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## Filmmaker found that women sharing her name also shared abuse stories

By JULIE WURTH  
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URBANA – You may not know anyone named Angela Shelton. But chances are you know someone who's been abused.

In 2001, Hollywood screenwriter Angela Shelton had a novel idea for a documentary about women in America. She would tour the country in a rented RV, interviewing other women named Angela Shelton.

What the former actress and model found was that they shared more than a name. Over half the women she talked to had been raped, beaten or molested – just like Shelton herself.

Her film, "Searching for Angela Shelton," is a powerful documentary about abuse in America and Shelton's own struggle to recover from her father's incest.

"It really captures the impact of child abuse, and how it creates such long-term damage," said Karen Simms, program director at Rape Crisis Services in Urbana.

Shelton initially found 76 Angela Sheltons on the Internet, got phone numbers for 55 and ended up talking with 40. Of those, 24 said they'd been raped, molested or abused, and four more have come forward since the movie was made. About half were white, half were black.

"My goal was just to survey women in America – who are you, where have you been and where are you going," said Shelton, who will visit Champaign on Monday for a screening of her film. "A lot of them thought I was a telemarketer. I had to put them at ease, make them realize that I was not insane. So I told them my story."

As soon as she mentioned that she'd been molested as a child, "the floodgates opened," she said, though some women wouldn't agree to be filmed.

Shelton originally had no plans to appear in the movie. Her crew started filming her "for fun," but the story soon took a personal twist. She found an Angela Shelton in Charleston, S.C., who tracked sexual predators for a living – and lived about 5 miles from the filmmaker's father. Shelton realized she was going to have to confront her past, and her father.

"It's like a cartoon anvil that comes out of the sky and hits you on the head," she recalled.

Her journey led her to his door on Father's Day. In the movie, he greets her with a hug and denies most of the abuse, blaming it on foggy memories and fabrications. Shelton, who somehow persuades her father

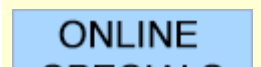
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to talk on film, is quiet for most of their conversation but later erupts in outrage back in her RV.

Much more fulfilling for Shelton was the reunion with her stepbrother, whom she hadn't seen for 10 years. In the movie's most emotional scenes, he admits his part in the abuse, though he, too, was a victim.

Along the way, Shelton draws strength from the Angela Sheltons she meets. There's the one in Detroit, a spiritual woman and date-rape survivor who taught her to have faith; the Angela Shelton in Virginia, who has rebuilt her life after years of beatings by her husband, a police officer; and the Angela Shelton in New York, who fought off a rapist and urges women to stick together.

Woven throughout the movie are agonizing phone conversations with an anonymous Angela Shelton, an alcoholic incest survivor whose self-hatred is palpable.

Bits of comic relief break the tension, as when Shelton surprises one of her interviewees in a fast-food drive-through.

Though it ends with stories of redemption, the project took its toll on Shelton – particularly when she was editing the film. Watching the scenes with her father over and over, hearing all the survivors' stories – the worst weren't even in the movie – sent her into a deep depression.

"I've heard so many horrible stories, it actually made me sick for a long time," said Shelton. "I literally fell apart."

But when she finished the movie and made it available on her Web site, she started hearing from survivors who told her it had transformed their lives.

The movie launched a grass-roots movement of survivors to "break the silence" about what Shelton calls an epidemic of abuse. Experts say one in four women, and one in six men, will experience sexual violence in their lifetime.

"Every single place I go, every person I talk to knows somebody, themselves or a loved one or somebody" who has been abused, she said. "If everybody knows somebody, that's a plague."

Though she is heckled or threatened at nearly every public appearance – some claim she's made up her statistics – she has received apologies from some abusers.

"This is not a women's issue, and men are not bad. I see far more good men, and men really like this movie," she said.

The movie is sold online and through rape crisis centers, which get a portion of the proceeds. She's created a forum on her Web site called "Tell Your Story," where survivors can talk to each other and all the Angela Sheltons. The Angela Shelton Foundation provides help to those recovering from sexual abuse. And she recently became the superhero in a video series, "The Safe Side," co-produced by the "Baby Einstein" creator, that teaches children how to be safe.

Shelton has told her story on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" and "48 Hours," and Lifetime Television will air the movie in March 2006. Though it hasn't been released in theaters, the film won documentary or audience awards at film festivals in Texas, North Carolina and Colorado.

"So much positive has come out of this, so much more than negative," she said. "Out of all the horror, I see far more good."

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