

The Popular Culture Studies Journal Interview
JENNA QUINN

ABOUT JENNA

Jenna Quinn is a child sexual abuse survivor, author, TED speaker, and the namesake of Jenna's Law. In 2009, Jenna's Law was the first child sexual abuse prevention education law that passed in the United States named after a survivor. It requires that each school district adopt and implement a prevention policy that educates students and school staff on how to recognize and report child sexual abuse. Now, over half the country has duplicated portions of Jenna's Law.

With a Masters Degree in Communications, she is a sought-after speaker who has traveled nationwide, educating and sharing her inspiring story with legislatures, law-enforcement, abuse-prevention groups, schools, communities of faith, nonprofit organizations, and the general public for over twelve years. As a survivor who benefited from the services of the Children's Advocacy Center (CAC), Jenna has worked with over 70 CAC's across the country and educated communities about the CAC's important work. She is the National Spokesperson for Childhelp Speak Up Be Safe and has participated in both local and national radio, television, and news programs, dedicating her life to preventing child sexual abuse through education and legislation.

For more about Jenna, please visit her site at www.JennaQuinn.org

After your abuser was found guilty and sentenced, a columnist from the *Dallas Morning News* contacted you. During your interview with him, what made you decide, as a teenager and survivor, to not remain anonymous?

The last piece of the interview was of me encouraging other survivors to speak up, speak out, and get help. I also reminded survivors that it wasn't their fault and told them they had nothing to be ashamed of. The columnist then stated that he didn't have any other questions, cleared his throat, and then confidently reassured me that he would not publish my name in the paper. The paper always concealed the names of sexual assault victims.

As soon as he made that comment something supernaturally rose up inside of me as a shy seventeen-year old and I shouted, "No!" I had spent too many years as a voiceless victim and it felt wrong to keep my name anonymous. How could I ask other survivors to speak up and come forward when I was too ashamed to be named myself? My goal was to lead by example, clearly stating that "we" as a community of strong survivors had nothing to be ashamed of.

Jenna's Law in Texas (HB 1041) is the first child sexual abuse prevention/education law passed in the U.S., that was named after a survivor. The law mandates K-12 prevention training on the symptoms of child abuse for educators and body safety for students. How has the law been helpful in helping students, teachers, parents, and staff better detect signs of child sexual abuse?

With the crime of child sexual abuse, over 90% of the time a child is abused by someone they know and trust. We can't teach stranger danger without also teaching acquaintance danger.

Darkness to Light's research on Jenna's law showed that after educators were trained, they were about four times more likely to report abuse versus their pre-training careers. And students are finally getting the prevention education so desperately needed this day and age. Among the many programs used in Texas, one student program alone, called Kids Count Players, has trained over 100,000 students in North Texas. Since 2009, I've heard countless stories of how Jenna's Law has helped children find their voice and make an outcry. Education is the foundation of prevention, as 95% of sexual abuse is preventable through education (Child Molestation Research & Prevention Institute). Jenna's Law provides this education. When children and adults are educated about the crime, taught safety strategies on how to prevent, taught who is safe to tell, and how to report, a victimized child is more likely to get the help they need. As long as we view this as a crime in our society, we need to be teaching how to prevent it. Because when we don't address this issue, we feed the deadly silence this crime thrives on.

What do you want schools, parents, teachers, and staff to know, to better help children being abused?

There are several facilitator based prevention programs available that schools can use to teach children safety. It only takes moments to empower a child's voice, but it can take years, or even a lifetime for them to get their voices back. As adults, we cannot choose the route of personal comfort or self-protection over the responsibility of providing a safe environment for children. If you are looking for a program to use at your school, Childhelp Speak Up Be Safe is a research-based program for pre-K-12th

grade. Childhelp Speak Up Be Safe helps children and teens learn the skills to prevent or interrupt cycles of neglect, bullying, and child abuse—physical, emotional, and sexual. The program uses an ecological approach to prevention education by providing materials to engage parents and caregivers, teachers, school administrators, and community stakeholders. To learn about the program, visit them at: <https://www.childhelp.org/subs/childhelp-speak-up-be-safe/>

In 2017, you published your memoir, *Pure in Heart*, to help raise awareness and as a prevention training tool. What do you want readers to take away from your book?

There are several takeaways from the book. I've given an extensive list of warning signs a child may display if they have been sexually abuse, as well as listing out National Resources for survivor help and education for Jenna's Law programs in the back of the book. Equally important, is the encouragement offered for children and families who have encountered this crime. There is hope and healing in the midst of this awful crime and it's never too late to get help. Many survivors feel alone in their personal struggles to overcome the pain. I address those struggles and am transparent with my journey through the healing process. I strongly believe this is a topic that should always be addressed through the lens of honesty and hope.

In *Pure in Heart*, finding your voice seemed to be an important theme. What advice do you have for those still shackled by shame and unable to find their voice?

In Silence, shame is allowed to grow. Shame keeps us from turning to other sources of help, like people and their belief system, and that's exactly what a perpetrator wants.

Silence and shame are the predator's best friends. And what is kept in secret has power over you. That's why we can't heal what we don't reveal, on an individual level and as a society. I would encourage other survivors to get help by first telling someone they can trust to take action on their behalf to get them help. Secondly, find a good counselor to speak with. The healing process is not linear, and everyone's process is different, but the first step in that process is honesty with the abuse, because denial with this crime is toxic.

What is next for you?

My hope to get prevention education into all communities is a direct result from my experience as a survivor. We've made a lot of progress since I first spoke out in 2004, but I feel there is still much more work to be done with prevention education and legislation. It's not just schools that need policies in place to protect children, but all organizations and agencies that provide services to children. I feel this work is lifelong. It's been a joy to be a part of seeing hope, healing, education, and empowerment grow all across the U.S.

In this issue, we are asking for testimonies. How might these testimonies be helpful for those sharing their stories and those reading them?

The American Medical Association has labeled sexual abuse a “silent epidemic.” This crime is different from other crimes because it’s one of the most underreported ones. There are many factors that play into why it’s a silent crime, but I am limited within this interview in explaining those factors. In short, this crime thrives on silence, shame, and isolation. And isolation is very dangerous because it can eventually lead to hopelessness. Many survivors feel they are alone in their experiences, however there are an estimated 42 million survivors in American alone. Shared experiences create a sense of community, acceptance, and empowerment. When we see that we are not an island, trapped or alone in our experiences, we find a sense of hope. And through many voices of hope we can ignite this movement to further break the silence