

## ***I'm Sorry: A long-delayed apology from one of the accusers in the notorious McMartin Pre-School molestation case***

LOS ANGELES TIMES, October 30, 2005 | Kyle Zirpolo is a 30-year-old former McMartin Pre-School student who now manages a supermarket on California's central coast.

My mother divorced my father when I was 2 and she met my stepfather, who was a police officer in Manhattan Beach. They had five children after me. In addition, my stepfather has three older children. In the combined family, I'm the only one of the nine children he didn't father. I always remember wanting him to love me. I was always trying excessively hard to please him. I would do anything for him.

My stepbrothers and stepsisters and a half-brother and half-sister went to McMartin. So did I. I only remember being happy there. I never had any bad feelings about the school--no bad auras or vibes or anything. Even to this day, talking about it or seeing pictures or artwork that I did at McMartin never brings any bad feelings. All my memories are positive.

The thing I remember about the case was how it took over the whole city and consumed our whole family. My parents would ask questions: "Did the teachers ever do things to you?" They talked about Ray Buckey, whom I had never met. I don't even have any recollection of him attending the school when I was going there.

The first time I went to CII [Children's Institute International, now known as Children's Institute, Inc., a respected century-old L.A. County child welfare organization where approximately 400 former McMartin children were interviewed and given genital exams, and where many were diagnosed as abuse victims], we drove there, our whole family. I remember waiting ... for hours while my brothers and sisters were being interviewed. I don't remember how many days or if it was just one day, but my memory tells me it was weeks, it seemed so long. It was an ordeal. I remember thinking to myself, "I'm not going to get out of here unless I tell them what they want to hear."

We were examined by a doctor. I took my clothes off and lay down on the table. They checked my butt, my penis. There was a room with a lot of toys and stuffed animals and dolls. The dolls were pasty white and had hair where the private parts were. They wanted us to take off their clothes. It was just really weird.

I remember them asking extremely uncomfortable questions about whether Ray touched me and about all the teachers and what they did--and I remember telling them nothing happened to me. I remember them almost giggling and laughing, saying, "Oh, we know these things happened to you. Why don't you just go ahead and tell us? Use these dolls if you're scared."

Anytime I would give them an answer that they didn't like, they would ask again and encourage me to give them the answer they were looking for. It was really obvious what they wanted. I know the types of language they used on me: things like I was smart, or I could help the other kids who were scared.

I felt uncomfortable and a little ashamed that I was being dishonest. But at the same time, being the type of person I was, whatever my parents wanted me to do, I would do. And I thought they wanted me to help protect my little brother and sister who went to McMartin.

Later my parents asked if the teachers took pictures and played games with us. Games like "Naked Movie Star." I remember my mom asking me. She would ask if they sang the song, and I didn't know what she was talking about, so she would sing something like, "Who you are, you're a naked movie star." I'm pretty sure that's the first time I ever heard that: from my mom. After she asked me a hundred times, I probably said yeah, I did play that game.

My parents were very encouraging when I said that things happened. It was almost like saying things happened was going to help get these people in jail and stop them from what they were trying to do to kids. Also, there were so many kids saying all these things happened that you didn't want to be the one who said nothing did. You wouldn't be believed if you said that.

I remember feeling like they didn't pick just anybody--they picked me because I had a good memory of what they wanted, and they could rely on me to do a good job. I don't think they thought I was telling the truth, just that I was telling the same stories consistently, doing what needed to be done to get these teachers judged guilty. I felt special. Important.

It always seemed like I was thinking. I would listen to what my parents would say if they were talking, or to what someone else would say if we were being questioned at the police station or anywhere. And I would repeat things. Or if it wasn't a story I'd heard, I would think of something in my head. I would try to think of the worst thing possible that would be harmful to a child. I remember once I said that if you had a cut, instead of putting a Band-Aid on it, the McMartin teachers would put on dirt, then put the Band-Aid over the dirt. That was just something in my head that was bad. I just thought of it and told [the investigators].

I think I got the satanic details by picturing our church. We went to American Martyrs, which was a huge Catholic church. Every Sunday we had to go, and Mass would last an hour, hour and a half. None of us wanted to go: It was kicking and screaming all the way there. Sitting, standing, sitting, standing. What I would do was picture the altar, pews and stained-glass windows, and if [investigators] said, "Describe an altar," I would describe the one in our church. Or instead of, "There was a priest in a green suit"--someone who was real--I would say, "A man dressed in red as a cult member." From going to church you know that God is good, and the devil is bad and has horns and is about evil and red and blood. I'd just throw a twist in there with Satan and devil-worshipping.

