

SCARS



SAVING CHILDREN AND REVEALING SECRETS

**HOW BERMUDA BECAME THE FIRST
COUNTRY IN THE WORLD TO TRAIN
NEARLY 20% OF THEIR ADULT POPULATION**

The impact that SCARS (Saving Children and Revealing Secrets) has made across the island of Bermuda can be felt at every turn. From schools who have made SCARS training with Darkness to Light's *Stewards of Children*® child sexual abuse prevention training mandatory for anyone coming into contact with children, to the dozens of churches that look to SCARS as a resource and partner in protecting children, and to the organizations that reach out to provide support to build a safer community for children, SCARS has put the protection of children at the forefront of minds and hearts of this island country.

THE ISSUE

In 2004 Debi Ray-Rivers, Founder and Executive Director of SCARS, discovered that her two daughters were victims of sexual abuse by a trusted family member. Ray-Rivers was shocked and pained to discover that someone who she thought her children would be safe with, and who she trusted, could do this. At this point, many Bermudians lacked the knowledge and education necessary to properly address the problem. Ray-Rivers' only knowledge of child sexual abuse (CSA) came from her own trauma and Oprah, when she revealed that she was also a survivor of sexual abuse. Oprah used her platform to educate her audience on CSA by bringing experts and survivors on her show to speak about the issue. Ray-Rivers' felt empowered to tell her story by Oprah's vulnerability, and was ultimately able to help her daughters disclose and report their abuse.

Ray-Rivers sought out support from her childhood church, the justice system, and the social worker assigned to her case, but was dissatisfied by how each group approached the situation due to lack of understanding. Even though a mandated reporter, her childhood pastor dismissed her story and was unwilling to help her report. Her social worker was unhelpful and even tried to talk her out of prosecuting the offender. The justice system was not trauma-informed or child-focused; it provided very little to help to ensure that her children would feel safe and prepared for court.

She also discovered that convicted sexual offenders were moved to transitional living where they were permitted to attend social outings where children were present.

Seven years later and after much healing, Ray-Rivers began to believe that the answer to this problem was education. She sought answers to help address CSA in Bermuda. “We were dealing with the aftermath of abuse and not the prevention. And so, I realize it’s the need for education. It left me realizing how dangerous a taboo topic [like CSA] is without proper education,” says Ray-Rivers.

THE MOVEMENT

A retroactive study suggests that one in three adults who live in Bermuda have been sexually abused before the age of 18.¹ Ray-Rivers realized that prevention is not only necessary, but the education and empowerment aspects could also help many islanders heal from their own trauma. In 2010, her passion led her to Darkness to Light. Ray-Rivers immediately flew to Atlanta to attend a training and knew instantly that she had to bring it back to Bermuda.

“If I would’ve done this training before or during the time when my children were being sexually abused, I would’ve seen the signs. I would’ve spoken differently to my children. I would’ve had different conversations with my mother and her husband... But I had no tools and I had no education on prevention.”

– Debi Ray-Rivers, Founder & Executive Director



SCARS launched its inaugural training in May 2012, intending to “bring awareness of the devastation [that is] child sexual abuse and the effects of it in the life of the child, the family, and the entire community if we don’t educate, and to be an advocate on behalf of children who have been abused.” First, Ray-Rivers shares her story and Darkness to Light’s *Into the Light* documentary in front of PTA meetings, corporation lunch and learns, churches, and community events to demonstrate the importance of bringing awareness to the issue of CSA. Then, when groups sign up to take part in the program, SCARS uses Darkness to Light’s *Stewards of Children*® alongside their own awareness program (SAFE: SCARS Arms Families through Education). By the end of SCARS’ first year, 131 people had participated in the program. Today, the popularity of the training has grown exponentially and training numbers have skyrocketed.

“Our goal has always been that every adult should receive this training and we’re not going to stop until that happens.”

THE RESULT

Over the past eight years, SCARS has equipped 10,472 adults, about 19.78% of the island’s adult population, to prevent, recognize, and react responsibly to abuse. The program works. The calendar at the SCARS office is full of trainings scheduled out months in advance, and the organization is constantly fielding requests for more training opportunities.

Youth-serving organizations across the island of Bermuda are now mandating training that all staff and volunteers be trained in *Stewards of Children*®. All Catholic Churches are required to train all vestry and employees before working with kids. In September 2019, the Commissioner of Education mandated that all public educators, administrators, and custodians be trained. Additionally, every private



school has mandated that their teachers be trained in prevention, too. Community members from across the island are coming to the table to ensure that Bermuda is free from child sexual abuse.

There are visible changes to how these organizations operate, including heightened awareness and monitoring isolated one-on-one situations between adults and children, reducing environmental risks in buildings by adding windows and doors, conducting background checks, and implementing codes of conduct. Parents talk to their children about body safety. As the number of people who are educated and aware of the issue increases, there has been an increase in the number of cases reported. From 2014-2018, reports of CSA increased by 125%. Ray-Rivers says, “we are going to continue to see a rise in reported cases, but eventually as children become adults, they will learn appropriate behaviors and it will reduce the number of people who cross boundaries with children.”

Bermuda is inspiring and setting an example for other island nations in their commitment to protect children. “Bermuda should be very proud because we are the first country in the world to have trained over such a large percentage of our adult population in sexual abuse prevention,” says Ray-Rivers. “It’s powerful.”

“SCARS is setting the standard for what the community should expect of themselves when it comes to protecting children and child safety,” says Darkness to Light President and CEO Katelyn N. Brewer. “They are showing the world that it can be done, and how.”

SOURCES

¹ SCARS, & Bermuda Health Council. (2019, January 22). SCARS Survey 2017.