

BREAKING NEWS:

Sabres sign defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen to six-year, \$32.4 million deal. (<http://buffalonews.com/2016/10/11/sabres-sign-ristolainen-six-year-32-4-million-deal/>)



These bikers may look scary, but their mission is ending child abuse



Bikers Against child Abuse WNY members stand outside Buffalo City Hall on Sept. 26, 2016. (Courtesy of Bikers Against Child Abuse)

In a courtroom in Lockport, the small spectators' gallery was filled with what looked like motorcycle gang members.

They had a hardened look, at least one had a Mohawk, and all wore boots, chains, and black leather cuts - vests emblazoned with patches, including a skull and a fist.

It was no doubt intimidating, and that's the whole point.

The crowd all wore a large patch on their backs with a curious motto, Bikers Against Child Abuse.

They were there on a mission to form a protective barrier in court around a 16-year-old girl at the sentencing of the man who raped her, carnival worker Michael E. Freeman. The young girl was pregnant from the rape, faced with the difficult decision to end the pregnancy, said Deputy District Attorney Holly E. Sloma, who called the crime, "reprehensible."

Sloma said it was also her first interaction with the Bikers Against Child Abuse organization, or B.A.C.A., a 21-year-old international organization with over 8,000 members in 11 countries, but whose Western New York/Buffalo Chapter is relatively new.

The Niagara County Court sentencing of Freeman on Sept. 7 was the bikers' group's first appearance in any local court.

Sloma said she had no idea the bikers would be filling up the courtroom that day, but called their presence, surrounding the victim as she sat far in the corner, empowering.

"Michael Freeman was glaring across the courtroom at that victim - or at least trying to. To see this young woman surrounded by these tough individuals I think made her feel not only special, but also protected," said Sloma. "(The victim) felt powerful with them there and she should feel that way."

Sloma said the group had asked the judge ahead of time for permission to support the girl in the courtroom.

Empowerment of abused children is the B.A.C.A. mission.

"We are not vigilantes out there to threaten or chase the accused, but rather to make children feel safe," said member David "Shepard" Collyer. "We are there to give them that security and comfort."

Many B.A.C.A. members publicly identify themselves only by road names, which they have on their cuts. Each child B.A.C.A. assists is welcomed into the group with a short ceremony and also given a road name.

Frank “Riff,” Perk, secretary and public relations officers for WNY B.A.C.A. did share his identity, but he noted that abusers are dangerous criminals who would stop at nothing to avoid prosecution. He said shielding B.A.C.A. members’ names protects their own families as well as the abused children.

The Western New York Chapter was formed in 2014, said Don “Rev,” Mohr, one of the nine founding members and a pastor at Tonawanda Free Methodist Church. His Biker Church outreach was an early meeting place for the group.

The chapter has provided assistance to less than 10 children in the Buffalo region so far, but it has also supported children in nearby Rochester and Syracuse, as happened in the Freeman case.

Mohr said 45 bikers came to the group’s first meeting, and were fingerprinted as they arrived. By the time it was over only nine remained, said Mohr. But that number has since grown to nearly 50.

Background checks, training and 24/7 availability to help children is required of all members.

“As a pastor for 38 years, I’ve seen the results of child abuse in someone who is 40 years old,” Mohr said of his reason for joining B.A.C.A., “(As a pastor) I am dealing what (these victims) went through as a child.”

Buffalo Chapter President George “Igon” McNamara, a biker since his teen years, said he also joined after seeing the “after effects” of child abuse in his community.

B.A.C.A. was founded by John Paul “Chief” Lilly in 1995 in Utah. Lilly is also a mental health professional who worked with children as a play therapist. He felt there was a hole children faced when they left counseling, or were not eligible for counseling. His goal was to take the best part of being a biker, feeling like part of a group, and use that to help children.

In a national B.A.C.A. sponsored video we hear the story of “Fa” who was just 10 years-old when her stepfather started abusing her. By the time she was 15 and ready to testify against him, she was suicidal - until she met “Tombstone,” a lifelong biker and B.A.C.A. member. His chapter’s members stood by her side and guarded her house 24 hours a day.

Bikers change lives of abused children



“We are scarier than the perpetrator. We are scarier than their demons,” said Tombstone in the video. “They get that any of us would take a bullet for them.”

There are B.A.C.A. groups in Syracuse and Rochester, as well as Western New York, but Perk said unlike motorcycle gangs there are no territorial boundaries and each group responds when needed, as liaisons.

A small number of B.A.C.A. members met recently with The Buffalo News to discuss the group's mission. All had personal reasons for joining. Some had seen the impact of abuse on friends or children. But none said they had been abuse victims themselves.

"Flipper," a woman who drives a pink motorcycle and bedazzles her patches in pink, had seen a childhood friend who was a victim.

Perk admits he joined as a skeptic after seeing a friend wrongly accused of abuse. He said he didn't want that to happen to another person.

Before B.A.C.A. can meet with an abuse victim, the case must have been reported to the police and a child's parent or guardian has to request B.A.C.A. assistance.

Perk said some kids are scared when the bikers ride up the first time, especially if it is one of the big burly bikers, but B.A.C.A. members spend time getting to know the child, welcoming him or her with their own vest with patches and a B.A.C.A teddy bear. The child also receives B.A.C.A. pins and hats in some cases. Two B.A.C.A members are assigned to assist each child and remain in close contact. B.A.C.A. support is available to accompany children to court, parole hearings, therapy or provide a physical presence as needed.

Members have regular jobs like mechanics, office workers, engineers and business owners, but they commit themselves to be available 24/7 to help victims.

"We don't take the place of the counselors, of the police or the agencies, or the families. We are there to make (children) feel safe," said Perk.

Perk said it is their goal to never have contact with the suspects, unless they see them in court. He said police are always called first.

“If there is a threat to a child and we are the last obstacle, then we will be that obstacle, but that’s not our role,” said Perk.

“As any counselor will tell you, when the fear is gone, (children) can face what happened and start to heal,” said Perk. “Our mission is a success when we are gone and there is no longer a need for us.”

Learn more about becoming a BACA member by calling (716) 222-2856 or emailing baca.buffalo@gmail.com. The help line is (716) 342-4107. B.A.C.A. is a 501C3 charitable organization and group meetings are held on the second Saturday of each month at 6:30 p.m. in the VFW Post in Kenmore, 3554 Delaware Ave.

email: nfischer@buffnews.com