



‘Our marriage survived a NIGHTMARE ORDEAL’

Margarethe Booth’s life collapsed one morning six years ago, when her husband was wrongfully accused of sex offences

Our nightmare began early one Sunday morning in January 2008. I was in the kitchen making breakfast and my husband, Ian, who was 61 at the time (I was 59) and a keen cyclist, was about to go off on a bike ride, dressed up in his sports gear.

The doorbell rang and Ian answered it. On the step were four police officers. They asked if they could come in. At first I thought perhaps a family member had been hurt, but what the police said next shook me to the core: “Are you Ian Booth? We’ve come to arrest you for

allegations of child abuse. You have to come to the police station and we also have to search your house for evidence.”

The colour must have drained from my face because Ian sat me down. He was visibly shaken, but said gently that it was clearly a horrible mistake and he’d go with them to sort it out. The officers wouldn’t tell us who had made the accusations, they simply read Ian his rights. One officer took Ian upstairs to get changed, while the others searched the house and came back with Ian’s laptop. I was shaking with shock. The officers were polite and courteous, but >>

it happened to me

I sensed that they thought Ian was guilty and I was the gullible wife.

Ian went on his own to the station while I stayed at home, trying to come to terms with what had happened. Our daughter, Sarah, who was 30 at the time and staying with us, was brilliant. She made endless cups of tea and we talked for hours, going over who could have said these things. Our other daughter, Charlotte, 34, was appalled when I phoned to tell her. She lived more than 100 miles away so couldn't come immediately. I also called our son, John, 37, who was living in Japan, and equally horrified.

I know people might think I'm naïve but I never thought, even for a second, that Ian was anything but completely innocent. He just wasn't capable of anything like this.

THE ALLEGATIONS

Ian, meanwhile, was having a torrid time at the police station. They kept him waiting in a cell for hours before he could see the duty solicitor. He was eventually released on bail and came home at around 6pm that evening, very shaken.

The allegations were from the early 1980s. It emerged that the accusations came from the daughters of neighbours. The two girls, who would have been between five and 12 at the time and used to play with our daughters, said that Ian had made them perform sex acts on him and masturbate in front of him.

The police strung the interviewing process out for five months. Ian had to go back to the station every few weeks for hours of questioning, which was incredibly stressful for all of us. It wasn't until June 2008 that he was finally charged with 12 counts of indecent assault and two gross indecency charges. Ian pleaded not guilty at the magistrates' court, then the trial was moved to Warwick Crown Court because of the seriousness of the charges. A date was set for September 2009, which felt like a million years away.

Those months were just horrible. We couldn't think or talk about anything else. At the time, these girls had been good friends with our daughters. Their father had died when the girls were young and we'd always looked out for

them. I'd also tried to be supportive to their mother by having the girls over for play dates. To have them accuse Ian of this was a real kick in the teeth.

We went over and over the times they'd been at our house, trying to piece together any events that happened more than 30 years ago that might have led them to saying these dreadful things. Ian and I couldn't even remember a time when he was alone with them. They'd accused him of touching them and having sex with them in a field near our

home, in our bedrooms and garden.

We looked at photos, tried to remember birthdays, special occasions, who we spent time with... anything to try and jog memories and provide Ian with an alibi or

indisputable factual evidence that would prove his innocence. We sought help from specialist solicitors, Chris Saltrese Solicitors, and discovered that because there was no physical evidence, it was Ian's word against the girls'. We had to build a case by discrediting them and proving they were lying.

Little by little, we gained access to the accusers' stories and files, which was an uphill struggle. The prosecution don't want you to have anything that might help you. Reading the documents, we began to see holes in the girls' stories.

One of them said that Ian had abused her at a sleepover at our house. But they had never stayed overnight because they

lived virtually next door. The other described Ian abusing her on a bike ride, which never took place, in a field with a gate and lake, which doesn't exist. One of the girls said that she kept a diary of everything that happened, but when the police arrived at her house to collect it, she denied it existed. When we did finally see the diary, it had been tampered with and altered. One of the girls later admitted doing this in court.

Both girls changed their stories continually, altering dates, locations and times until even their own solicitor seemed confused as to what happened when.

ON TRIAL

Going through this, day in day out, was gruelling for us all. And as the trial drew closer, Ian became increasingly pessimistic and convinced he was going to prison. "It's my word against theirs," he kept saying. "In this climate, who is going to believe me?"

