I was 12 when the abuse started or maybe just 13. It’s difficult to say exactly, which may seem strange but when you are abused the details can sometimes get a bit muffled. It’s the brain’s way of coping with what has happened. I blocked it out for many, many years. It was only when I reached my 40’s that I could actually remember clearly what had happened.

I am the eldest of 6 and was often needed to care for my siblings so it was flattering when this older man showed an interest in me. Looking back he was obviously grooming me although it did not seem that way at the time. I thought I was in love with him and he with me. Clearly this was not the case and just his way of stopping me telling anyone what was happening. It was our little secret.

The abuse continued on a regular basis until I was 16, he was a lay volunteer within the Catholic Church. He was also a friend of my parents and lived around the corner from us. I was not able to tell my parents about the abuse as I had told my dad about being bullied at school and he had not believed me so I couldn’t tell him about the abuse. It only stopped when I stopped attending the activity. I found another group to join which was at the same day and time so that I could stop going without my parents thinking it strange.

I struggled a lot with attending school as I was being bullied and the name calling was of a sexual nature which reminded me of what was going on out of school and with my abuser. As it was I ended up going to university as a mature student, when I was already married and had 2 children. My marriage ended as we had difficulties around our relationship. A lot of these were caused by the abuse. Our sexual relationship was never great, I wasn’t able to link sex with being loved. My husband put in for an annulment and we were given one.

It was while I was married to my first husband that the daughter of my abuser came to live with me. She was getting thrown out of her flat, as her flat mate had not been paying the rent while she was in hospital. She had just had a new born baby and had nowhere to go. She came and lived with me for a few months and we have stayed in touch over the years. She was abused by her father, the same man who abused me. I have no doubt we were not the only ones.

My second marriage also failed as when I found the courage to tell my husband I had been abused, he left me. He couldn’t be married to me as I was ‘damaged goods’ He had been abusive to me during our marriage, he was controlling and did not like my friends to visit. I came home one day from work to find the house empty, he had taken everything. My parents had to bring me two camp chairs as myself and my daughter had nothing to even sit on. This happened at the same time that my son was sectioned for the first time. I remember the Parish Priest visiting me, and acknowledging to me that it was as if I was living in the anti room to hell.

It was when my daughter, who at the time was in secondary school, mentioned that her friend’s dad was talking to girls online, that it all came rushing back to me. The friend’s dad was the man who had abused me. This was his second family, he had remarried when his first wife died from cancer. I knew at that point that I had to say something, so I rang social services and reported him. They came out and spoke to me and subsequently removed the children from him.

His son, from his first marriage started bringing him to mass and it was my sister that mentioned to me that perhaps I might want to say something to the Church Safeguarding Representative. The Safeguarding Representative advised me to talk to the Diocesan Safeguarding Coordinator. I contacted her and she came out to speak to me about how I felt about him attending the Church. She asked whether I wanted him to go to a different church. I said I just said that I didn’t want him at the time of mass I went to as it was the one children attended. A Safeguarding Plan prevented him attending that mass.

The Coordinator was also able to persuade the diocese to help with funding for the part time Theology masters degree I was studying. I wanted to put some God stuff in my head instead of all the abuse. I was then approached me to be one of the survivors to meet privately with Pope Benedict. This was a very meaningful experience, as I prayed that God would give me the grace to be able to forgive my abuser. I was able to forgive him and that was like a great weight being lifted from me. It had no effect on the abuser, the forgiveness was for my benefit.

It may seem odd that at 56 I’m still talking about what happened to me. The truth is, when you’ve been abused, the effects last a lifetime. When my eldest daughter reached her teenage years I was unable to hug her. I found it really difficult. She in turn found this very hurtful, she was coping with her brother being in and out of hospital and with his mental illness, she needed me, but I was unable to provide that support. Fortunately I now have a really good relationship with my daughter and her family. It’s only now that I’ve had various lots of counselling that I’m able to have a caring loving relationship with my now boyfriend.

I was recently asked to work in Foundation stage in the school I work in. I had to explain that it would be very difficult, as I don’t like uninvited touch and children of 3 and 4 are always touching you.

I think that’s all I want to say but if you have any questions I would be happy to answer them afterwards.