

Margie Downey's Story of Abuse, Survival, and Renewal

Many wonderful people give and work and raise funds for domestic violence prevention, but not too many are actual survivors of violence AND candidly share that reality with others to help them find freedom and dignity, too. It seems when a woman and her children get safe and sane and begin new lives for themselves, it is easier to compartmentalize their thinking and leave all that suffering behind.

I have heard some survivors avoid or criticize others they meet who are dealing with the sorrows and extreme challenges of escaping abuse and/or domestic violence, forgetting how much grace and kindness it took to get free. In contrast, I am a joyful, thriving survivor who is willing to turn back and lend a helping hand to pull others up out of the pit of abuse. I hope my frank story will strengthen and deeply encourage anyone who receives this message.

At least three generations of my family have suffered from domestic violence, and I committed to not only get free of it and stop the cycle of power and control in my life, but also my family line, to the best of my ability. Years later, I realized I also want to be part of the healing process for other women. I want to encourage women at the very hardest times of challenges, in the midst of their mess and despair. I want to hold a lantern of hope to those women and children who feel numb, shell-shocked, and confused-- to light their pathway to better lives, and point out some of the safer footing along the way.

No one anywhere deserves to be mistreated, entrapped, abused, and manipulated. No one deserves violence from the loved ones who above all others should love and care for each other. Nevertheless, abuse and violence are prevalent everywhere: in any age, race, religious group, educational level, or region.

If you are not abused, you know someone who is.

Here is my story, who greatly helped me, and some lessons I learned. In these principles are many classic red flags of getting into abuse, as well as steps of recovery, which I pray will help women struggling with their own challenging families, to understand and to act wisely.

I grew up thinking well of myself and being treated with respect by everyone: friends, family, school, church, and adults I knew. In familiar or new circumstances, I took that healthy self esteem with me wherever I went. I was like an oak tree with deep, well-watered roots. I was loved, pretty, and knew there were things I excelled at, and felt I was living a purpose-filled life with a bright future. There was one weakness in my upbringing that I was unaware was impacting me then, however, leaving me vulnerable to violent relationships.

My father was a good man, but had some of the "Power and Control Wheel's" personality/behavior traits. His own dad had been an alcoholic, so my dad became super self-controlled as a reaction. That was his psychological and Christian reaction to his dad's lack of control., but he

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never learned to deal with the emotions from that relationship. I would describe my dad as a loving, benevolent ruler in the household. I did not then feel so controlled, but my decisions as the firstborn in a large, affluent family were always finally "approved" in my childhood and teens by my parents. My department store job as a teen, my work schedule was subject my parents' plans to demand I babysit siblings instead. My large financial decisions like cars and college were principally chosen and paid for by my parents.

So, when I fell in love with a young preacher who also seemed a benevolent and strong, controlling personality who convinced me he knew more about life as an adult, I hitched my wagon to his dreams and married right after my 21st birthday. He was my first and only boyfriend, chosen in a three-month courtship. I remember my mom telling me she thought he was the only person with a personality strong enough to lead me in our new family. That really turned out to not be good for me, actually.

My young husband was ambitious, but wanted- as early as our newlywed year- to remake me in some image of what he thought I should be, using Bible verses to reason me into obeying his demands. I did not like him trying to remake me, but I was trying to be a loving,,submissive wife and thought I needed to try to please him in any request.

I had not gotten to really know him, much less his family well before we married. I was aware early of his family's history of alcoholism, emotional problems, multiple divorces, and domestic violence. I was completely unaware of the signals of abuse and violence springing from roots of power and control, as I had not known anyone like that personally. I naively expected Jesus to protect our little family from those errors, and married him, despite our pre-marriage counselor telling me not to marry him! I never imagined I would suffer abuse and violence from the man I gave my life to, with great hopes of a happy life.

All that is to explain I had unknown predispositions to become a victim. We remained married twenty five years, despite his telling me in arguments we should divorce (over many years). He abused me increasingly mentally, emotionally, spiritually, psychologically, financially, sexually, and physically. The manipulation and control grew to greater abuse and eruptions of life-threatening violence against my life. Eventually, he began to place the children's lives in danger, too.

Some of the abusive patterns I experienced from him were:

- Taking car parts out of my car so I could not drive away.
- Putting all his income in a single account with only his name, that I could not access for household expenses.
- The pantry and fridge were often bare. When my mom came to visit us, she observed the scarcity and wondered how I made meals for a family of seven, did not say anything to me then.
- Dressing himself in expensive clothes and shoes, but not giving me funds for my clothes. Besides old clothes I wore to church, my wardrobe daily was jeans and t-shirts. He scorned and criticized by appearance and sociability, but did not provide for me for these needs.