We went backwards and forward to court. Everything was so slow. The prosecution asked for longer to analyse evidence, track down another witness or delay proceedings because a witness was ill or traumatised. It dragged on for 18 months. The police didn't have one scrap of physical evidence. There was nothing incriminating on Ian's laptop because he was innocent.

We were dreading the trial. It was incredibly frightening walking into court and knowing that the rest of our lives hinged on what happened in that stuffy, intimidating room. But it only lasted seven

THE LAW AND COURT COSTS

● **According to Chris Saltrese, of Chris Saltrese Solicitors (chrissaltrese.co.uk)**, specialists in false accusations of abuse, under most recent rules anyone who is found innocent after a case alleging sexual abuse and who has privately funded their case is not entitled to claim any costs back.

However, you can claim a small amount of the money back (at legal aid rates) if you have applied for legal aid and been turned down (regardless of your income), if you're found innocent. This is why many solicitors encourage even wealthy clients to apply. However, for example, in a

court case costing over £100,000, you may only get around £8,000 back.

● **Falsely Accused Carers and Teachers (FACT)** supports men and women who have been falsely accused of sexual abuse. See factuk.org.

● **MP Nigel Evans** is backing calls for those found not guilty to get their legal fees back from the Crown Prosecution Service. He was cleared of sexual abuse charges, including rape, this year, and said that the case, costing £130,000, had taken his entire life savings.



Margarethe is trying to leave the past behind her



it happened to me

Why I'm speaking out



IAN SAYS: One of the reasons for telling this story is that I don't want this to happen to anyone else. I wouldn't wish what I've been

through on my worst enemy. The morning of my arrest was surreal. I was utterly confused but at that stage I still had faith in the police as an organisation with integrity and an interest in getting to the truth. I don't believe that any more. I slowly realised they just wanted a conviction and believed I was guilty from the start.

The first real low point was being shut in a cell, minus my belt and shoes. I was shocked at how dehumanised you feel.

Over the following weeks, the outrage and indignation I felt at being accused of something that I didn't do, especially something as horrible as this, was replaced by the appalling realisation and sheer panic that I could lose my freedom regardless of my innocence, simply because of the way the system works.

My family and Margarethe were amazing. They never once doubted my innocence and kept my spirits up. The case was enormously hard work and I wouldn't be free today hadn't it been for the dogged determination of my legal team.

Even now, though, I don't really want to be left on my own with my granddaughters, and if I saw child alone in trouble on the street, I wouldn't help them.

I feel truly sorry for real victims of sexual abuse, but there should not be an automatic assumption that accusers are telling the truth. There needs to be a rigorous, objective investigation into the facts or more innocent men will end up in prison. w&h

days. The girls gave what was considered by the judge to be flimsy evidence. When it came to our barrister's turn to question them, they refused to answer nearly all the questions; stalling and making excuses. They sometimes shouted and even stormed out of court, even though the questioning was gentle and sympathetic.

Gradually, the girls' case collapsed and they couldn't produce a single incident that stood up to questioning. On the seventh day, our barrister asked the judge to direct the jury to find no case against Ian and that he be acquitted. The judge agreed and threw the case out of court.

The relief was indescribable, but I was also furious. We'd had to spend tens of thousands of pounds defending Ian and his good name had been dragged through the mud. The case made a large

dent in our savings and we were lucky that we didn't have to sell our house. Fortunately, we were able to claim some of our legal costs back, because our case happened before October 2012, but this has now changed [see box, left].

Six years on, and we're still feeling the effects of the accusations. We've moved house and done our best to leave it behind us. Ian has retired and we have gorgeous grandchildren. But Ian is still nervous of being completely on his own with them, which is an outrageous legacy. Victims of sex abuse get paid compensation by the government, quite rightly. But falsely accused men are expected to be grateful to be free. I'd like to see the government refund court costs to any man found innocent of charges like these.

The relief when the case was thrown out was indescribable, but I was also furious

AS TOLD TO FIONA WRIGHT PHOTOGRAPHS TREVOR LEIGHTON STYLING JOY WILSON AT CAROL HAYES MANAGEMENT HAIR AND MAKE-UP SARAH JANE GREEN AT TFA AND JULIE READ AT CAROL HAYES MANAGEMENT CLOTHING XXX