THE UGLY UNDERNEATH

NAVIGATING THE EMOTIONAL TOLL OF INVESTIGATING CRIMES AGAINST CHILDREN

CARLOS RODRIGUEZ



CONTENT WARNING: Memories can be fallible. I have done my best to ascertain the factual content. Some of the names in this book have been changed, including the names of many detectives that are still doing the work described here. All the names of victims and survivors have been changed out of respect and to protect their privacy. While adults should be free to review any of this material, and may find it to be informative, reader discretion is advised. This book contains explicit language and depicts criminal sexual activities involving children that may be offensive to some adults and is inappropriate for minors. You understand and acknowledge that in using this book, you may be exposed to such content and shall hold yourself fully accountable for your feelings about it.

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This book is dedicated to:

Vitamin K, my first real love. We didn't always get it right, but we didn't get it all wrong. Thanks for loving me when I didn't always deserve it.

My Boo Boo, the man in the moon is still smiling. You keep me grounded. To my son, I always knew it was you and not an apple. I love you both so much.

To my parents for showing me the best way you knew how.

To my MECTF family for not letting me fail. "For the children."

"We will walk through hell to get the devil."

—MECTF detective

INTRODUCTION

"I could never do what you do."

I hear those words a lot, even now that I am retired from investigating crimes against children. At first, I would say, "Thank you." Well, because that's the polite thing to do. When other law enforcement officers would tell me those words I would say, "Thanks, someone has to do it."

I must admit, when it came from law enforcement, after a while it made me angry. Angry because it shouldn't be a choice to protect a kid or go after someone who wants to do evil things to a child. I know now that wasn't fair for me to get angry. Not everyone is cut out to work these types of crimes, just like not everyone is suited to play a professional sport, build a rocket, or conduct open heart surgery. I did the work because I could.

People asked me how I coped with the violence and pain that adults inflict on kids. How did I keep it together when face-to-face with a man or woman who used a child for their own sick sexual pleasure?

Well, as long as I can remember, I put things in mental boxes to

process conflict or deal with the uncomfortable things. As with anything, there are pros and cons with how I store these boxes.

This book is my way to unpack some of my boxes by sharing them with you. These boxes contain stories and events that I experienced growing up before I worked crimes against children or was even a police officer. These stories put me on a path to help others.

These experiences helped me cope with my work. These stories are important because they ultimately prepared me to work the cases I did. The boxes are filled with successes, but more importantly they contain mistakes I made, mistakes you can avoid.

For my fellow law enforcement family: I challenge you to take the time to process how this work impacts you and those around you. It's necessary to, if you want to stay healthy while working in this space.

For those of you that are not law enforcement, this book will give you a better understanding of what it's like to work these cases and have some insight into what those who investigate these horrible acts endure.

In 1993 I was fortunate to become a part of the Washington State Patrol (WSP). I was employed by WSP for twenty-seven years, for twenty-five of which I was a law enforcement officer, a state trooper. I spent most of my career conducting investigations, but I didn't start to investigate crimes against children until May of 2012. The best way to explain my career is I got to do some pretty cool shit. I loved it.

I attribute my success to busting my ass and being in the right place at the right time. It also helped that I looked like a kid. Ages ago I thought it was a curse, but now? It's not so bad.

I remember going to see the movie *Soldier* with Kurt Russell and Jason Scott Lee, and the box office attendant asked me, "Can I see your ID?"

I said, "Are you serious?"

"Yes, it's rated R."

I was twenty-six years old at the time and had been a trooper for two years. My youthful appearance was a blessing, though. I think it kept me alive. It allowed me to work undercover investigating auto-theft rings and mid- to upper-level drug trafficking organizations (DTOs). When people found out I was a cop and not an auto thief or a "thug," they were always shocked.

The most rewarding part of my career was investigating crimes against children. It was also the most difficult. I worked in that capacity for nearly eight years. Like I said, I loved my job, but it came at a cost.

Investigating crimes against children is a lot to take on. It can suck the life out of a person. You start to compartmentalize things so you can do the work. For me I became detached from my own emotions.

I had a hard time saying no when people asked for help. For me it wasn't an option. The answer was always yes.

The subject matter itself: overwhelming. The case load: overwhelming. The number of cases compared to the number of resources to do the work was and still is disproportionate.

Then there was the pressure I put on myself to succeed. The necessity to be successful and help others. The thoughts in the back of my mind, the self-doubt.

Can I really help this person? Will I find this kid? That weighed on me a lot. Some of it still does. The ones I didn't find. The ones I failed to help.

If you are out there doing this work, whether you believe it or not, it affects you. You won't know how much until you aren't doing the work any longer. If you don't take care of yourself, this work will tear you down slowly. It will affect your family, the people around you, and ultimately it will negatively impact your ability to complete your mission.

