

## [Back from the dark: Survivor shares struggles, lessons learned](#)



[Tashmica Torok uses her Google Sky app to aid in her stargazing last month in Mason.](#) / Kevin W. Fowler | for the Lansing State Journal

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There are 60 million survivors of childhood sexual abuse in the United States.

Lansing resident Tashmica Torok is one of them.

This is a story of bravery.

In the summer of 1987, the bodies of six missing girls were found in the desert outside El Paso.

Devil worshipers, some whispered in church. They were stealing girls and committing human sacrifices in the dark.

It was actually a serial killer named David Leonard Wood, but for Tashmica Torok, just 7 years old at the time, the image of Satanists and sacrifices was the scariest thing she'd ever known.

For the first time in her short life, she had found something that frightened her more than her father.

*Let's go stargazing,* her daddy said one day when she was 8.

*Let's take that new telescope I bought you and go look at the constellations. Just you and me.*

She never said no to him. She was raised to obey. To sit up straight and chew with her mouth closed, to never say "ain't" or talk back. She was raised to be a good daughter.

But this time, her father headed to the desert. This time, she tried to stand up to him.

*Please, Daddy. I want to go home.*

He ignored her pleas.

He drove way out into the empty blackness where the stars stretched far and wide, where the phantom bones of six dead girls reached out in her imagination, their skeleton fingers grabbing at her hair and her clothes to pull her down beneath the sand where unseen horrors awaited her, worse than anything she was already living.

*Daddy, I want to leave,* she cried. *I'm scared.*

*Don't be a baby,* he snapped.

Tears burned the backs of her eyelids, aware of an irony she should have been too young to understand.

*But I am a baby.*

A few months later, a strange red car pulled up outside her family's mobile home. Two men got out wearing Army uniforms. Not the faded green ones her dad wore every day but the fancy ones.

Her mother opened the door and one of the men said something and then her mother began pounding her fist into her hand over and over.

No no no no no, her mother cried. Tears dripped from her chin.

Tashmica ran to her mother and threw her tiny arms around her waist. Poor Mommy. She didn't know the truth about Daddy. She didn't know the things he had done. *It's going to be OK, Mommy*, Tashmica assured her. *It's going to be OK.*

And maybe for Tashmica it would be.

Her father was dead. It was over.

She would never have to go stargazing again.

“My name is Tashmica, but most people just call me Firecracker.”

It's July 31, just a few days ago. She's 33 now and [standing on a stage](#) in front of 100 people at Art Alley, a renovated gallery and event space in Lansing's REO Town.

She's been planning this event for months. She'll stand before a crowd of strangers, friends and family, and fellow members of her roller derby team — the [Lansing Derby Vixens](#) — to describe what happened to her.

The event is the official launch of a new nonprofit she has created called [The Firecracker Foundation](#) — named in honor of her derby name. She wants to raise money to pay for counseling services for children who are victims of sexual abuse.

Standing here is its own kind of victory, the culmination of a long journey to understand what happened to her and its impact on her life. She's three years into her own intensive counseling and is finally able to, as she puts it, lavishly love herself.

“There are children who don't know what I know,” she tells the audience, many of whom are wiping tears. “So many children who are abused don't get counseling. What if we as a community decided that children who have survived deserve to have their bravery honored?”

Projected on the white wall behind her is a slideshow.

A selfie appears of Tashmica with two of her three sons. They're scrunched in cheek to cheek, goofing for the camera.

"My life is pretty awesome," she says. "Look at those little faces. I am incredibly loved and supported. But before I was all of this awesomeness, I was this little girl."

Another photo appears. It's Tashmica at 6, catching herself mid-fall in her first pair of roller skates outside her grandparents' house in Sheridan.



"This was around the time of my first memory of being sexually abused," she says, her voice tightening.

Those who aren't already crying begin to clutch their tissues.

## **SPEAKING UP**

*There are good touches and bad touches. Do you know the difference?*

Tashmica was 9 when a man came to her classroom to speak. Her father had been dead a year, and she had never told anyone about the abuse.

