

on the MOVIE

Story by Mike Latona

Photo illustration by Greg Francis

RAPE

"He has ruined my life"

EDITORS' NOTE: The following story was told by a teen who belongs to a Catholic parish in the Rochester Diocese. Her name has been changed to preserve confidentiality.

It started out as a nice hike in the country with some adult acquaintances. By the end of the day, "Nicole" had suffered more physical and emotional abuse than many people do in a lifetime.

Nicole, then 14 years old, went on the trip with a married couple and another man, all of whom she had met previously. The married man had seemed like "a really nice guy", Nicole said, in the time she had gotten to know him.

On this particular day, Nicole noticed that the married man — who was in his 50s — watched her closely in his rear-view mirror as he drove to the hiking area.

"I didn't think anything of it," she said.

After they began hiking, she said, the man told her how pretty she was and asked her to kiss him. He also asked her for a date. She refused the date, but she did honor his request for a kiss on the cheek, thinking he might back off after that.

"That was completely wrong," she said.

Once he began offering wine to get her drunk, Nicole realized that he might well be interested in more than a kiss.

"I was just praying non-stop, saying Hail Mary after Hail Mary," she said.

The group was in a rather deserted area when the other two adults decided they needed to find a bathroom, and took off. Nicole, who was in the back seat of the man's car, pretended to read a book. Then the man got out of the driver's seat and told her to move over.

She locked all the doors, hoping it would buy her some time. But he unlocked the car, jumped in the back seat and began kissing her hard on the mouth.

"My arms were flailing. I tried to yell and he put his hand over my mouth," she said. "I tried to bite his hand; I tried to kick him."

But she could not fend him off. The man forced Nicole into having sexual intercourse; the rape lasted about 20 minutes.

Nicole noted that at the time of the rape she was a virgin, having adhered to Catholic teaching about remaining chaste before marriage.

"You know, you always want to wait for the right person," she said bitterly.

The rapist told her it was her fault. He also said if she told anyone about it, he would deny the attack ever took place.

When the other two adults returned another 15 minutes later, Nicole's attacker was smiling and smoking a cigarette, as if nothing had happened. Nicole tried to tell the man's wife that he had raped her; the wife became furious and refused to believe it. Nicole kept silent about the incident for several months afterward.

As time went by, Nicole discovered a vivid reminder of the rape: She was pregnant. She decided to keep the baby, saying she was raised to believe that human life should be preserved in all forms.

"I didn't even think of abortion," she said.

Though she visited a doctor, she decided not to tell her parents — or anyone else — about the rape or pregnancy. Meanwhile, she struggled to understand why she had unwittingly become a target for a rapist.

"I was not so much scared, but I felt like I was betrayed — betrayed by the world," she said. "The world can be so bad. You were raised to trust people and find the good in them. Everything I'd been raised to believe was rubbed in my face."

"You go through a series of emotions. Shock that it could actually happen to you. Then fright, because of all the diseases there are today. Then I was so depressed. I wanted to die. I didn't want to look anybody in the face for months. I felt dirty, no good, damaged. Somebody who was not even worth talking to."

Despite the manner in which she had become pregnant, Nicole said she was looking forward to having the baby. However, she miscarried after four months.

"That was the one thing that was really keeping me going, and now it was gone," Nicole said.

A year has gone by since that time. Nicole has gradually begun to share her story, mostly with a therapist and some close friends. However, she still refuses to let her parents find out.

"I figure, one day it won't be a question of keeping it a secret. One day I want to let it go and forget about it," she said.

Nicole said she has had no communication with her attacker, and doesn't plan any — either to let him know about her pregnancy, or to press criminal charges against him.

"I don't care what he's doing right now. I hope he's in pain; I hope he's suffering — because he has not only ruined my life, but his afterlife," she said. "I'm sure he's probably thinking about it with pride, that he got away with it."

Nicole mused that "forgiveness is really for those who are ready, and it can take a lifetime to be ready. I won't be ready for quite some time."

She added that rapists, and potential rapists, should stop to consider the trauma caused an innocent victim — possibly for life — in just a few minutes.

These days, Nicole is striving to put her life back together. In addition to getting therapy, she enjoys attending her parish youth group as well as diocesan events, saying she can be more trusting in those surroundings.

"The Catholics are more compassionate than everyday people. Some of them you just love to death, not just because of what they believe in, but because they believe so strongly," she said.

Yet Nicole struggles with her own faith, questioning why God allowed her ordeal to occur. She's also skittish of physical contact, flinching even when somebody puts a hand on her shoulder.

"Now I don't like to be touched at all, and I come from a very affectionate family," she said.

Nicole has frequent nightmares about the rape, has abused drugs and has considered suicide. She doesn't cry anymore about the rape and miscarriage. "Once you've experienced something like that, nothing compares. Nothing is worth crying about."

She does envision getting married someday, but with reservations: "It's a nice thought, to have someone to rely on and trust your whole life. I would wait a very long time to know the person."

She's also uncertain about bringing children into the world, saying, "The world is such a bad place."

Asked if she could be happy again, she said, "At some point. Maybe not."

COMING NEXT WEEK: Professional help

When NO always means NO

In a teen movie or among friends, you may have picked up the notion that when a girl says "no" to a boy's romantic advances, she is being shy and might actually mean "yes."

But according to social worker Mary Clare, when it comes to sex, "no" means exactly that — and if aggressors think otherwise, they could end up in jail.

"They might not attach the word 'rape' to what they're doing, but that's what it is," Clare said.

Clare, along with Chris Spooner, has counseled numerous rape victims. Both work as clinical social workers at Catholic Family Center in Rochester. The counselors explained that rape, legally, is any sexual act in which someone

unwillingly takes part. It's a felony crime and can carry a prison sentence of several years.

A sizable percentage of rapes are committed by adult males, their victims being adult or young females who are strangers or casual acquaintances. Spooner and Clare noted that rape can also be committed in a marriage; by a female to a male; and between two people of the same sex. In New York state, adults commit *statutory rape* by having sex with anyone under 17, the age of consent.

In addition, the CFC counselors emphasized, "date rape" — in which both parties know each other well — is a very real possibility among teens. They

explained that teen boys tend to pressure each other to be "manly". Adolescent girls, in turn, are preoccupied with being liked and accepted by boys. These dynamics, they said, increase the odds of sexual contact — and if the contact is not consensual, then it is rape.

"Our message to parents is to educate both genders about the stereotypes that would make them most vulnerable," Clare said.

Spooner said that teen boys may not perceive sexual intercourse, after the girl has protested, as rape. This mindset, she added, is simply justification and denial for the act.

Spooner and Clare said that more than half of all rapes go unreported to authorities. Victims maintain their silence, Spooner said, for fear of humiliation; that

they won't be believed; that they will have to relive the experience; that there will be repercussion from their attacker.

Spooner and Clare said that rape victims should confide in someone they can trust, such as a close friend, family member or teacher. The counselors also urge all rape victims to see a physician immediately and be checked for sexually transmitted diseases, bodily damage and pregnancy. Hospital emergency rooms, as well as Catholic Family Center (716/546-7220), are among the resources available to rape victims.

Getting medical care, Spooner and Clare said, does not obligate rape victims to file criminal charges. However, if they do decide to take court action at a later time, the medical files will help provide evidence.

