

Anonymous

'I was only 12; I didn't know what love meant.'

The story I'm telling you began in Mexico. I was raised by my grandparents. When I was 12 years old, I met my ex-partner and went to live with him, against the will of my grandparents. You could say that it wasn't real love because I was only 12 years old. The truth is I didn't know what love meant. I was so young, and maybe I was hopeful, but as time went on, I realized it wasn't love. I've never felt that. During that time there were many incidents of domestic violence. I lived with him for about 19 years until I separated from him on January 31, 2020.

He beat me from as young as 12, until I was 18. I was in middle school when I went to live with him, but after about a year, I went back and was able to graduate middle school. After, I went to high school. Throughout that time there were always arguments, quarrels. I'd fight him, he'd hit me, I'd go live with my grandparents and then I'd go back. He was very jealous. Two or three years back, he'd control the way I dressed, he wouldn't let me have friends, he wouldn't let me talk to anyone. I couldn't look in any direction because he would start telling me, "Who are you looking at, do you like that guy?" Then he'd start insulting me on the street.

Over time our children were born, but it got worse even during the pregnancies we'd fight. I honestly didn't want to have them because we were always arguing and fighting. I felt bad because all of my pregnancies were filled with yelling and insults. I'm not going to deny that there were some good things, but most of the years were bad. Even when we'd walk to take the kids to school, he'd yell at me in front of them. There were days that we'd spend hours arguing, from 8 a.m. to 10 or 11 at night.

I felt hopeless, frustrated that he'd insult me and that my children were listening to so many things. I'd say, "It's enough already!" I tried to cover his mouth with my hands, but that bothered him and he'd push me. His blows started. I'd push him back, that's how it would get started. It was very ugly. I was already desperate. I couldn't figure out how to get out of that life. Since I didn't work, I didn't have any money. He was always there in the house. He wouldn't let me work so I had no way to leave.

'Many times, I tried to ask for help.'

I arrived to California about ten or 11 years ago. I have no relatives here; my whole family was in Mexico. I couldn't figure out where to go. I met a friend who provided me with support. But many times, I asked for help, even from his family. They didn't want to be in the middle, to choose between helping him or me. I was able to go to my friends' homes a few times. But since that was near where my ex-partner lived, he'd go find me. I'd have to go back over and over. I always went back because he said he was going to change; things would be different. But nothing changed. Just the first few days, the first two months were better, and then everything would go back to the way things were.

Once my children were born, it was different. The moment you see their faces when they're born, everything changes. You see them grow up over time. They call you mom, and you see them walk...they wake you up and give you kisses and hugs...and that's a lot, it feels different. When they tell you I love you, you can't buy that kind of love--the love of a child. That's why I decided to get out of that relationship. I didn't want to see my kids so timid. They were always afraid that dad was coming! *Dad's coming! Behave!* When he wasn't there, we did other things. He said everything we did was bad; he wouldn't let us go out or he was always in a bad mood.

I didn't want to be in that relationship anymore. My children were traumatized. Poor things, they no longer smiled, were always sad, always scared. Often while they were sleeping the yelling and fighting started. They'd hear all that. Even now, when the youngest are asleep, they wake up startled, remembering all the trauma.

The last time I said, "That's it! This can't go on like this anymore!" I told my daughter, the eldest, who is now 11. I sent a letter to her teacher and the teacher reached out to children and family services. The next day the worker showed up to interview us about what happened, what the whole situation at home was like. They even spoke to the kids. I saw my chance. I thought, *it's now or never! It's now or never!* When the worker asked if I'd be willing to leave if I had the chance, I said yes. I didn't think about it twice.

'They're mentally healthier and so am I.'

I used to think I was fine enough there, but thanks to all the classes I took, I learned that the relationship wasn't good for my kids or for me. Even now I'm more at peace. I have a lot of stress...I have to find a job and I'm afraid to think that I'm going to be alone and how I have to provide for my kids' future. How am I going to pay all my expenses, pay rent, the bills? But I'm better off that I don't hear him yelling and fighting every day. My children are not sad or scared anymore. At first my kids were timid; they didn't even want to speak. Now they yell and argue with each other.

When I first separated from him, whenever I heard his voice, I'd be afraid. I still have very bad insomnia. I've always had a lot of nightmares that he's after me, that he wants to hurt me. As soon as I hear his voice, I feel distressed. It's happening less and less now, but I remember that feeling. The children go to visit with him and they say things that I don't want to talk about, because then I remember him and feel unsettled.

They'd like to be with both mom and dad, but I tell them that isn't possible anymore. It's better to be like this: daddy at his house, mommy is in her house. We're both going to love them just the same. I've cried a lot and felt very bad and other times I'm fine. They're mentally healthier and so am I.

I was taken to a shelter initially, then moved to another. A year has passed since January 31st, 2020. It's been a difficult year but now we're better. I'm still living in a shelter. We're okay and I'm going to get through this. I've learned a lot of things with the classes I've taken. That it's not good to be in a relationship that is toxic and violent; it's not good for my mental health or that of my children. As time goes on, we're going to be better.

My advice is don't stay silent. Get help. There's a lot of help. Sometimes we don't know about it. I was like that before. I didn't have the knowledge about any of those things until later. I've had depression too, but over time I came out, little by little, I overcame it. I'm not saying that I'm 100% better. But if you get depressed, and you have no desire to live or to do anything, then yes, get help.

Policy makers could create more campaigns, more publicity, advertise more on television, put it on social media, on Facebook, on Instagram, all that. You can put things up so people look at it, read about it and if they're in that situation, that may encourage them to not stay silent, to speak up, to look for help. Also look into it (the violence). If the partner, or the man's been arrested with a criminal record, they sometimes let them go. Look into that. Check to see if it's dangerous for the woman because sometimes they let them out and they go after her. The authorities need to focus on those matters.

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