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Jordyn Wieber gives her victim impact statement in Circuit Judge Rosemarie Aquilina's courtroom during the fourth day of sentencing for former sports doctor Larry Nassar, who pled guilty to multiple counts of sexual assault on Jan. 19, 2018, in Lansing, Mich. Wieber will speak April 12 at this year's Santa Clara County Child Abuse Prevention Symposium. (Matthew Dae Smith /Lansing State Journal)

Opinion: Listen to Jordyn Wieber and speak out against child abuse

Santa Clara County symposium will seek ways to end the culture of silence

By Stacy Castle and James Gibbons-Shapiro

A U.S. national gymnastics doctor is accused of sexually molesting hundreds of young athletes for decades, including a young 5-foot-2-inch Michigan girl who adored the balance beam. A Penn State football coach sexually molests children in his care going back years. The Catholic Church abuse controversies, the University of Southern California gynecologist scandal. The tragic list seems endless, the problem intractable. How did such widespread, destructive, criminal behavior go on for so long? Why do some victims keep quiet, or wait years to report? Why do witnesses turn the other way? What exactly creates a culture of silence?

From prosecutors to pediatricians, Santa Clara County professionals are delving into these questions to create better ways to detect such crimes; deter organizations from actively and passively covering them up; and ultimately, to give a voice to survivors and save other children from their fate.

One of the most powerful of those voices belongs to Olympic gold medal gymnast Jordyn Wieber, who will be speaking on April 12th at this year's Santa Clara County Child Abuse Prevention Symposium entitled "Speak Out! Confronting the Culture of Child Sexual Abuse and Secrecy" (www.capscsc.org).

Jordyn spoke to a U.S. Senate panel in 2018 about the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of sports doctor Larry Nassar for years. She was not alone. Nassar was accused of molesting at least 250 girls and young women including a number of well-known Olympic gymnasts, dating as far back as 1992. Nassar will spend the rest of his life in prison, but the devastation he caused was massive, and the questions about how he was able to get away with it for so long continue. "Nobody was protecting us from being taken advantage of," Jordyn said. She and other athletes talked about a "culture of silence" more interested in winning than in protecting athletes, and about others who must have known something was wrong but did nothing to report it.

The symposium intends to raise awareness about the issues that lead to such abuse. Did you know that only about 38 percent of child victims disclose that they have been sexually abused? Why don't they report? One clue may be that about 90 percent of children who are victims of abuse know their abuser, most are abused by people the family trusts, and approximately 30 percent are abused by family members. Abusers can be found in the home, in schools, churches, recreation centers, youth sports leagues and clubs, and any other place children gather.

Perpetrators routinely rely on the shame and guilt they have infected their victims with. In turn, victims are often held captive by the fear and secretive nature of child sexual abuse. But it is in the sharing of secrets that the shift of power begins – survivors, you've done nothing wrong and have nothing to be ashamed of. When you are ready to speak out and claim your power, caring people are here to listen and take action.

For immediate in-person crisis assistance and counseling services, local resources include the YWCA at (800) 572-2782 or, in South County, Community Solutions at: (877) 363-7238. To report suspected child sexual abuse, call the Santa Clara County Department of Family and Children's Services at (833) SCC-KIDS, 911 or your local law enforcement agency. Additional excellent information including tip sheets for parents, families, and youth serving institutions regarding prevention, child safety, and how to talk with children about the issue are available at Stop It Now at <https://www.stopitnow.org/>. Let's closely listen to Jordyn Wieber and the other heroic survivors to give us the courage to speak out, get help, and provide support.

Stacy Castle is director of programs for Child Advocates of Silicon Valley and chair of the Santa Clara County Child Abuse Prevention Council. James Gibbons-Shapiro is a Santa Clara County Assistant District Attorney and is chair of the 2019 CAPC Symposium Committee.