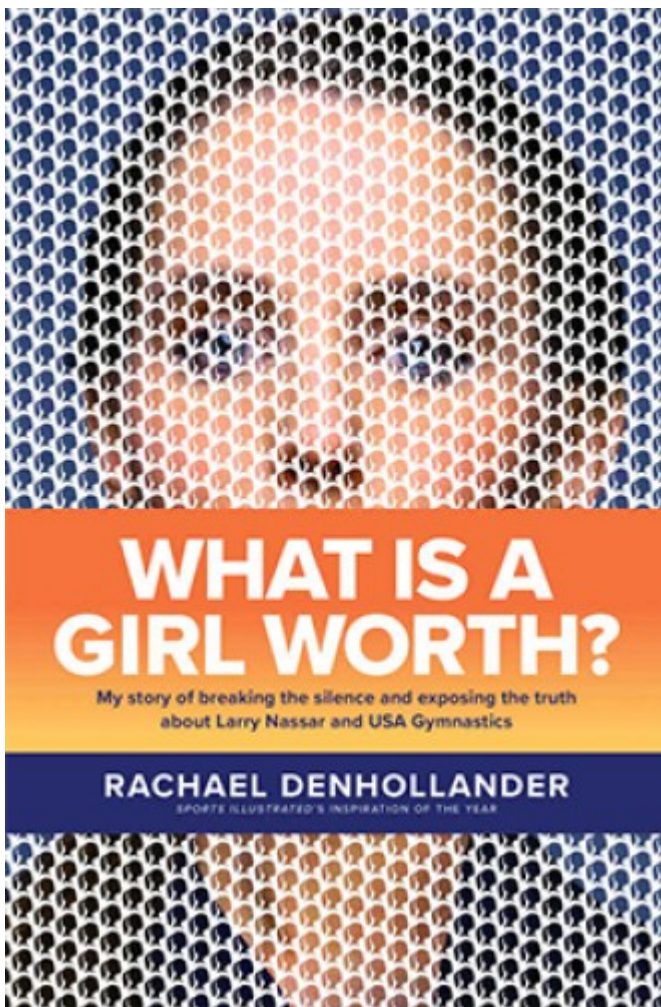


Rachael Denhollander's account of standing up against sexual abuse

## **The gymnast who brought down Larry Nassar tells her story.**

by [Ruth Everhart](#) in the [February 12, 2020](#) issue

### **In Review**



### **What Is a Girl Worth?**

# My Story of Breaking the Silence and Exposing the Truth about Larry Nassar and USA Gymnastics

By Rachael Denhollander  
Tyndale

When Rachael Denhollander walked onto the stage, even before she reached the podium, the packed audience rose for a standing ovation. As I joined the thunderous applause, the university lecture hall reminded me, for a fleeting moment, of a rock concert. Group adoration is, after all, how we treat rock stars.

Denhollander earned such admiration when she exposed the crimes of Larry Nassar, the USA Gymnastics doctor who was convicted of sexually abusing young gymnasts under the guise of treating them for sports-related injuries. Although she's trained as an attorney, Denhollander's primary role in Nassar's trial was that of a victim who was willing to step forward publicly about being abused at age 15. Nassar, in addition to being on staff at Michigan State University, had treated Olympic athletes and was revered in the world of competitive gymnastics. Facing her powerful abuser, Denhollander proved to be well informed, articulate, and brave.

This memoir is more than a grueling account of crime and punishment. It is a nuanced, thoughtful work by someone who trusts the light enough to shine it in shadowy places, especially the ones she knows and loves best, "the church and the gym." Indeed, Denhollander's deep faith forms an undercurrent as she recounts her story in detail, from the circumstances of her sexual abuse by Nassar to the long journey to prosecution, which began some 16 years later. That she exposes her thoughts and feelings so thoroughly—some might say overly so—not only portrays her as an honest narrator but gives voice to the dynamics of silence and shame that surround sexual abuse.

