

Bob's Testimony



The various Wisconsin prison cells I occupied for almost three years were similar: a simple bunk, a small table or desk, and a barred window that opened no more than a few inches. Other inmates nearby had committed murder, rape, armed robbery, and other crimes. My sentence: first and second-degree sexual assault involving boys aged 13-17.

Like any young child I loved to be held. One evening when I was about six years old, I climbed on my father's lap to kiss him goodnight. My mother interrupted me asking, "Don't you think you're getting a little old for that?" I hesitated, then climbed down and offered only a verbal "good night, Daddy." I never again held or kissed my father.

About one year later, an older boy initiated sexual activity with me. I was scared at first, but came to enjoy those times of contact. In the years that followed, I found other boys who responded to my encouragement for the same kind of touch. For a brief moment, I imagined that my need for what I thought was love was answered.

When I was 16, my dad died of diabetes. I tried to cry but tears came with difficulty, as though something had shut down.

In college I lost my heterosexual virginity in an effort to convince myself that I was normal. While I had no problem finding physical pleasure with women, the most meaningful relationships to me occurred with male peers.

As a college freshman, an older man in a public restroom propositioned me. Soon I went to such places often. For a while, I clung to the idea that such behavior was just experimentation.

I had met my wife during my first weeks as a teacher and I married with the hope that a heterosexual relationship might correct my own distorted life.

One Sunday afternoon not long after graduation, I stood in the shower room of a local school after a swim, alone except for a boy standing opposite me. He seemed to watch every move I made. When I smiled, so did he. Every movement I made, he mirrored. In the dressing room I quietly suggested that he might like to come to my apartment and he agreed.

After having sex, I asked him "Why did you let me do this to you?" I wasn't ready for his answer. He said, "Today is my 15th birthday. I wanted to find out what it was like to love a man." I panicked and thought, "I'm a teacher and I just assaulted this kid! Please God, don't let me get caught and it'll never happen again." But it did happen again.

Most of my students called me "Dad" and openly shared their hurts as well as their hopes with me. The absence of their own fathers probably made them vulnerable to me. Before the end of any school year, I would be sexually involved with at least one male student.

There were many nights when I lay awake and prayed that God would release me from the darkness. Tears flowed at the thought of losing my wife and family but my prayers always ended, "Please, don't let me get caught."

In April 1985, a student from 14 years earlier returned to town to confront me. When he asked how many other boys I had abused, I lied and told him "none." He knew that I was not telling the truth and went to the police.

Within days police arrested me. The media aired all the information about my arrest. Deeply ashamed, I frequently thought of committing suicide.

A year passed between the day of my arrest and the day of my sentencing. In that time, God's healing love worked on me as individuals and then a prayer group taught me how to seek God's presence. At first I sought *their* God, *their* experiences. Eventually I learned to pursue my own personal relationship with God. I desperately needed to believe that I, Bob Van Domelen, was worth saving.

The hardest part of the final court appearance was listening to the court clerk read the charges against me. A year had passed free from pornography and behavior hiding in dark secrecy. I wanted to scream, "I'm not the same person you are hearing about!"

Just before my sentencing I offered what I hoped was a sincere apology to all those I had harmed although I'm not sure who if anyone believed me at the time. Then the judge sentenced me to 5 years prison and 10 years probation following that. I know now that this sentence was light compared to those being handed out today, and I hope that those who read this will see the sentencing as not something in my control.

Word spreads quickly among inmates in a county jail where I waited for transfer to the state prison. It wasn't long before handmade signs appeared on my bed frame announcing that I was a "baby raper." Lewd and suggestive remarks were included, along with comments that I was not fit to live. I rarely slept for more than 15-20 minutes at a time.

While in prison I spent hours each day reading the Bible. No matter where I was sent within Wisconsin's prison system, I attended as many Bible studies as allowed. At a Prison Fellowship meeting one week, I met the director of a local Exodus International outreach, Bill Windel, who gave me permission to call him collect whenever I felt a need.

Upon release from prison in 1988, I drove 60 miles to Madison, Wisconsin, every week to attend Bill's support group, Broken Yoke. His witness and love gave me the courage to believe that sharing my own testimony could make a difference for others. Within a year of beginning those meetings with Bill, I started a branch group in the Milwaukee area. Bill left Broken Yoke not long after that because of a job change, and I took over for him.

My healing process is grounded in the knowledge that God loves me, and I surrender my life to Him on a daily basis. As I've grown spiritually, I have become more aware of my choices, rather than simply giving in to compulsive behavior. I look at boys and young men far differently than years ago, no longer feeding off their vulnerability in order to find a completion within myself.

Pornography no longer has the control over my life it once did, but I am vulnerable in this and in other areas. I avoid adult bookstores and say a quick prayer before entering public restrooms. Temptations offer only empty promises of fulfillment. I have a freedom that I don't want to lose, a freedom built on what God has done and what He promises to do in my life.

Some years ago I spoke at a church and felt God encouraging me to confess the sins that brought me to prison. After the talk a woman came to me and opened her arms in what was clearly an invitation for a hug. As I stepped forward, she said, "I'm Sue, Oscar's mother." With a shock, I realized that I had been sexually involved with her son years ago when he was one of my students.

I accepted her hug with a plea for forgiveness. She told me that Oscar was now a minister in a large city and added, "Up until a few months ago, I hated you. One day I was sharing some of my hurt with my pastor's wife and she mentioned Broken Yoke." When Sue shared this information with her son, he responded, "I have been praying for that man ever since he was my teacher." I have written Oscar and asked for his forgiveness knowing that I needed to ask for it but that his forgiveness was not mine to expect.

In 1997, Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson appointed me to serve on the board of directors for the Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board and recently appointed me for a second term. I retired from that position after serving seven years. On December 12, 1998, I completed my 10 years of parole.

In the past 20 years, God has shown His love for me over and over. He has given me the strength to share my crimes in more ways than I can count, yet I know that each event is meant to be a fresh time of healing for me and for someone hearing the message God has me present. It is a message that is connected to the cross and its fruits are forgiveness and salvation.

Many people-including Christians-say there is no hope for one someone like me. But they are wrong. As Christ occupies more and more of my life, I am changed into the man of God He created me to be. My prison doors have opened, and now I'm walking free.