

'I DON'T WANT OTHER CHILDREN TO BE ABUSED LIKE ME'

Shy Keenan grew up suffering horrific sexual abuse from a network of paedophiles run by her stepfather

FEATURE Olivia Gordon PHOTOGRAPHS Getty/East Anglian Daily Times MAIN PHOTOGRAPH POSED BY MODEL

No matter how often Shy Keenan repeats the story, it never gets any less painful. 'Every time I see a Polaroid camera, I feel sick,' she says, barely concealing her emotions. 'My first childhood memories are of being photographed while I was raped. The one thing I remember is a blinding white light. It wasn't until I was six that I realised this was the flash from the camera.'

From stills photography, her abusers moved with the technology to capture their sickening scenes of child abuse on moving image. Four decades later, now Shy is in her early 40s, those images are still circulated by paedophiles on the Internet.

Shy was three years old, and her sisters two and four, when her divorced mother, Jennifer, met the man who was to destroy their lives. Violent alcoholic Stanley Claridge was the mastermind behind a network of child molesters; he had also abused his own adolescent daughter since her infancy. Shy was immediately drawn into the merciless paedophiles' depraved web as she was drugged, beaten and then raped in her Merseyside home. The final insult were the photographs. 'He sold me to other people, drugged me and abused me every day,' Shy says. 'Looking back is hard because I'm smiling in some of the images. It wasn't a proper smile though. I was doing what I was told. I just wanted it to finish.'

Claridge was a violent man who left Shy partly deaf from constant beatings. 'By the time we were six, Claridge didn't have to raise his hands to us. We did what he wanted because we knew we'd get the beating of our lives if we didn't.' Childhood was an unmitigated nightmare. When she tried to tell her mother about the abuse at the age of five, she not only didn't believe her but accused Shy of trying to steal her man. 'She then beat me and never spoke to me again.' Jennifer died of thrombosis when Shy was just 13. There was more tragedy in Shy's life when her real dad, Robert, gassed himself after feeling powerless to save his children from their torment. The one person who showed the little girl kindness was her aunt Pat but, sadly, she was unsuccessful in her attempts to adopt her.

Social workers and doctors saw Shy had sexually transmitted diseases and unexplained injuries. But, in a series of failures, no-one believed Shy when she begged them for help. Instead, Claridge successfully branded her an attention-seeking liar and had Shy drugged and locked in an adult mental institution. After being subjected to further sexual assaults by care home staff, Shy escaped and tried to live homeless on the streets of London. She was arrested and fled again, and then was saved at the last minute from throwing herself from the top of a Birkenhead tower.

The horror continued once Shy had grown up and escaped, as Claridge and his ring continued to circulate their photos and films of her. Shy is sure about this because sex offenders contact her now, saying they have just downloaded images of her. She says that the ring abused up to four generations of countless children over the years, while Shy and her sisters tried in vain to save them by passing

information to the authorities who failed to act. After numerous threats from child abusers, Shy, by now a wife and mother herself, was forced into hiding. Finally, after learning of a baby at risk of abuse from Claridge in 2000, she took the story to a BBC news team who asked her to get the evidence on a secret camera. 'After 20 years of staying away, I had to go back to my hometown,' says Shy. Full of revulsion, she entered the house and confronted him. With the tape running, Claridge boastfully confessed to all the crimes. Shy recalls: 'He lunged forward and grabbed me between legs. I wanted to hit him, but made myself hold back for the sake of the baby I was trying to save. When I got outside I threw up.'

The programme was broadcast and a massive police investigation, code-named Operation Phoenix, was launched. With media pressure, the claims were at last taken seriously. In February 2002 at Liverpool Crown Court, the abusers were given life sentences. Soon after the trial, Shy set up the help group Phoenix Survivors. Since then, she has also teamed up with Sara Payne, whose daughter Sarah was murdered by paedophile Roy Whiting in 2000, to tirelessly campaign against the sexual abuse of children.

