

# features

## Turning trauma into something better

**GRACE SCARBERRY**  
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The judge wanted her to say the word out loud.

“Penis,” she mumbled quietly, tucking back into her mother’s quivering legs and hiding her face, cheeks blushing from embarrassment.

“I couldn’t hear you,” he said. “Speak up.”

“Penis,” she said again, louder this time so the judge and the rest of the jury could hear.

This was not even her choice of word.

She did not have the intellect to be able to explain what happened, but here he was forcing her to say it out loud to a room full of judgmental strangers.

He went on asking question after question, making her more sheepish with every answer.

It was bad enough Chucky made her play Pull-Down-Pants in the woods, but to tell a whole room of adults? What could be worse? This was mortifying.

Prior to the trial, she had already had to explain to her mother, the neighbor who was a policeman, the hospital staff and the rest of the police force once her examination was complete and they were willing to take her statement.

It was not even very clear to her what had happened out there. She knew it was wrong. When she came out of the woods her mom was holding a stick, asked her what happened, then demanded she go take a bath.

Unfortunately, this was probably the wrong move. The doctors and nurses said there was not anything they could do to collect evidence since she had taken a bath already.

Was she not supposed to take a bath after getting dirty? And what were they collecting evidence for?

Chucky said he built a really cool fort out in the woods. She just wanted to go see it. Their property in that little county in Maryland was surrounded by woods and manmade lakes.

In the summer, everyone would swim or fish, and in the winter, each child grabbed their ice skates to glide across the lake.

Besides one other little girl about two years younger, she was the only girl. It was not uncommon to go play in the woods with the boys. Except, Chucky was 16. He was a grownup. That made his invite even more exciting, so why not tag along?

They walked, him leading her deeper and deeper into the woods to find this amazing fort. She continued on, gently walking along the crunchy leaves.

She could not wait to see it and play. Maybe he would even let her come back anytime she wanted. It could be their own hangout. A special place just for her to escape from the other boys and their reckless games of baseball and football.

The neighbor girl was his niece so maybe she could even come too. She was a little bit younger, but they could probably still be good friends, and there is no way Chucky could say no to his own niece.

Maybe they could play something girlier for once. They could be princesses awaiting their prince charming and the fort could be their castle. They could play dolls or even host a tea party. Their stuffed animals could be their guests and the fort could be their very own home.

Only, there was no fort.

He led her out there and made her take off her clothes. At nine years old, she knew this was weird, but he was a grownup, so



PHOTO SUBMITTED BY: CATHY THIEMENS

Thiemens representing the ACCESS program.

she did as she was told. Besides, this was a normal game amongst the neighborhood kids. Growing up, kids get curious so they pull at each other’s pants. This was kind of like that game.

After Chucky was finished playing, she nervously pulled her clothes back on, afraid she would get in trouble for playing the forbidden game.

As she walked out of the woods, that is when she saw her mother, but the stick was not for her. She knew she had not done anything wrong, so Chucky must be in trouble.

As Chucky had taken her into the woods, her older brother saw and ran to tell their mother what he was doing.

It was 1968 when that 16-year-old boy sexually assaulted Cathy (Lewis) Thiemens, only nine years old at the time.

This incident left Thiemens forever scared, but she does not let the trauma of it hold her back. Rather, she uses it and her faith in God to fuel her passion to protect others.

Social work is where she found her calling. As she grew up, got married and earned an Associ-

ates degree, she found herself being offered a position to save children.

Along her journey, she has adopted the phrase, “It’s a God thing,” and frequently uses it throughout her career and everyday life. She even feels God is what led her to her husband, she said.

Today, as she stands in church, her faith radiates throughout the sanctuary as she closes her eyes, raises her right hand and sings out and prays.

Pastor Scott Henderson of Zion Lutheran Church believes Thiemens’s faith is a blessing to their congregation and community.

“Cathy has shown that we need to reach outside of our walls and out into the community,” he said. “Her strong faith and willingness to be open about it has been such an inspiration and a blessing to so many. I’ve seen her give a sense of hope through her faith to people who have been in situations of despair.”

In the 1980’s, the Thiemens’ moved to Loudonville, OH where she saw the power of God in her life yet again.

She got a call from one of the lo-

cal schools. They asked her if she was willing to take a position with a newly implemented program.

The Child Assault Prevention Program (CAPP).

At this point, Thiemens was very involved in the community; she did the church newsletter, taught Sunday School, and was a Girl Scout leader for not one, but two troops.

She was incredibly busy and her husband tried to talk her out of it, but Thiemens met him with an undeniable argument.

“I looked at him and said, you know, even if one kid doesn’t have to go through what I went through because of this program, isn’t it worth my time?” she said.

The trauma she faced as a child left her with a hole in her heart that she did not even know existed.

Even as she spent years working in dress shops and flower arrangement stores, she was not feeling fulfilled. She knew there was something more she could be doing, and God led her to that, she said.

However, Thiemens went on to help more than just one child.

After working for CAPP for a

couple of years, a director position became available for the Catholic Charities location in Ashland.

With a motto of “working to reduce poverty in America” Catholic Charities is ranked as the fifth largest charity in the United States, and serves millions of people a year, regardless of their religious, social or economic background.

In 2019, 12 million persons were served at more than 2600 locations. Next to the federal government, Catholic Charities is the largest US social-safety-net provider.

At this point, the Ashland location was at risk of permanently closing, which meant CAPP, funded by Catholic Charities, was at risk for shutting down as well.

Thiemens got the job as director and approached the president of Catholic Charities about the rumor of the closing of the Ashland office.

“I walked right up to him, stuck my hand out and said, ‘How do you do, I’m Cathy Thiemens with the Catholic Charities Ashland office, are you going to fire my people?’ and he looked at me and he started to laugh and he said not only will I not fire your people, I’ll teach you how to grow the organization if you follow what I tell you to do,” she said.

In 1995, the organization was about \$60,000 in debt, but by 1999, Thiemens said they were almost a million-dollar organization.

She did everything she was told by the president in ‘95. She did countless acts to better her community, and many are still in place today.

For example, she created a multi-generational mentor program that is not only still in place, but was also replicated in Ashland.

When the Loudonville Public Library opened, the community was wanting to have a place for older adults to gather. The Golden Center was added by Catholic Charities for those individuals.

In addition, children would spend time in the library after school, waiting for their parents to get off work.

Thiemens had the idea that if both generations were already at a common location, why not start a mentoring program?

She further benefited the community by pairing with agencies that offered meal and transportation services.

Of course, funding was needed, but a man Thiemens called Ralph was willing to assist.

“Ralph said, ‘how much money do you need?’ I put a thing together and came up with a ridiculous number and he said, ‘okay you got it,’” Thiemens said.

Later in ‘99, she was asked to accompany the new director of CAPP to Yugoslavia for a training program for both children and adults.

“Safe, strong and free is their slogan,” she said. “We were teaching concepts to adults who were under communist rule their entire lives. Their perception of free is entirely different than ours. But they wanted their children to be safe and learn skills that would help prevent child abuse. I know people today who are alive because of the skills they learned in the CAPP program.”

When an individual from an older generation talks to someone younger, there is a stereotype that they are complaining about how the world has changed, usually for the worse.

**Read the rest on AU-Live.com**



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Thiemens with her three grandchildren at the Loudonville State Fair.