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- He suggested homeschooling, which I did for 20 years with our five children. However, he would not provide the summertime funds to buy the books and materials we needed at the start of a year, or agreed to enroll the children in classes/ tutoring in special subjects, which he later failed to pay the teachers the monthly fees to attend.
- It was hard to “make do” and embarrassing not to have bills paid, so I kept little businesses going to keep some cash liquidity available. He talked me into closing down several of my obviously prospering little businesses, intimidated by my potential for independence and cleverness and hard work, I suppose. He wanted me to depend on him and said so.
- When I was 7 months pregnant with our only son, my husband assaulted me, slammed me into walls, and repeatedly kicked my womb, making me urinate on the hall carpet and scaring me that I would abort the baby. I had to clean the carpet after the fight and never got an apology or offer to obtain a medical check-up on the baby's health.
- I was repeatedly strangled or smothered in bed in the middle of the night..After the first attack like this, I left him for six weeks, moving in with our two children back into my parents' home
- I jumped and cowered when he came through the door after his workday. I was relieved and happy when he was away from home. I learned later in counseling this is part of what is called called hypervigilance and post traumatic stress disorder.
- I dreamed at night of being a single mother, but considered it a troubling nightmare as I repeatedly had exactly the same dream. I wanted to be a wife and mom., not on my own
- I could not see a way out of abuse and violence. How could I divorce a preacher? How could I support myself and five children? I saw no way out, but to continue to reform (falsely blame) myself, trying to please and placate him. It was never enough.
- When we met with his business clients, afterwards on the way home, my husband berated me and criticized every word or part of my "performance." No matter how nice a meal or location or what I had done, it was miserable to go places in public with him. His business clients saw something was going on and were embarrassed.
- At giant banquets or in front of his audiences where he was the speaker for his business, he announced I was his wife of (___) years, and it was like (_ minutes underwater. The audiences gasped and stared to see my reaction. I died ten thousand deaths when he did that stunt. It made him only look bad, and he never realized it. I knew it, but sat there surrounded by thousands of shocked spectators feeling sorry for me.
- My husband spoke well of me to others, even boasted about my accomplishments as a educator and fine character, parenting, etc., but I rarely heard it.
- When events came up to give me presents, he chose the gift, rarely asking and getting what I desired. I remember one birthday he bought me a huge electric walking/ jogging machine so I would slim down, and installed it at the busy door to our kitchen. Another year, he bought me tacky aluminum and plastic-strapped yard chairs that rocked. They were unsuitable for any terrain and ridiculous.
- Another year, he bought me a small handgun, when he developed a growing gun and knife collection of his own and would shoot at trees in the country. I refused the gift, which displeased him; he kept guns in his closet, including “mine.” His loaded guns and knives scared me, and worried me for the kids' safety, as well as mine I learned later he started secretly drinking Vodka alone late at night about this time, hiding it in a brown sack. Alcohol added to our troubles.

Some other things he did to put the children in danger or at risk:

- Tying a makeshift sled to the back of the Chevy Suburban and dragging the young children on an icy field at fast speeds, with no protection, steering, or safety controls. It terrified them, and me, too, when they returned from that outing and told me about it, and about falling off the sled.
- While I cooked supper, he and our toddler son played a cruel game of butting heads like billy goats, but impacting really hard so my boy's head hurt and swelled with a "goose-egg" on his forehead. His dad was trying to toughen him up and insulted him if the child cried or complained. I forbade the game, but he would do this when I cooked supper and could not see them.
- My husband went jogging on distances so dramatically far with our prepubescent daughter, that she stopped having menses and became anorexic with self-loathing. She recovered from both ailments eventually, but still struggles with issues.
- He taught the children to regard me as weak and to confide in him only, but not in me as their mother. He lied about me to them, his friends and business associates, lied to me about myself, and spun a web of his own reality interpretation. He once said that the only reality he knew was the reality in his own head. Some of the children kept trusting me, but some were persuaded away or thought I was weak.
- There was not enough love in the house for him, so he wanted all the affection, attention, and ownership of all possessions. He became an emotional and controlling whirlpool.
- He was foolish enough after our divorce to marry a second woman who was abusive to him and very cruel to children from my marriage to him. His second wife's permitted abuses to my children broke my heart, and led to 12 years of family court battles to protect, provide for, and nurture the children, despite cruelty when in their home.

Let me fast-forward to today, to good news and solutions I have found for us.:

- I have gone from: escaping his violence via sleeping in my car, at my parents' home, or with friends to: having my own, cozy home in a safe neighborhood.
- I have gone from: losing his health and life insurance protection for 12 years uninsured to: being insured again (even if it is only an ACA subsidized coverage.)
- I have gone from: denigration and shame to: self appreciation and self respect again, even popularity at work..
- I have gone from: T-shirts to: professional wardrobe.
- I have gone from: the "divorce-mobile," a clunker car he bought me when he cashed in my Suburban to: an attractive, safe car less than 4 years old. Finally, I have enough credit.
- I have gone from: community and service projects my ex-spouse selected or led to: starting my own charity, a 501c3 tax-exempt nonprofit corporation which helps women and children needing to get out of abuse and violence. Now my primary domestic violence prevention labor is through the 501(c)3 charity I started, Abigail's Archangels Domestic Violence Prevention (see www.abigailsangels.org). We are growing our funding, board, web site, services, and areas served this year. It is exciting, and we work from the perspective of healthy survivors of abuse helping other women to get healthy and helped.

