

Film Calls Attention to the Need for Community Dialogue Around Child Sexual Abuse

The Woodsman, a new film by first time director Nicole Kassell, is an emotionally powerful film that challenges audiences to experience the story of a sex offender struggling to overcome his sexual attraction to young girls. It does not sensationalize the subject. It is direct, hard-hitting and unsettling in its matter-of-fact attitude towards this silent, violent epidemic.

Some people will not be able to watch or sit through this entire film. If you have been hurt through child sexual abuse, the film could be re-traumatizing. Please think carefully about your choice of whether or not to see this film.

If you do go to see the film, it will challenge you on many levels. More than any other movie, *The Woodsman* asks us to examine the limits of our compassion while we hold Walter, the main character, played by Kevin Bacon, accountable for his crimes. In scenes at Walter's workplace, we see the anger and fear of his co-workers. Through Walter's sister, we see how difficult it is for any of us to accept that someone we love can sexually abuse a child. Through Walter's interactions with a young girl, Robin, we finally see him recognize the harm he has caused. We also see how difficult it is for anyone to come forward and admit these crimes when we offer few options for safely re-entering our society.

Unfortunately, in the interest of creating dramatic effects, the film perpetuates many stereotypes that are simply not true. Given that 90 percent of children are sexually abused by someone they know, the images of "Candy" lurking at the edge of the playground pulls us away from the most prevalent situations of abuse – those that are closer to home. It is the off-screen stories that convey the full complexity of child sexual abuse including Robin, who has been sexually abused by her father and Vickie who has been sexually abused by her brothers. Furthermore, the film suggests a sense of helplessness when it ignores the role that police in coordination with specialized treatment providers, probation, parole, and prevention professionals play to make their communities safer for children.

The film has already won awards at the Sundance Film Festival and in festivals overseas. But beyond the art value of the film, the director, producer and Newmarket Films eloquently argue for the film's potential role in provoking positive community conversations about child sexual abuse. What would these conversations look like? As an advocacy organization, we hope to push you beyond your initial reactions to the film to begin thinking about and talking about how to prevent child sexual abuse. For example, when you think about Vickie's situation, begin to wonder what happened in her childhood home that allowed several brothers to abuse her. Were her parents aware of the warning signs in their sons? Did they see Vickie change after she was sexually abused?

Every professional who works with this issue agrees with the importance of breaking the silence surrounding child sexual abuse. We hope that every adult who chooses to see this film will take

on the responsibility of talking about the film, learning what is accurate, and exploring the options available to prevent child sexual abuse before a child is harmed. To help facilitate conversations, Stop It Now! has created a discussion guide for *The Woodsman*, available at www.stopitnow.org. Be creative in how you use the film to educate your community. If your community has the resources, you can increase your impact by organizing a panel of local experts to discuss the film, write your own Op Ed, and get others excited about prevention. If we work together, we can make our communities a safer place for our children.

Stop It Now! is a national nonprofit with a vision of adults and communities taking on the responsibility of preventing child sexual abuse. For more information about Stop It Now! and our sites in Georgia, Minnesota, Philadelphia, Vermont and the United Kingdom, the warning signs for abusing behaviors, or links to organizations working to stop child sexual abuse, visit our website at www.stopitnow.org.

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