



Anne Beiler feels compelled to tell the rest of her tragic and triumphant story

By John W. Kennedy

The amazing rags-to-riches story of Anne Beiler and her husband, Jonas, is a heartwarming account that prompts admiration of the blessings of God. It's the chronicle of a Christian couple who entered middle age with no life savings, no life insurance and a recently foreclosed house. Seventeen years later they emerged to sell their self-made company that by then generated \$247 million in annual sales. Auntie Anne's Soft Pretzels grew from one outlet in a farmer's market to more than 850 locations by 2005.

During her tenure as the face of Auntie Anne, Beiler appeared to be a strong businesswoman, a female entrepreneur who had made it in a man's world and a savvy titan who built a Gap, Pa., multimillion-dollar enterprise from scratch. Employees, customers and industry analysts marveled at how a woman without a high school education, business knowledge or financial capital could form the largest soft pretzel chain in the country.

Despite appearances, Anne Beiler didn't have it all together.

She felt insecure because of earlier sexual abuse perpetrated by a spiritual leader who advised her after the death of her 19-month-old daughter, Angela.

During her tenure as Auntie Anne's executive, Beiler says she committed adultery because of failure to deal with the causes of the previous sexual abuse.

Her workaholic tendencies — which helped make her a success in the business world — contributed to a sense of failure as a mother to her remaining two daughters, LaWonna and LaVale, both of whom also suffered sexual abuse.

"In order to conquer adverse circumstances, we must overcome ourselves," Beiler says. "I hated myself. I wanted to self-destruct."

As she gained fame in commerce circles, Beiler told half her tragic story, the part about how her middle daughter's death in 1975 caused her to sink into a deep depression, pushing her to the brink of divorce.

Today, Beiler says she is healed and whole — both spiritually and emotionally — because she is revealing the full details of what happened to her: the part about how the spiritual leader took advantage of her vulnerability, and manipulated her into sinful behavior that she kept secret from her husband, daughters, siblings and others in the church.

Only after counseling sessions with EMERGE Ministries founder Dr. Richard Dobbins, did Beiler grasp the value of preserving her faith, her



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family, and indeed her life.

“The power of confession one to another transformed my life,” Beiler says. “I feel like a new person, without shame and guilt. I’m overawed by God’s absolute love.”

The narrative of her troubled life is revealed in the recently released autobiography *Twist of Faith: The Story of Anne Beiler, Founder of Auntie Anne’s Pretzels*. After taking years to come to terms with her past, Beiler says she is telling her travails to glorify God and to encourage others, especially women who have been wounded by besetting sin and feel as though they have no hope.

“We don’t go through terrible things simply to keep quiet,” Beiler told *Today’s Pentecostal Evangel*. “People who are broken will understand my story rather than being offended by it.”

Her brokenness began in 1975 with the death of Angie, run over by a farm tractor driven by Anne’s sister, Fi. Beiler put on a façade that she felt others required of her. While acting as though she had dealt victoriously with her daughter’s death, bitterness, guilt and depression consumed her. She didn’t allow herself to grieve. She confided in no one.

Then a minister offered to provide a listening ear. The vulnerable Beiler rejoiced that God finally had sent someone to whom she could confide her tormented feelings. But the minister had other motives besides Anne’s mental health. He seduced her, first with hugs, then kisses, then more. Beiler experienced an unhealthy transference of emotions that turned into six years of sexual abuse.

As the liaison continued, Beiler felt trapped, isolated and even more depressed. She wanted to tell others, but whom would people believe: the likable trusted minister or an unstable grieving mother? Beiler figured God didn’t have any use for her anymore.

Unaware of her involvement with the minister, Jonas figured his wife’s unspoken anguish stemmed from Angie’s death. Yet as the Beilers lived in a disjointed marriage, they continued to tithe consistently. She cites Malachi 3:11 (“I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruits.”) as a verse that kept the family going through the turmoil.

“Tithing is an act of obedience to God,” Beiler says. “When we tithe, it puts the power of God into motion, protecting us from utter failure.”

Likewise Beiler never stopped attending church, even though many times she didn’t want to go.

“We have been taught in church that some sins, like gossip, are more ‘acceptable’ than others,” Beiler says. “When it comes to sexual sins, we can’t confess it openly because to some people it’s unpardonable.”



Recovery from abuse by a trusted figure

Sexual abuse is terrible under any circumstance, but abuse by an authority figure — a parent, extended family member, teacher or minister — is especially horrific. Usually the abuser lures the victim with overtures of trust, respect, confidence and emotional security. These are valid elements of true love, but abusers distort them for their own emotional and sexual gratification.

True love can be defined as the intentional choice of our will demonstrated by those four elements: trust, respect, confidence and emotional security. Emotional security is the result of the other three elements, which build upon each other.

Emotional security is being comfortable in the presence of another person. This is the first element of love to be negatively affected when we are afraid, intimidated or harmed.

Confidence is knowing that when we are open and transparent with another person, the individual won’t use that personal information to manipulate, coerce or intimidate. The abuser lures the victim with winsome words and behavior that evoke a distorted false confidence from the victim.

Respect is simply acknowledging another’s worth. We are to value each other’s time, energy and effort. Abusers play on or attempt to create low self-esteem by getting the victim to respect them.

Trust is keeping the words we vow. Abusers make commitments or promises they don’t intend to keep.

The tragedy beyond the sexual abuse is that the perpetrator destroys the victim’s perception of love, trust, respect, confidence and emotional security. It is critical that the victim experience God’s transforming power and find a safe place in an environment where true love is taught and demonstrated.

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Consequently, many who have fallen to sexual sin withdraw from church because they already are berating themselves, she says.

“What we really want is arms extended to us that say, ‘I know what you’ve done, but I love you and forgive you anyway,’” Beiler says. “While the sin doesn’t need to be accepted, the church needs to follow the model of Jesus to love people who are broken. That’s what Jesus did best.”

Beiler credits her husband of offering love and forgiveness to her following her confession of unfaithfulness for keeping their marriage intact.

“When my husband found out, instead of judging, condemning and criticizing me, he granted mercy,” she says.

Dobbins counseled Beiler in 1996-97. In her book, she says

the Christian psychologist saved her life “from complete destruction, emotionally and spiritually.” Beiler says Dobbins “provided a safe place for me to spill my guts and gave me a better theological understanding of life.” She says he convinced her to reveal secrets to others, once she was comfortable in doing so, in order to break Satan’s stronghold. Citing James 5:16, Beiler says confession to God is a necessary first step, but absolute overcoming requires telling humans.

“The enemy keeps us hammered down by using the weapon of silence,” says Beiler, 59. “As we confess our sins one to another, then we’ll begin our journey to healing.”

The Beilers, who will mark 40 years of marriage in September, sold Auntie Anne’s in 2005.

These days much of their time involves overseeing a free and low-cost counseling facility near their Pennsylvania home. Jonas, who received training from the Akron, Ohio-based EMERGE Ministries, founded the Family Center of Gap, a facility with 13 staff members who help troubled families.

Part of Anne’s journey in seeking healing involved forgiving the perpetrator of the abuse.

“I’m going to heaven because of the grace of Jesus,” Beiler says. “If my abuser is in heaven, he got there the same way I did. I’m OK with that.” **tpe**

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