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been sticking up yourself, and why in God's name you would do something like that!"

With a child's understanding, Austin said, she thought only of her father's command that what happened between them be kept a secret. It also never occurred to

her that the doctor may have told her mother someone else was responsible for the abuse.

When she was around 7, Austin vaguely remembers her mother asking whether Daddy had ever touched her "where he shouldn't." But aside from that,

she suffered in silence, leaving home every night from the age of 10 to avoid her father's advances.

"I still went to the same school, and I sneaked in (to the house) to take a shower," she recalled.

She learned recently that when her father couldn't find her, he abused her younger brother.

Surviving

At age 14, Austin moved in with another family, but her father didn't stop trying to molest her until she was 16 or 17, she said. Through all those years, though people may have suspected trouble, no one reported it.

From what Austin has seen, not much is different today.

"I find so many things have not changed," she said. "We talk about it, but we don't do anything about it."

It's often difficult for survivors to get connected with help, Austin said. While they may need therapy, some who have spoken with her can't afford it.

HAVEN, an Oakland County agency that provides services for victims of abuse and family violence, can provide help for those in need — everything from counseling to crisis intervention.

Public relations coordinator Pam Callahan said people often think of HAVEN only in terms of domestic violence. However, the agency can prove a valuable resource for incest survivors and their families.

"We talk to the spouses who say 'I do' to somebody and they

don't know they have these issues," she said. "We can help them understand what this person may be going through."

With satellite offices in Farmington, Rochester Hills, Southfield and three locations in Pontiac, HAVEN serves families throughout the county. Through its crisis and support line, (248) 334-1274, the agency can connect survivors with the kind of help Austin received.

"You don't even need to be in crisis," Callahan stressed. "You can just talk to somebody about your issues."

The results

Married for the second time just last year, Austin has begun to speak publicly about her life. Her husband, a computer technician, is assigned to projects all across the country, and wherever they go, she tries to find a place to share her experiences.

While others may find her childhood the stuff of nightmares, to her it was simply her life. She has learned from it and grown, as has one of her younger brothers, now a homicide detective.

Her oldest and the youngest brothers have experienced dramatic after-effects. Given pseudonyms in the book, both have suffered psychological damage. The oldest has paranoid

delusions and literally hides from his family. The youngest lived at home even as an adult, losing his long-time love because his mother opposed their marriage.

Karen's life was no walk in the park, either. Though multiple personality disorder and anorexia followed into her adult life, she holds no grudges. Instead, she focuses on sharing her story and working as an advocate for child abuse awareness.

"My focus is not to place blame. My focus is on preventing," she said. "Most people don't want to hurt their kids. They get stressed out and they don't know how to cope."

Instead of judging parents who hurt their children, Austin believes people should put more energy into helping through parenting classes, relieving stress and providing emotional support.

"I'm very much into forgiveness and helping families back together," she said, "because until the day you die, no matter what, you want to reconcile with your family."

For a copy of Austin's book, "Blind Trust: A child's legacy," contact her at (248) 427-0675 or by e-mail at karenaustin@mind-spring.com.

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letter, Mergener, in California on business, said he did not feel comfortable doing so over the telephone and would rather do

so in a face-to-face meeting.

He did say, however, that his concerns are "all documented meetings, with action or inaction in black and white."

What began "as an isolated incident here or there, ... became a pattern," he said, adding that the whole matter turned into a "very frustrating experience."

Mergener emphasized the recent publicity over whether fifth graders should watch a video about sexual harassment did not play a role in his decision.

"I viewed it long and hard and gave it very serious consideration," said Mergener, about running in the board race. "But my fear was, I didn't want my message to be distorted into a self-serving political agenda."

Brouillette, who is president of

FARMINGTON SCHOOLS

the school board, Friday afternoon said she was ready for "the scrutiny and added discussion that a challenger brings to the election. But I hope Mr. Mergener's decision to withdraw represents confidence in the work Gary Sharp and I are doing."

The lack of a contested race apparently won't alter how the incumbents will approach the coming campaign.

"We're both very active in the community and we certainly are available to answer any concerns and questions people may have," Brouillette said.

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