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### Alumni Profile: Christa Neal ('08) Facilitating hope and healing

Jon Merryman

Office of Communications & Marketing

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*Lead photo by Tyler Rosenthal*

For immediate release

**Alumni Profile: Christa Neal ('08) Facilitating hope and healing**

*By Jon Merryman*

March 09, 2021

For more information, contact Ouachita's Office of Communications & Marketing at [comm-mark@obu.edu](mailto:comm-mark@obu.edu) or (870) 245-5206.

Alumna Christa Neal admits that talking about child abuse and maltreatment isn't fun or joyful, but there *is* joy in helping children who are victims of abuse find hope and healing.

Seven years ago, Neal was named executive director of the newly established Percy and Donna Malone Child Safety Center in Arkadelphia. There wasn't a "center" to speak of at the time, just a vision of helping children who were victims of abuse or maltreatment in the area. Soon, a location would be found, Neal would grow funding and support and families would gain much needed services.

Neal entered Ouachita without a clear career path, but a general psychology class her freshman year piqued her interest and led her to work in counseling and now non-profit management.

"I remember at a young age feeling concerned for those who were hurting or needed someone to stand up or fight for them," she said. "I'm definitely for the underdog and am a lover of justice. I had no idea how great the need really was when I first started this work. After seeing the need, I felt responsible to do something, and that is what I hope others will feel as well as they learn more about child abuse."

In her current role, she not only manages the center's staff of eight, but also provides mental health therapy to children, completes grant proposals and reports, provides expert testimony in court, raises funds and support from the community and collaborates with other organizations who help protect children.

"The highs are high and the lows are low," Neal shared. "Soon after I started at the center, my husband, Jay, told me that I seemed different. And I think it is true. You cannot look evil in the face and not be changed."

Because over 90 percent of abused children are the victim of someone they know or trust, when schools closed this spring due to the pandemic, many children were stuck at home with their abusers. Teachers contribute the majority of calls to the child abuse and maltreatment hotline, so without direct access to teachers, reports dropped off almost completely in the spring and summer and then rose sharply in August.

"We know that children wait to tell (if they do tell), so I think we will see the effects of this isolation and these COVID-19 restrictions for years to come," Neal said.

She noted several ways that individuals can be part of the solution, beginning with acknowledging that abuse happens. Statistics show that 10% to 20% of Americans are victims of sexual abuse before the age of 18.

"I encourage everyone to be a safe person for kids," Neal added. "Invest in relationships and educate yourself. Open, age-appropriate conversations with kids in our lives – nieces, nephews, grandkids, our own kids – these are important. While studies show the effects of trauma on children are lasting, studies also show that those who find healing are those who have safe, caring adults in their lives."



To hear more of Christa's story,  
check out the Tiger for Life Podcast at

[obu.edu/tigerforlifepodcast](http://obu.edu/tigerforlifepodcast).