I remember going in our van with all my brothers and sisters and driving to airports and houses and being asked if we had been [abused in] these places. I remember telling people [that the McMartin teachers] took us to Harry's Meat Market, and describing what I thought the market was like. I had never been in there before, and I was fairly certain I was going to get in trouble for what I was saying because it probably was not accurate. I imagined someone would say, "They don't have that kind of freezer there." And they did say that. But then someone said, "Well, they could have changed it." It was like anything and everything I said would be believed.

The lawyers had all my stories written down and knew exactly what I had said before. So I knew I would have to say those exact things again and not have anything be different, otherwise they would know I was lying. I put a lot of pressure on myself. At night in bed, I would think hard about things I had said in the past and try to repeat only the things I knew I'd said before.

I remember describing going to an airport and Ray taking us somewhere on an airplane. Then I realized the parents would have known the kids were gone from the school. I felt I'd screwed up and my lie had been caught--I was busted! I was so upset with myself! I remember breaking down and crying. I felt everyone knew I was lying. But my parents said, "You're doing fine. Don't worry." And everyone was saying how proud they were of me, not to worry.

I'm not saying nothing happened to anyone else at the McMartin Pre-School. I can't say that--I can only speak for myself. Maybe some things did happen. Maybe some kids made up stories about things that didn't really happen, and eventually started believing they were telling the truth. Maybe some got scared that the teachers would get their families because they were lying. But I never forgot I was lying.

My stepdad was a police officer who had guns in the house. I remember when all of this was coming down, he was put on a leave of absence from work because he was being investigated for supposedly threatening the McMartin family. He was cleared of that accusation--apparently it wasn't true. But being only 9 years old at the time, I thought my dad was saying he would kill the McMartins. So in my mind, I figured no one from the school was going to dare mess with him because he would have hurt them first. That made me feel secure. It could be a reason I never mixed up reality and fantasy and always knew I was lying.

But the lying really bothered me. One particular night stands out in my mind. I was maybe 10 years old and I tried to tell my mom that nothing had happened. I lay on the bed crying hysterically--I wanted to get it off my chest, to tell her the truth. My mother kept asking me to please tell her what was the matter. I said she would never believe me. She persisted: "I promise I'll believe you! I love you so much! Tell me what's bothering you!" This went on for a long time: I told her she wouldn't believe me, and she kept assuring me she would. I remember finally telling her, "Nothing happened! Nothing ever happened to me at that school."

She didn't believe me.

We had a highly dysfunctional family. We argued and fought all the time. My mother has always blamed anything negative on the idea that we went to that preschool and were molested. To this day, she believes these things went on. Because if they didn't, how can she explain all the family's problems? To this day, I can't open up with her about my personal problems. She's always asking me why I never do. That one night skewed our relationship.

Once the case was over, it was just over, in the past. The defendants were set free and that was it. The kids' parents never asked, "Why were they innocent? Why were they unable to find evidence to convict these people?"

My family has not seen the movies or read the books questioning the prosecution. It's like skeletons in a closet that you just don't want to take back out. I'm the only one who ever brings the topic up and who admits nothing ever happened to me. I've said I lied about everything, but I've never gotten a real response from my mother and stepfather. It seems really strange, seeing their reaction to the fact that nothing happened to me. If I had gone my whole life thinking my child was molested, I would be elated to find out that he or she wasn't. I'd like to think learning that your child was not molested would supersede anything. After all, all you have is your next day. It would be a shame to live the rest of your life thinking molestation had happened when you could think it didn't.

McMartin is something negative in my life and I'm trying to make it a positive. I've got two little kids I love dearly--they've changed the priorities in my life. My goal is to raise them as best as I can and try to lead by example. I want to be totally honest with them, to say, "This is something that happened to me. I did something dishonest, then at some point I was able to be honest about it." I want my children to be able to come to me like I wish I could have with my parents.

I'm a supermarket manager, and the thing I like best about my job is the interactions I get to have with customers' kids. I love talking and listening to them. I've been told I would be perfect for opening a children's day care. That's very ironic. I would love to look at the defendants from the McMartin Pre-School and tell them, "I'm sorry."