When I worked these cases, I didn't realize how much they affected me. I was selfless in my pursuit to help others, but in doing so I negatively impacted other areas of my life. It affected me then, and still does today.

I wasn't the best father, husband, partner, or friend. I wasn't horrible, but there are things I know I could have done better. The activities I chose to do to cope with my work took away from my time with friends and family. My ability to turn off my emotions didn't come with directions. I lacked the ability to turn off emotions individually. It was like switching off different circuit breakers and then finally flipping off the master breaker switch. Thing is, when I turned the master breaker back on, some of the switches failed to activate.

My life decisions resulted in my divorce, which wasn't the greatest experience for my kids.

I am no hero. The things I share regarding my work are from my perspective, but I did not accomplish anything I set out to do alone. It was always a team effort. All my successes are because others shared the same goal and wanted to do good things.

The topics in this book are painful to digest, and it is difficult to comprehend why someone would do such horrific things to children. If you find yourself having a difficult time reading this book, please stop reading and take a break. This book will still be here when you are ready to pick it back up. Some of the names in this book have been changed. This includes some detectives that are still doing the work. All the names of victims and survivors have been changed out of respect and to protect their privacy.

Even though some names have been changed, these events are real. This is my story and how I remember these events happening. I hope you learn from some of my mistakes and successes.

ONE

DAVID

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In 1992, I worked at a retail store called Mervyn's. Mervyn's was like a JCPenney but with no catalog. My first job there was scrubbing toilets and waxing the tiled floors. After four days of that, management moved me to receiving. I unloaded merchandise from trailers. Every day was the same: Truck drops off trailer. Open said trailer to reveal a sea of brown cardboard boxes. Move said boxes from said trailer onto our dock. Unpack the boxes.

About a year later I transferred to the children's department. I was nineteen years old and selling OshKosh B'gosh to moms. It wasn't exciting, but it was a job.

My time in the children's department was limited. The store created a new position called area coordinator of customer service. I had no idea what the responsibilities were, but it meant no more little overalls. More importantly it was a 75-cent raise and considered a promotion.

On top of that I learned we were getting new store management, so I decided to wear a tie to work every day. I figured the new

managers would see me dressed up and think I was more important than I really was. You know, look the part, get the part.

It worked.

A few months later I was helping in the jewelry department during a big sale. A little boy wanted to buy his mom a necklace. The little guy must have been six, maybe seven years old. He pressed his plump face on the glass case and pointed. "That one."

I said, "This one?"

"Mm-hmm."

"That is a great choice, sir!"

His aunt smiled as she watched us. She happened to be the head of the WSP's Human Resources Division. She liked how I treated her nephew and suggested I apply for the WSP. I was hired the following year.

My first assignment was at the WSP headquarters (HQ) in Olympia, Washington, as a noncommissioned office trainee stuffing envelopes and filing paperwork. Noncommissioned means I was not a law enforcement officer. I was a civilian employee of the WSP. The WSP employs many people that are noncommissioned. Without them the WSP would not be able to function.

HQ was in the General Administration building on the State Capitol Campus. The four-story building was a modern architectural wonder when it was built in 1954, but not in 1993 when I started there. The walls looked like an old man with stress cracks for wrinkles. I remember the air vents used to spit out little black specks. Two men in light blue jumpsuits ran tests on the air and told us it was fine. One guy who worked in the office thought we were all going to die from it.

When I told people I worked for the WSP, most asked if I was a cop. Most people automatically assume that when a person works for a police agency they are a cop or a dispatcher. I wasn't either, and

I had zero desire to become a state trooper. I enjoyed organizing paperwork by day and attending community college at night.

Eventually I became the mail boy for the agency sorting and delivering mail. We didn't have the internet or email yet. I was a real-life Norville Barnes, the mail clerk in the Coen Brothers film *The Hudsucker Proxy*, but without the "Hoopla" and I'm no schmo.

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Two years later on Mother's Day I woke up to screams: "NO! NO! NO!"

It was my girlfriend, Julie. I met Julie on a blind date set up by one of my buddies from high school. I had stayed the night and was sleeping on her living room floor. She was in her mother's bedroom at the back of the house. I could hear Charlotte, Julie's mom, talking to her, but I couldn't make out what they were saying.

When I saw Julie, tears were rolling down her face. "David was in a car crash. We need to go to the hospital."

David was Julie's oldest brother. I had only met David a few times. I remembered playing video games with him at a family Christmas party. We didn't talk much except about the video game. He was married and his wife, Beth, was pregnant with my future nephew Eli. Most of the time at the party he spent sitting with Beth. He sat next to her the way someone wants to be next to someone they love. That's the best way to describe it.

I eventually heard the story. Earlier that morning, David and his father-in-law, Sam, had gone fishing. They were driving home on State Route 512 and thought their canoe, which was strapped to the top of their little truck, was coming loose. David had pulled onto the shoulder so they could check the canoe.