*No one is allowed to touch you down there,* the man told the class.

Her heart began to race. Memories she had already worked to forget came rushing back, making her sweat.

*I'm teaching you how to be a wife, her father would tell her. It's just like those National Geographic pictures. But you can't tell anyone because people will hate me for it. They won't understand.*

Guilt is a powerful tool, Tashmica says. You can make a little girl do anything if she's convinced your happiness, your entire reputation as an upstanding man of God and country, depends on her. So she did do what he told her to.

She watched the weird movies with grown-ups doing gross things. She acted them out with him. She laid silently in her bed, didn't call for help like she wanted to, when her bedroom door creaked open at night.

Afterward, he would make her kneel beside him and pray. While he asked for God's forgiveness, she just asked for Him to make it stop.

When her father died, she thought she had killed him with her prayers.

The man in her class told the children to close their eyes. *Anyone who has been hurt or touched in a bad way, raise your hand so we can help you.*

Tashmica kept her hands firmly in her lap, afraid other kids would peek behind squinted lids and discover her secret. Still, something had changed inside her.

There was a strange relief in knowing there was a name for what her father had done to her and that she wasn't alone. Why should she have to keep this secret? Why should she feel bad? Her father was gone. She had nothing to fear anymore.

At the end of the day, she beckoned her teacher to her desk.

"Mrs. Pease, can I talk to you?"

Her teacher led her out of the classroom.

Her bravery wavered and she began to cry.

*My dad used to make me do things, she said.*

## OTHER CHALLENGES

“Do you know what happens to a child’s brain when they’re abused?”

Tashmica asks the question without waiting for an answer.

“They [don’t develop](#) the same way other kids do who are not abused.”

She’s sitting on the front porch of her home near Moores River Drive, a historic two-story that once belonged to her husband’s grandparents.

There are plants everywhere — a small flower garden out front that has overgrown its boundaries, a potted cactus that her youngest son wants to water every day, and a vine that won’t obey.

She bought the vine at Meijer. It grows wild against her wishes, clinging to the railing when she’d rather it climb the trellis. She dotes on it despite its stubbornness. She picks off its yellow, dead leaves, waters it, tries to redirect its energy.

Tashmica never realized until her counselor pointed it out to her just a few years ago how much she is like that vine — fighting against something that is deeply programmed.

A child’s brain is an unblemished wilderness, Tashmica says. Every interaction is like a brand, making a mark that will last forever.

“I’ve spent a lot of time researching this,” she says. “At the time I was abused, my brain should have been learning certain things, but it wasn’t able to.”

She’s right. Numerous studies have shown that abused children can suffer long-term developmental and emotional delays because of the physical stress caused by fear.

The fight-or-flight response that allows humans to react when presented with danger is never fully honed in a victim of abuse, according to a group called Adults Surviving Child Abuse. They learn to detach themselves from pain, coping by avoiding.

And that one missing development in a survivor’s brain can cause problems later in life.

Survivors are more likely to become depressed or have problems with drugs and alcohol, according to a group called Child Help.

They're 25 percent more likely to get pregnant as teens or get someone pregnant and 59 percent more likely to be arrested as juveniles. Nearly 15 percent of sexual abuse victims will attempt suicide.

Thirty percent will eventually abuse their own children.

Somehow Tashmica survived all that. She never got into drugs or alcohol. She didn't sleep around, didn't get an STD, has never thought of killing herself and has never hurt her children.

But like the vine on her porch, there are things she can't help either. And they nearly cost her everything that mattered.

## **PAINFUL PROCESS**

There came a moment — it was brief and many years ago, but it happened — when Paul Torok felt cheated.

He's a man of deep faith who believes God has a plan for everyone and brings people into our lives for a reason. But even he went through a period where he thought, *This isn't what I signed up for.*

They were together just a few months when she told him she was an abuse survivor. She just blurted it out, he says, like it was no big deal. But Paul was devastated. When you love someone, it's unbearable to imagine anyone ever hurting them.

She assured him she was over it, and he believed her. Things changed, however — she changed — after they had children. He had a vision of what family life should be, and she wasn't living up to it.

