

ABUSE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1A

adding that he dreamed of celebrating the day he could mark a year of sobriety. It never came.

"I'm writing cause I'm scared to death the next time I 'use' I might not make it back."

Matt was 31 when he died Oct. 8, presumably from an accidental overdose, though his family is still waiting for autopsy results. Not that it matters. While the drugs might have killed him, Matt's family already knows what took his life.

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"People thought he was a screw up."

Victoria McGuirk wasn't condemning her son, rather making a point. Her boy was tall and fit and genius-smart. He was a charmer, with an infectious personality that could fill a room. He made friends quickly and was fiercely loyal to them. He was surrounded with love, from his parents, his sister, a beautiful girlfriend.

With so much going for him, Victoria knew how it looked when Matt got in trouble with the law, again, the trips to rehab, again and again, the failures to stick to school or anything else that might help him realize that vast potential.

Outsiders couldn't understand what was holding him back, and Matt would never let them in.

As she watched the news of the child sex abuse scandals at Penn State and later Syracuse University, read about the students who rioted over the dismissal of a popular football coach, all Victoria could think about was the anonymous boys at the center of the case. Where was the outrage for them?

She also thought about the mothers. Victoria had always imagined she could surround her son with so much love that he wouldn't be able to feel the bad touch any longer. Would these boys get the help they need?

Victoria felt like she knew them, without even knowing their names. How many people looked at them, years after they'd tried to lock away the memories of what happened to them, and called them screw-ups?

Matt could have helped them, she thought. Maybe he still could.

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Victoria McGuirk will never forget the morning her life changed forever.

It was September 1989. Matt was eating a bowl of Cheerios while she readied for work, the TV news providing a droning background noise until she heard a name she recognized. James Bowen, a South Daytona daycare operator, had been arrested after authorities found child pornography in his home.

Victoria froze, certain she'd misheard. She rushed to the TV and watched State Attorney John Tanner asking parents who'd had children at Bowen's school to contact his office.

She turned off the TV. Matt had stopped eating. It had been a year since they'd pulled him



BOWEN

from Bowen's small private school, Fast Track to Learning. Victoria

The lawyer asked Matt if he was old enough to change himself and whether he changed himself at home.

"Yes."

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At first glance, James Bowen was a busy parent's dream.

He was by all accounts a brilliant teacher. One parent called the thin, snowy-haired man "a Mr. Rogers type." His grade-school kids were doing algebra years before their public-school peers. The school grounds and classroom were immaculate. The children took frequent field trips to the beach and YMCA. Parents could drop off their children early or pick them up late at Bowen's home.

Only in retrospect was it an obvious trap, to fall into "that rut of easiness," as Mike McGuirk called it. With a commute from the Kennedy Space Center where he worked on the space shuttle launch team, McGuirk valued that flexibility just like the other parents who had their children there.

"If you were late to pick them up, all you had to do was call," Mike said. "You can't do that with a public school."

Like Matt, Jordie Hoeck was also a "teacher's pet."

"He could easily pull the blanket over anyone's eyes," said Hoeck, who attended the school with his sister and remembers Disney trips with the Bowens and frequent sleepovers at their house.

"He was like a grandfather figure," Hoeck said. "We had our own room at his house. We had our own clothes there."

Later, when Hoeck started fifth grade at South Daytona Elementary, he found that he was grade levels above his age peers in reading, spelling and especially math, Bowen's favorite subject.

"I was doing seventh- or eighth-grade work," Hoeck said, recalling his reaction when he was given class work he'd mastered years earlier. "Are you kidding me? Times tables?"

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The rest of the morning was a blur of activity. Somehow Victoria had calmed Matt and gotten him to school, warning his teacher the boy might be upset. She rushed to the State Attorney's Office.

She was met there by two women and a young attorney, Dennis Bayer, who would prosecute the case. They handed her a box of Polaroid photographs, about the size of a large shoebox. There were more than two dozen images, all young boys. Matt was in more of the photos than any other boy. He was naked.

Victoria cried and cried until someone came in.

"Are you going to be OK?"

"No!" she blurted. "I still can't believe this."

She called her husband, Mike, at work. He came home and they cried together.

Before Mike got home, Victoria had time to leaf through a dictionary, seeking the word she'd heard all morning but, in 1989, wasn't familiar with. She found the word — pedophile — and closed the book. "You bastard."

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"Do you remember any bad touches while you were at Fast Track?"

"Yes." The boy spoke so softly that the judge had to ask if the jury heard his next response.

But Bowen was more like a character from a Grimm fairy tale than a parent's dream. He was first arrested in Michigan in 1966 for taking "indecent liberties" with a 10-year-old student. He confessed that he "touched the private parts" of the boy and was sentenced to five years probation but released less than two years later.

The bad touches continued. Prosecutors would later show Bowen molested children for more than two decades, touching them while supposedly helping them change clothes or applying ointment for sunburn or poison ivy, taking pictures of the boys while they were naked. Inviting the boys to touch him or do things to each other while he watched or took photos.

Bowen was fired from schools in Maryland and South Florida after being accused of molesting young boys, but no charges were filed. Florida law at the time didn't require background checks for the people who opened private day cares — a law that would change following Bowen's conviction.

Green sentenced Bowen to 155 years in prison — 115 more than the state guidelines recommended. An appeals court upheld the sentence.

Bowen was still in prison when he died just after Christmas in 1995 at age 57. The family was told he died of "unnatural causes." They imagined what that meant but drew little comfort in suspecting Bowen's death was unpleasant.

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As part of the counseling that preceded the trial, Mike and Victoria were warned that puberty could be a particularly troubling time for the victims of child sex abuse. Difficulty with authority figures was common.

Victoria wondered: Don't all teens have problems with authority figures? The teen years can be difficult for any family dynamic, but the McGuirks, forever racked with guilt, had it worse than most.

Matt quit football and the other team sports he'd always excelled at, preferring to spend his time surfing. His sister, four years older, remembers how other boys who'd heard what happened called Matt cruel names. She fought those who were foolish enough to say it in front of her.

"I would beat the living daylights out of them," said Krissy, who's now a grade-school teacher in Palm Coast. "I would jump on them and punch them."

Matt was 13 when he was caught with

drugs and arrested for the first time. He was 15 when he had his first stint in rehab.

His parents pushed him to get more counseling, but they couldn't make him talk about what had happened. Victoria remembers times Matt would just stand in a corner, refusing to face the counselor. Another time he was put in group therapy with all girls.

The family paid for all the counseling, and when funds were low, they sought reimbursement through a state program for victims. Victoria was dismayed to learn those costs were covered only within a few years of the trial. Some kids, like Matt, weren't ready to talk that quickly. She fought to have the laws changed, but the changes came too late to help Matt.

Among the papers he left behind, Matt wrote that he knew he needed help, that he wanted help, but at the