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- Part of that violence prevention work has also been activities with The Family Place in Dallas. I am deeply concerned and committed to holding out a lantern of hope, my own little grace beacon, to encourage those at the beginning of the difficult journey out of abuse into new freedom, respect, love, hope, and a new LIFE. At The Family Place, I managed the library for kids and adults, stocked the supply shelves for Shelter residents, sorted donated clothing, helped with children's classes for encouraging games/counseling in a group, popped popcorn for movie nights, hung child art on the wall, monitored the front gate security, and visited with residents to encourage them with empathy. I have in the past told my story at major fundraising events for The Family Place. The results were powerful.

My personal journey included some personal spiritual struggles and resolutions. I challenged everything I believed about the Bible, God, my life and purpose, womanhood, what a family means, ... yet kept my faith in Jesus as the wars raged around me in so many arenas. I am sure I would not be alive, sane, and doing this well without Jesus Christ. If you wonder how I survived and came successfully to the other side of the deep ocean of abuse, I must explain that my greatest asset, solution, strength, and best friend through this is Jesus.

Police, criminal court, investigations, lawyers, and even going to court without a lawyer sometimes are part of our story, but that is for another article. It was a police officer called to our home the last time I was assaulted by my husband, who gave me a reality mirror to see myself. Maybe these statements will help someone else. He told me I had three options at that point: 1) A smoking gun, because I would shoot my husband in self defense 2) A body bag, because I might stay until he killed me or 3) Choose when and how I would leave safely with the children. I decided in less than two days I was ready to leave, while my husband sat in jail for attacking me. I was ready and bold and never looked back on the decision to get safe.

Not all of my children came through the last 20 years with their faith intact, or their morals, either. Each of them was in years of counseling, some as children and some as adults. I am sad to see their scars, love them as they are. I hope and pray they find their way to happy, loving lives where they also feel loved and respected.

I have gone from shattered credit to building credit successfully. I mentioned the car financing, and recently rented a washer/ dryer, a huge blessing to launder at home. I walk with a cane now, and pulling my laundry around to wash it had become almost impossible.

In 2002, I had a pastor who was clueless about abuse before the divorce, but found a church that had ministries to divorcing, abused women and knew how to help and love us through hard choices and the common poverty of a single mom. Many psychological counselors had failed us over 25 years of "marital counseling", but in the new church and at The Family Place, we received appropriate help.

From The Family Place, we received these services and probably more I do not even know: counseling for the children and me, for me with a group of women also escaping abuse, for the

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children with other children, and each of us individually counseled for years. We had social services described to us with contacts provided. We got new concepts to change our thinking and behavior, teddy bears for Christmas, large candy Easter baskets, backpacks of school supplies for three children for several years, and art therapy sessions.

When I testified in criminal court regarding the violence from my husband, The Family Place sent ambassadors in the courtroom supporting me emotionally and flagging to the judge they knew the case. The staff and counselors from The Family Place came for some of my divorce hearings to support me, too.

From the local schools, free supplies were donated to us, too. We benefitted from clothes closets at churches and Network of Community Ministries in Richardson. Various charities helped me with rent or utilities many times as I pursued regular employment, sometimes working four jobs at a time.

My parents reversed-mortgaged their paid-for home to pay my divorce and custody legal bills and housing for several years, until they could not help any longer. They sacrificed so much to help us, once they knew what was happening.

I am forever grateful to all the people and dozens of organizations who helped me start a new life free of abuse and violence for my children and me. There have been over \$200,000 in services and support and legal help spent just on my family, the best I can add up over the years. Friends of the children and me have "run toward the fire" like brave firemen to be our devoted friends. They have been lifelines.

What are some of the other helpful things I have learned through all of this agony, drama, and healing?

1. God is on His throne, cares for each of us, and is powerful. Miracles do happen.
2. There is purpose to life, and anything painful I must bear is my choice to accept and make into a blessing in some way to someone else.
3. I do not want what I suffered to be wasted, so helping others makes good use of my suffering and reduces theirs.
4. Face each day with hope and joy and love. The greatest of these is love.
5. Forgiveness is good for ME. Proactive justice and protection can and should be pursued, but the internal forgiveness of letting GO of the offenses helped me heal and move on to my new life. I have been forgiven my mistakes by God, and He gives me (His own) forgiveness for those horrible things done to me. I can let go. I did let go, because I did not want to be consumed with bitterness. I do not want pet dragons in my heart.
6. Family is who you choose. Most of my relatives have been furious for me to be public about helping others out of violence and abuse. I am shunned, rejected and challenged by relatives I never would have dreamed would side AGAINST me and my safety, including relatives who chose to keep their own family abuse secret. So, I enjoy those relatives who do want to interact in close relationship, knowing I will keep being open and helping others get out.

7. You can learn to support yourself, outside of abusive relationships. There are good options. It is a lie that a woman is forsaken or unable to provide for her children. It takes a while to work up a sustainable career path, but there is a way to it. There is help.

8. You can survive downsizing your possessions, residence, theft, disappointment, and most injuries to your body or your ego. You can survive, and even thrive.

Watch us thrive now!