Victims are often asked: "Why didn't you say something sooner?" Denhollander did, in fact, tell her mother about the abuse after it happened. Knowing Nassar's powerful connections, the two pondered who they could tell. They knew the mystique that surrounded him all too well. They'd both initially been thrilled that the teenaged gymnast was being treated by such a prominent physician.

A few years later, Denhollander's gymnastics coach, Jackie, mentioned that she was considering sending another young gymnast to Nassar. Hoping to spare another girl,

Denhollander told her coach about Nassar's abuse. Jackie listened, verified the story with Denhollander's mother, checked for previous complaints, and reported: "We can't find any evidence anyone else has ever raised the slightest concern about him." Jackie not only chose to send the other gymnast to Nassar, she cautioned Denhollander to keep silent: "I really don't think you should say anything else. . . . It could really go badly for you if it gets around."

The decision to end her silence came years later, unexpectedly. Denhollander was busy caring for three young children at her home in Louisville when she read a story in the *Indianapolis Star*. Reporters were investigating sexual abuse by coaches at USA Gymnastics, and the story provided an email address for anyone with additional leads. Even though Nassar wasn't a coach, and even though she suspected that coming forward would "completely upend" her family's life, Denhollander decided to do so.

Besides having the unqualified support of her parents, Denhollander had an equal partner in her husband, Jacob, who didn't falter even when her pursuit of legal action in another state caused great disruption to their family.

There were other heroes too: journalist Mark Alesia at the *Indianapolis Star*, who was quick to follow up with Denhollander and believe her; detective Andrea Munford, in the MSU police department, who went looking for evidence even when the system protected Nassar; and assistant attorney general Angela Povilaitis, who was adept at anticipating the complications a prosecution would face.

And then there were the other brave victims, some 150 of them, most of whom Denhollander did not meet until after the conviction. At the sentencing hearing, Judge Rosemarie Aquilina allowed each of the victims to make a statement, a process that lasted seven days. Denhollander spoke last. Her powerful statement to Nassar included these words: "I pray you experience the soul-crushing weight of guilt so that you may someday experience true repentance and true forgiveness from God, which you need far more than forgiveness from me, though I extend that to you as well." She framed her statement with the question that haunts her still: "How much is a little girl worth?"

Intensifying the depth and tragedy of Denhollander's story are other instances of abuse, which bookend the abuse by Nassar. At age seven, Rachael was sexually abused by a member of her church. Too young to have words for what happened,

she was saved from further abuse by the sharp eyes of her mother, who noticed that her daughter was avoiding a young man who had formerly been close to the family.

When Denhollander's mother moved to protect her daughter, the family was ostracized from their faith community. A decade later, the young gymnast began to connect the dots:

As I lay in bed the night after Larry abused me, I remembered the time I'd found out why we'd lost our church and had begun to recognize how too many churches treat sexual abuse. The unwillingness to believe. The refusal to engage with experts. The denigration of those who do. Hushed secrecy to preserve the pristine image of "the gospel," when justice would demonstrate the love of Christ much better.

A second painful church story shadows the memoir. As newlyweds in Louisville, the Denhollanders joined a church planted by Sovereign Grace Churches. When charges of abuse and cover-up rose against several prominent church leaders, the allegations were tamped down. Rachael, who had previously written about how church dynamics can contribute to abuse, was not ready to whitewash the situation. For her efforts, she was reprimanded and Jacob was removed from his position of leadership. She lost another faith community to the silencing of abuse.

There is a single positive note in counterpoint. The Denhollanders found a new church—one that later ended up supporting them in the legal battle with Nassar.

One of the many questions the book raises is this one: Which kind of church will we choose to be? Denhollander struggles honestly with this question, quoting *Spotlight*, a film about sexual abuse in the Catholic Church: "If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to abuse one." But she also draws inspiration from the film's main characters, the *Boston Globe* reporters who broke the story. "The film showed that it takes a village to stop the abuse too. One rogue attorney. . . . One survivor who stood up first. . . . One newspaper editor . . . and a team. . . . A village had cast a light where only darkness had been allowed to reign before."

What is a girl worth? Denhollander inspires us to believe that every girl is worth the protection of the village.