

KIDSAFE FOUNDATION BRINGS SAFETY TO LIGHT

BY KRISTEN MAGER

Twelve years ago, Sally Berenzweig's 3-year-old son walked out of the house and wandered through the neighborhood – barefoot and crying – before a stranger stopped, put the toddler in his car, and drove around looking for the boy's home. The babysitter never noticed he was gone.

"We trusted her," said Sally. "She was 24 years old, a certified swim instructor, preschool teacher, and part-time nursing student. You don't get better credentials than that."

For Sally's family, the ending was happy, thanks to a Good Samaritan. But the life-changing incident inspired her to bring a safety program to her son's preschool that other families, along with hers, could benefit from. That's how she met Cherie Benjoseph, a licensed clinical social worker and former middle school guidance counselor, who started giving safety seminars to mom's groups after one of her students disclosed she'd been abused by her stepdad, also the PTA vice president. Cherie was shocked – not by the claim itself – but that this student didn't show the textbook signs of abuse. It made her realize there was a need in the community for better awareness.

PROTECTING CHILDREN AGAINST PREDATORS

"After I heard Cherie speak, I approached her and asked, 'Why isn't every parent and child

getting this program? Let's do something here,'" said Sally. Her career prior to becoming a stay-at-home mom was a psychotherapist to physically and sexually abused children and women, so she had motivation on both personal and professional levels to educate and make a difference.

The two women started meeting at local Starbucks shops, researching ways to keep kids safe, which led to a joint passion in 2009: co-founding KidSafe Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that provides education to children and adults to prevent child sexual abuse, bullying and Internet exploitation.

SOBERING STATISTICS

Sally said that even with her professional training, she didn't realize the severe epidemic of sexual abuse until she dug into the numbers: One in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually exploited before the age of 18. Nine out of 10 times a child will be harmed by someone they know. 68 percent of the time the offender is a family member.

"Not everyone reports abuse," she said, "so sadly the numbers are actually higher."



Sally Berenzweig and Cherie Benjoseph. Since their inception they have taught 50K children and 25K adults. KidSafe strongly believes every child and adult needs to be educated to stop this epidemic.

If there's a bright side, here's one: With education, 95 percent of abuse and exploitation can be prevented. And that's where KidSafe Foundation is making a difference, one classroom at a time.

KidSafe's eight-week program for children is centered on role play, art, discussion, and lessons from the co-founders' award-winning children books. The concept is to keep it fun and teach children tactics for making smart choices.

"We share empowerment skills and use a multilayer approach that incorporates seminars for parents, teachers and all professionals working with children. It's important that everyone's speaking the same language of safety," said Sally.

SHINE THE LIGHT GALA

KidSafe Foundation currently offers programs for children ages 4-11 in Palm Beach and Broward County schools. *International Opulence* is proud to be a sponsor of the organization's "Shine the Light Gala" on March 10th at Woodfield Country Club in Boca Raton.

Major sponsors of the gala include Hotwire Communications, Charles Schwab and The Schmidt Family Foundation.

Visit www.kidsafefoundation.org for more information.