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## On a long run to recovery

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MERCER — When he walks into a room with his sleeves of tattoos, no one can see the monkey on his back.

And that's where Christian Griffith's 3,000-mile journey of healing begins.

Griffith, 48, survived sexual abuse as a teenager – first, he says, at the hands of his mother, then by several other men.

As he peels away his running shirt, he reveals a tattoo that spans his entire back.

A monkey on the right corner flashes pointed teeth toward an outline of a man and a woman. These are his abusers. The woman's arm is raised to hit the monkey. The man holds a chain that is wrapped around the monkey's arm.

The monkey rages. He will not be quieted. His red, raw mouth burns angrily on Griffith's back.

Griffith realizes he still holds anger toward his abusers and what they did to him. He says he is still trying to forgive himself for what happened.

“There will always be that part of me that feels guilt and shame. That's something that's very difficult to shake. The rage around the way that (my mother) did it is very difficult for me to get rid of. I still struggle with it to this day,” Griffith said.

The tattoo is not finished yet, but then again neither is his journey of recovery. That's what put him on the road.

And sharing his message is why he stopped in Mercer Tuesday.

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Griffith's mission, Run2Heal, is a partnership with Help for Children, a global child-abuse charity that is helping him run 3,000 miles, coast to coast, to raise a million dollars and to create awareness for children of abuse.

He started his run March 19 at Riverside Park in New York City and expects to reach San Francisco by Aug. 23. To reach his goal, he packs away 30 to 35 miles five days a week, and does 10 on each of his two off days.

Griffith is running in a jagged line across the U.S. so that he can talk with as many people as possible. The cold, wind, snow and hills in Western Pennsylvania have been difficult, he said, but nothing will keep him from his mission.

“It's been awesome,” Griffith said. “And to know we still have four and a half more months of this, it doesn't scare me. I can run all day. I can suffer with the best of them. Don't ever try to stop me. Good luck.”

Wednesday, Griffith, of Jacksonville, Fla., ran 17 miles through Mercer County, ending at Flynn's Tire and Auto just outside Mercer. Griffith is living out of an RV, which is driven by Adam Warwinski to the location where he finishes his run.

He might be a long way from home, but he is connecting with people along his run to listen to their stories and to share his own.

Griffith was 15 and lying in a sauna, towel wrapped around his waist, when an older man molested him.

"I didn't punch anyone in the mouth. I froze like a scared cat. I didn't know what to do," he added.

The abuse led to confusion about his own sexual identity, even though he is neither gay nor homophobic.

"I hid it for a really long time," Griffith said. "I'm a child of the '80s, and I feared labels. I was scared to death people were going to call me gay. When you're a 14-year-old boy, you don't understand political correctness."

To keep people from thinking he was gay, he went in the opposite direction, becoming promiscuous to prove he was straight.

Griffith said he was emotionally and verbally abusive, leaving a "wake of wounded women" behind him. Today, he supports the women who are changing the tide by speaking out about their own sexual abuse.

It took Griffith about 30 years to recognize the damage that was done to him and the damage he wrecked upon others.

The reason he was able to tell his story, he said, was because of a "big, strapping, 6-foot-2, ripped to ribbons, strapping dude" who shared his own journey of sexual abuse.

Griffith met Damien Rider in October 2015 while he was doing a survival run in Australia. At the time, Griffith was living in Nicaragua.

Rider told Griffith his own story of sexual abuse and his efforts to fight child abuse. He is covered in tattoos, just like Griffith.

"I listened intently, but I didn't say anything. I just listened," Griffith said. "I have 30 years of coping mechanisms, so I was kind of believing my own lies at the point. I didn't necessarily equate what happened to him as what happened to me. But it had an impact on me."

After his flight home, Griffith sent Rider a message on Facebook Messenger and shared his entire story. The distance between them helped Griffith to open up for the first time, he said.

Talking helped, Griffith said, but he still needed more of a release. So Griffith wrote an essay called "That's Right, I Was Sexually Abused," and posted it on his website and his Facebook page.

"So I released it, and the second I released it I sat back and thought, 'What did I just do? What is everyone going to say?'"

Griffith was still worried about labels.

He needn't have.

“Within 24 hours, I had 157 Facebook messages back to me,” Griffith said.

The people who messaged him shared their stories and offered their support to him.

“I remember sitting back and thinking to myself, ‘There is an army of us out there,’ Griffith said. “The problem is when you go through something like this, especially as a teenager, you tend to isolate yourself — you feel like you’re the only one.”

Griffith’s mission while completing Run2Heal, is to tell children — and adults — that they’re not alone.

On Tuesday, Griffith stopped to run with the Boys and Girls Club.

“You could tell they had a lot of admiration. They paid attention to what I had to say, they tried to get me to do cool things with them, like the worm, which I did do,” Griffith said.

When Griffith talks to children, he shows up in jeans, Converse shoes and a black T-shirt that displays his sleeves of tattoos.

“I let them know that I’m them. I was that kid who got in trouble. I was that kid who felt a little different. I was that kid who was harboring secrets,” he said.

Griffith does everything to show them that he is not an authority figure. He is genuine and open.

The tattoos might help to earn their trust, he said. And the fact that Griffith has appeared on “The Selection: Special Operations Experiment” and “American Ninja Warrior,” doesn’t hurt either.

“I’m able to earn their respect,” he said.

One boy even began to share his story of sexual abuse.

Griffith listened, but the next step, he said, belongs to the community. He only hopes that people in the boy’s life will take over where he left off, encouraging him to start his own journey of recovery.

“I tell them that if you’ve been through some crappy stuff in your life, you’re not alone, and I understand. I understand what it’s like to take crappy things in your life and package them up and put them on a shelf somewhere and pretend they didn’t happen,” Griffith said.

But they did happen. His past does not have to be his future, but it is his mission – a change from the self-focused and empty life he says he used to live.

“To have a purpose now that is so much bigger and so much greater than me is one of the greatest feelings in the world,” Griffith said.

That purpose won’t end in San Francisco.

Griffith has miles and miles to go before he sleeps.

Follow Natalie Eastwood on Facebook and Twitter @natalie\_herald. Email her at [neastwood@sharonherald.com](mailto:neastwood@sharonherald.com).

You can help

To donate to Run2Heal and support Help for Children, visit <https://run2heal.hfc.org>

