. That's what he always said."

■■■

One person who knew better than anyone else what Matt was going through was his childhood friend Jordie Hoeck, another of Bowen's fair-haired boys who had testified during the trial.

Now 32, Jordie has never spoken publicly about what happened to him. He agreed to have his name used in this story because he knew Matt believed telling their story might help other victims of sexual abuse.

Jordie's life paralleled Matt's in so many ways, though, if anything, Jordie had it worse; within a couple of years after the trial, he lost his right eye in a freak wood-chopping accident, leaving him for the second time in his 13 years feeling like everything had been stripped away from him.

"I felt out of place. I felt different from everyone," he said over coffee one morning at a local diner. "I felt I had a secret I could never tell anybody. That (feeling) eats away at you."

Like Matt, Jordie turned to drugs as a way to forget or at least numb himself to the memories he couldn't shake from his mind. He served a year in prison on drug charges, and it was that time away that helped him resolve to change his life, the bottoming out that some addicts believe is necessary for a lasting recovery.

"I could enjoy the things people take for granted. The feel of the sun on your face. The smell of the ocean. That's the thing I missed the most."

Jordie had trust issues, too, but when he got out of prison he was able to be freer with his emotions. He opened up when he met Shawna Silvia, who's now his fiancée and the mother of his 3-year-old daughter, Jayla.

"She keeps me motivated," he said of his daughter. "She looks up to me. For me to let her down, that's one of my motivations."

Jordie got his degree from Daytona State College, something Matt was never able to do, and now runs his own lawn-care business, goes regularly to church and Narcotics Anonymous meetings. Yet he knows how fragile his ongoing recovery is.

He was staying at his mom's house when he learned of Matt's death. His mom came to his bedroom, trembling, as she sat at the edge of his bed.

"Something's happened," she said. "I don't want to tell you."

Then she did. Jordie, so practiced at locking away his emotions, couldn't hold back any longer.

"I don't think I've cried like that in a long time," he remembered.

■■■

Matt had always dreamed his story would help other victims. It is revealing, perhaps, that the one time Matt spoke freely of the abuse he endured was in court, when he might help others by testifying against the man who had abused so many before him and was sure to keep adding victims if he wasn't stopped.

His sister grew impatient with him at times for not following through with the book or the website he'd dreamed up — "Straight up SolGier," the "G" representing God, which is now a foundation registered with the state — that he'd hoped could benefit other abuse victims.

But when she looks back now, she wonders if there might have been a reason for his writer's block. Maybe Matt was waiting for when he could write his story with conviction, that he had to feel he was OK before he could convince others they could be OK.

"He wanted to write the story to where it had a happy ending," Krissy said, sobbing at the thought. "He never got that."

Nicole Sharbono, the program director at the Haven Recovery Center's Stone Street facility in DeLand, treated Matt in 2010 and spoke about his treatment at his mother's request. She was convinced Matt believed he could put the abuse behind him.

"He was probably waiting until he was on the other side of things" to write his story, Sharbono said in a recent telephone interview. "The problem is, when can you really say that? Is it after you've been clean for a year? Two years? Twenty years? It's a difficult question for anybody to answer."

It's a question Jordie still wrestles with. He had a relapse after getting the news of Matt's death, disappearing for a nearly day-long binge that he barely remembers. But something odd happened when he did.

"I got the high but I didn't get the escape. It backfired."

He hopes the failure to find escape in drugs will give him more strength to avoid another relapse. The risk, especially with a daughter, is just too great.

It took a year in prison for Jordie to appreciate things like the smell of an ocean breeze. Matt's death touched him in a similar way.

For as long as Jordie could remember, he'd measured his life by what had been taken from him: the lost eye that prevented him from playing sports, the abuse that took away things he couldn't even begin to quantify.

Losing Matt — "the brother I never had" — has changed that. In talking about his past with a stranger, something he couldn't have done even a few weeks earlier, the conversation slides easily to the subject of his daughter, his hopes for the future. Jordie likes what he sees.

"I have everything I want in life. I have a lot of things going for me," he said, almost careful at first, as if afraid to jinx himself, but quickly warming to the idea. "It's taken something drastic for me to open my eyes."

An addict is never really fully recovered. An abuse victim will always carry those memories. Jordie knows that as well as Matt did, so as he speaks of his future, it's with a resolve that may be intended to convince himself as much as his listener.

"I feel really strong. I can stand on both feet, chin high, without going to my old coping mechanisms."

If that's how Jordie's story goes, it's an ending Matt could applaud.

Jordie Hoeck

Losing Matt, "The brother I never had," has changed how Jordie Hoeck looks at his life. Instead of measuring his life by what had been taken from him, he now judges by all that he has, including his fiancee, Shawna Silvia, at right, and their daughter, Jayla. "I have everything I want in life. I have a lot of things going for me," he says.

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VOL. LXVI NO. 131 — DAYTONA BEACH, FLA. — SATURDAY — MAY 11, 1991 — 35 CENTS

Day-care molester gets 155-year term

Judge exceeds guidelines for sentence by 115 years

By ROBERT NOLIN

The judge said the only way to keep James Bowen from children was to jail him for life.

SEE MOLESTER 10A

10A — THE NEWS-JOURNAL Saturday, May 11, 1991

Molester

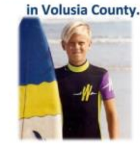
CONTINUED FROM 1A

In memory of Matt "Magou" McGuirk

This is the face of Matt as a victim in 1984 -1989.

When his teacher sexually molested him!

This is Matt McGuirk at the age of 10, (1990) when he testified against that teacher in the biggest pedophile case in Volusia County.



He died on October 8th, 2011 – at the age of 31.

Because he <u>NEVER</u> got over what happened to him!

We have started a Foundation to help other kids like him survive and thrive after the trauma!

STRAIGHT UP SOLGIER FOUNDATION