Shy knows images of her abuse are still available because sex offenders write and tell her. 'There are sites dedicated to hating me,' she reveals. 'They write and have a go, saying I look like I was enjoying it so what am I complaining about.' Shy spends much of her time today helping to shut down indecent sites by

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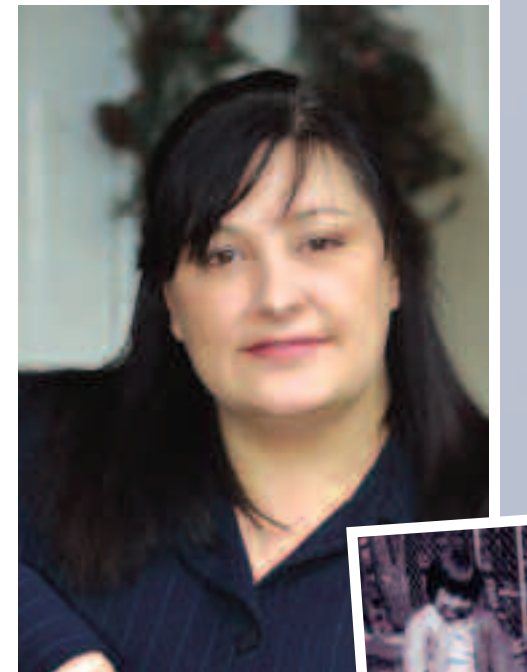
tipping off the internet service providers about the obscene content. And she welcomes the launch of the UK's new Child Exploitation and Online Prevention centre (CEOP) last month which aims to crack down on online child abuse. It brings together for the first time police, Social Services, and children's charities, as well as other organisations that safeguard the Internet like the Internet Watch Foundation and the Virtual Global Taskforce.

Jim Gamble, chairman of the Virtual Global Taskforce, says Shy's cause is extremely important. 'The victims can never escape the horror when people continue to look at a picture from 20 years ago. Every time an image is viewed, the child is revictimised.' He stresses that the term 'child pornography' is highly inappropriate as child abuse is a crime that bears no relationship to pornography.

Disturbingly, Shy says: 'The sex offenders really hate CEOP – they write and tell me so. They've already decided that they themselves as paedophiles are just yesterday's homosexuals and that, given another ten years, the public will accept them as a sexual minority.'

Shy feels that with ever-increasing online security, the sexual abusers who share obscene images are running out of time. 'They may be in a virtual world but they're also in a real world. When they go online they seem to lose their inhibitions, which is great, because it means we can catch them really fast. The Internet, in this respect, is a wonderful thing.'

Shy still lives in a secret location because of the constant threats from sex offenders. So far, the threats have proved fruitless. She has fought all her life for



ABOVE Shy is now fighting to stop today's paedophiles
ABOVE RIGHT Shy suffered years of abuse from the age of three



justice and she's confident now that victory is just around the corner where images on the Internet are concerned. 'Many people would prefer us to go away and shut up,' she says. 'But I can stand up to them, take what they taught me and turn it on them: close down their websites, come up with anti-grooming software, appeal against their lenient sentences, make it harder for them to get to children.'

She adds: 'Although I don't connect with those pictures of me anymore, I hate the fact that they're turning perverts on and that they could be used to further the abuse of children. I feel that, in some way, I'm part of the next person's abuse. That's why I want to stop it.'

*A spokesperson for Wirral Council said: 'We have the deepest sympathy for Ms Keenan. This case is the subject of ongoing legal proceedings and it would not therefore be appropriate for the council to make any further comment on the specifics of this case.'

USEFUL CONTACTS

- www.thinkuknow.co.uk
- Phoenix Survivors provides advocacy for child abuse victims. www.phoenixsurvivors.org or, to donate, send a cheque made out to Phoenix Survivors to PO Box 7771, Colchester CO2 0YB.
- To report illegal sites, get advice or support on child abuse on the internet, visit the following sites: www.ceop.gov.uk, www.virtualglobaltaskforce.com, www.iwf.org.uk