



# Al Jones column: The quiet neighborhood boy really had something to say



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on April 10, 2013 at 12:08 PM, updated April 10, 2013 at 1:31 PM

**KALAMAZOO, MI** -- Our neighbor's boy was very quiet, even when he didn't want to be.

Before he was old enough for school, he was with a family member most of the day, a friendly fellow with a quick smile below a wispy mustache.

The man was a second-shift worker who watched the boy until a first-shift family member returned. My wife cared for the youngster on weekdays, to bridge the childcare gap in their work schedules.

When he delivered the boy to our house, the man usually made a big show of saying good-bye, with arms open to give his little buddy a hug. But the boy never seemed to want to be part of the show, or the hug.

His family moved out of the neighborhood about 10 years ago when he was 4. But my wife continued to be his late-afternoon sitter and our house was his drop-off and pick-up point for school.

She noticed that at age 10, he became more aggressive with younger children and with her. She and his mother were concerned. And there were other red flags. The boy would get sexually aroused at inappropriate times, such as when a baby cried or while using the computer at school.

He was about 13 when my wife stopped babysitting a couple of years ago.

On April 2, two women testified in Kalamazoo County Circuit Court that they were boating on Crooked Lake in Texas Township in June of 2006 when they saw the boy on shore.

A man was gripping his arms from behind and performing a lewd act on him, one woman testified in court last week. "Yes, that's him," the other told Kalamazoo County Assistant Prosecutor Michael J. Stein, identifying the man who always used to have a quick smile. He no longer had his wispy mustache.

The women said they beached their boat, confronted the man, followed him, copied his license plate and reported him to the police. But he was never prosecuted.

Kalamazoo County sheriff's deputies reported that witnesses were not quite sure what to make of the incident at the time. And the boy was unable to explain what happened. He is autistic, so communication has always been a challenge.

He has always been able to speak, but he has had trouble putting sentences together when he's excited or upset. For most of his life, too much noise, confusion or stress simply caused him to shut down.

Deputies reported that the man told them the boy had problems related to his autism and he would sometimes

have to hold the child tightly to stop him from losing control. Deputies said they found no injuries or other evidence to propel the case farther.

“We found nothing to send it to the prosecutor’s office,” Sheriff Richard Fuller told me. He was not involved in 2006 but recently reviewed the case with detectives.

Lt. Jeff Christensen was a detective sergeant in the sheriff’s office in 2007 when he opened a different investigation. That happened after the boy told his mother he saw pornography and images of nude, crying children on a computer at the man’s house.

Christensen testified on April 2 that a search of the man’s computer and storage discs turned up tens of thousands of pornographic images, including those involving children.

The man pleaded guilty in December 2007 to distribution of child sexually abusive material. He was sentenced to 10 days in jail, five-years of probation and required to register as a sex offender.

Kalamazoo Township Police Detective Mike Szekely interviewed my wife late last year. He asked if she’d seen a portable dog cage at the boy’s house when his family lived nearby. They did not have a dog. But my wife remembered a cage. She said she thought nothing of it.

She also testified on April 2, against the man with the quick smile. She told Stein and a jury that there were several things she saw that made her worry. The boy wore diapers, and then pull-ups, much longer than most kids, she said, and he would routinely have accidents in his pants within a half-hour of arriving at our house.

“He would struggle when I tried to clean him up,” she said. “Most kids poop and they like to be cleaned up. He would clench up.”

Szekely began his investigation after the boy visited a therapist last year and opened up. The boy, who is now a teenager, talked about being locked in an animal cage by the family member and about being sexually assaulted by him regularly. Years of special help and schooling have helped make him a better communicator. That did not bode well for the man who used to be his daytime care-giver.

The boy testified against the man on April 2, which happened to be World Autism Awareness Day. It is a day sanctioned by the United Nations to call attention to the developmental disorder that now is estimated to affect 1 in 88 American kids.

[On April 4, a jury convicted the fellow](#) with the quick smile on one count of first-degree criminal sexual conduct, two counts of second-degree criminal sexual conduct, and one count of torture. The torture charge was related to the boy being held in an animal cage, as well as having his eyebrows yanked out and his genitals squeezed when the family member was upset or simply felt like inflicting pain.

“How tall are you now?” I asked him during a recess in the trial. I had not seen him for two years and I liked to tease that he was getting taller than me.

Without hesitation, he told me. We are the same height now but he seemed even taller. He also seemed calm and more engaged than he did as a young child. He remembered a couple of fun things he used to do at our house. I was amazed he could filter good memories through all the bad.

Reporters fancy themselves to be trained observers. They expect to notice things others don’t. But I can no longer make that claim. I picked up no clues about what was happening when the boy was a neighbor or during the years after.

There were no loud arguments, no strange meetings, no odd-looking strangers, no visible scars and no screams. But I think I should have noticed something, perhaps changes in behavior.

Szekely, who conducted the investigation that led to the man's two-day trial last week, said cops find themselves in the same boat.

He asked, "Who really knows what's going on in their neighbor's house?"

"I have been a police officer for 38 years," he said. "And he (the boy's abusive family member) is on my list of Top 10 worst offenders. Perhaps in the top three."

Misty Moon-Lartridge, program director of the domestic and sexual assault programs at the YWCA of Kalamazoo, said that although incidents of abuse are life-changing, "with the correct therapy and support, life may be different, but life goes on. There is hope."

She said diaper changing and bathtime can become problematic when a child has been the victim of sexual assault. Other signs that may indicate child abuse, she said, include: changes in sleeping habits, displays of sexual behavior that are inappropriate for the child's age, and regression in behavior. Be aware of a child who begins to suck a pacifier again or who has been potty trained but suddenly begins having accidents again, she said.

Displaying inappropriate sexual behavior, "tends to be an indicator that something is going on," Moon-Lartridge said. A change in attitude toward a particular adult and a fear of a particular room or part of the house is another. She said abuse tends to occur in the same place.

David John Bassett, 52, of Kalamazoo, is to be sentenced on April 29 by Kalamazoo County Circuit Judge Alexander Lipsey. The weightiest of his convictions, first-degree criminal-sexual conduct and torture are each punishable by a sentence of up to life in prison.

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