She was often gone, off with whatever group she had joined to save starving children or AIDS orphans, instead of spending time with own kids at home. Even when she was home, she was gone — buried in her laptop or smartphone.

When he complained, she got defensive. When she got defensive, he retreated. When he retreated, resentment took over and grew into a hard ball in his stomach.

For a man who never imagined divorce in his life, the D word became a whisper in his mind.

They started marriage counseling when Tashmica was just 25. They did it again after the birth of their second son. A third time after their third child was born.

It wasn't until then — that third round of counseling — when they realized how much of their problems were directly related to the abuse.

For the first time in her adult life, Tashmica was forced to accept that she wasn't really over it, that she was still broken. For the first time in their marriage, Paul understood what that fact meant for him.

You learn what it truly means to be compassionate, he says. You learn to recognize your own faults, how your own expectations can be a form of control. You learn to be patient, to respect, to love purely, without judgment.

Last week, he was jittery with nerves as she took the stage. What if people didn't accept her message? What if she was too honest and people used it against her? What if she broke down?

Then she began to talk. All his worries went away.

He used to get frustrated whenever Tashmica threw herself into some new cause or another. Not this time.

Tashmica never got counseling as a child, he says. Would things have been different for her if she had?

## **LITTLE VICTORIES**

Tashmica was born in the posterior position, facing up.

“Did you know they call those babies?” she says, smiling at the irony. “They're called stargazers.”

She tilts her cellphone toward the sky, the screen lighting up with a nighttime map of stars. She has a new app on her phone that identifies all the constellations. Maybe she'll teach them to her sons.

"There's Gemini," she says. "And the Big Dipper. Everyone knows that one."

She hasn't done this since that summer when her father bought the telescope and took her to the desert. His betrayal still burns.

"The telescope was a ruse," she says, "and the stars a trap."

Maybe part of her blamed the stars. Maybe she hated them for what they saw, the secrets they knew and protected.

She has a vision of her life as one slow climb from a dark ditch. New Tashmica carries old Tashmica. Old Tashmica is bloodied and broken, muddy and heavy. New Tashmica limps and she winces sometimes, but she's stronger than before.

She sets down the old Tashmica at the top of the hill and immediately turns around.

"Where are you going," Old asks her.

"Back to the dark," New says.

"Why?"

"Because there are others who need help getting out."

She lays down on a blanket on the ground, holding her cellphone this way and that in search of Orion. She's planning a vacation with her family soon to the Upper Peninsula, where the skies are big and the stars spread far and wide.

That's what healing looks like, she says. It's little victories every single day that let you know you're going to be OK. It's reclaiming things that were stolen. It's lavishly loving yourself and knowing you don't deserve to suffer.

It's gazing at the stars, knowing what they've seen, and not hating them for it.

## **Signs of abuse**

There are physical, behavioral and emotional signs that a child may have been sexual abused, according to the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN).

### **Physical**

- » Difficulty walking or sitting
- » Bloody, torn, or stained underclothes
- » Bleeding, bruises, or swelling in genital area
- » Pain, itching, or burning in genital area
- » Frequent urinary or yeast infections
- » [Sexually Transmitted Infections](#), especially if under 14 years old
- » Pregnancy, especially if under 14 years old

### **Behavioral**

- » Inappropriate sexual knowledge or behavior
- » Nightmares or bed-wetting
- » Large weight changes/major changes in appetite
- » Suicide attempts or self-harming, especially in adolescents
- » Shrinks away or seems threatened by physical contact
- » Runs away
- » Overly protective and concerned for siblings, assumes a caretaker role

### **Emotional**

- » Withdrawal
- » [Depression](#)
- » Sleeping & eating disorders
- » Self-mutilation
- » Phobias
- » Psychosomatic symptoms (stomachaches, headaches)
- » School problems (absences, drops in grades)
- » Poor hygiene/excessive bathing
- » Anxiety
- » Guilt
- » Regressive behaviors - thumb-sucking, etc. *Source: RAINN*