

TRACY ESCOBEDO | SPARTAN DAILY

Surviving domestic violence isn't shameful



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Trigger Warning: violence, suicide, sexual assualt.

I wish I could tell my 17-year-old self to delete that Instagram message.

I wish I could tell her to run, to ignore him, that he would quickly become a nightmare, a disease and scar I have yet to rid myself of.

I wish I could tell 18-year-old me it wasn't her fault.

Domestic violence is never the victim's fault.

The start of domestic violence awareness month has pushed me to reflect on my own horrific experience.

I met my abuser at 17 years old. He began as an unimportant annoyance to me. A man messaging me through social media every few weeks while I was enthralled in my first relationship. After that boyfriend and I broke up, I decided to give my future abuser a chance, unbeknown to me.

He quickly charmed me with flowers, gifts and sweet words. What I later learned was love bombing, had my 17-year-old heart soaring.

Love bombing is the action of subjecting a person to an excessive amount of affection and attention in hopes of gaining something according to the Oxford English Dictionary.

I had never experienced so much attention and love in such a short amount of time. I was never desired or pursued in high school, so garnering male attention was a fun new adventure for me.

After the first three blissfully-ignorant months of the relationship, my abuser let the loving and gentle facade fall.

The changes in his behavior started out small, like responding to my messages less often and no longer paying for my coffee. I noticed these changes but started excusing the behavior, expecting I had done something wrong.

These small changes soon became aggressive. I went from hiding the fact I would pay for all of our meals to hiding my tear-swollen eyes and bruises.

I heard that someone can only pretend for three months, then their facade of kindness and love disintegrates. I never believed it until the first time my best friend asked me why I always looked like I had just cried whenever I saw her.

This abuse, like many domestic abuse cases, only escalated.

The verbal abuse came first. From invalidating my Mexican-American identity to threatening that he would kill himself if I left him, I heard all of the manipulation tactics an abuser could muster.

I was belittled for being bisexual. I was simultaneously called slurs and propositioned for threesomes by this monster masquerading as my boyfriend. My entirety of a being became ammunition for an assault of verbal carnage.

I was conditioned into believing that I didn't deserve better, that the abuse he was forcing upon me was the best love I would ever receive. I became isolated from my friends and family while still remaining by their side. I was ashamed to admit that I was unhappy and allowed him to treat me this way. That's why I stayed for just over a year.

One of the ways he kept me beneath him was the constant begging for love. I had to beg him to pay attention to me, to give me effort and affection, to do the bare minimum.

No one should ever have to beg their partner for the bare minimum in a relationship. I soon learned that this was another form of abuse. I was made to feel as though he held more power in the relationship instead of it being equal.

The violence came next.

I had the great misfortune of being with an abuser that was a skilled wrestler and an alcoholic. A terrible combination if you ask me. Without going into graphic detail, I became his unconsenting practice dummy.

Somehow, I became even more ashamed of myself once he started leaving marks on me. I felt as though they were a reminder each time I looked in the mirror of how weak and worthless I was.

This experience is unfortunately a common one. Over 910,000 people experienced domestic violence in the U.S. in 2021, according to the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice programs article.

Many victims of this type of violence do not even consider themselves victims, according to the same article.

I fell into this horrific line of logic for the majority of my stint with my abuser. I only clawed my way out of this line of thinking when the abuse worsened.

I was raped multiple times throughout my abusive relationship. He always used the excuse that he was drunk, he didn't remember, that we were together so consent was implied.

Those are lies, excuses to wave away the severity and consequences of what is one of the most humiliating, dehumanizing, and damaging acts someone can inflict upon another.

Sexual and physical violence is never the victim's fault. It does not matter if you were yelling, how much skin was showing, how angry the other person was. No one deserves to experience such cruelty.

It doesn't matter if someone is drunk, if they're partners, if the other denies the assault, it doesn't invalidate or dismiss the truth.

No one should be gaslit and coerced into believing that their rape never happened, that they're just being dramatic.

I plead to victims to speak up, to press charges, to seek justice, because I didn't give myself the respect and internal trust to do so until it was too late.

I finally stood my ground after my countless attempts to break off the relationship when I witnessed my ex teaching his 12-year-old sister to use the "N-word."

This little girl was the only reason I stuck through the abuse. My thought at the time was, "If he's screaming at and beating me, at least he isn't doing it to her." I stayed in fear for my own life and for hers.

I finally realized that my own life was my only responsibility, that I couldn't save this young girl even if I wanted to.

I'm torn between hoping she reads this so she knows the warning signs, and desperately praying that she doesn't so her image of her brother isn't so violently tainted.

Despite leaving him, my ex had the delusional idea that I still belonged to him. January of 2021 marked the beginning of my two year endurance of stalking and threats.

After two or three months of pretending as though I wasn't terrified of every loud car and every phone call, I broke down and called my father.

No daughter should ever have to cry to her father about how scared she was of her ex-boyfriend, who had been harassing me for months, showing up at my house, threatening me with revenge porn and calling me at all hours of the day.

I was lucky enough to get a restraining order quickly and easily.

My lawyer, ironically the same man that represented my father when my mother left him, said something that terrified my little 18-year-old self.

He told me that he was surprised I was still alive.

He told me that he's seen his clients kill and be killed, and that I could have easily been one of them.

That traumatized me even more.

He wasn't too far off from the truth though, which made it even worse. My ex had attempted to take my life multiple times while he was drunk. Of course my ex didn't believe me when I told him that.

I was one of the lucky ones, getting a restraining order so quickly. I find it disgusting that my experience was considered lucky. Our court system constantly fails victims of violence. I'm just grateful that I got justice before I was six feet under.

Even though I have this so-called luck, my ex still harasses me. I have gotten dozens of phone calls that I suspect are him within the past few weeks, two years after I left him. I had to make various police reports documenting his repetitive breaking of the restraining order. I'm so lucky, aren't I?

What I am lucky and grateful for is my recovery.

I had an incredible support system once the truth came out. Family and friends rallied around me, offering me their home to hide in and their arms to find comfort in. I was lucky enough to experience a healthy and loving romance that helped me unlearn my survival tendencies and fears that were instilled in me.

Not everyone gets the chance to recover.

Not everyone gives themselves that chance either.

The most important lesson I learned is that being a domestic violence survivor is not something shameful. Staying silent gives all abusers power. Keeping quiet about the pain and experience is a disservice to yourself and other survivors.

I share my story in the hopes of reaching another person who is scared, isolated, and in pain. My story isn't a pleasant one, but a necessary one.

Talking about domestic violence shouldn't be a shameful experience. Expressing pain and recovery isn't labeling yourself as weak. That was the hardest part of my recovery, realizing that it wasn't my fault, and that I never deserved the violence that was inflicted upon me.

I am grateful I survived and have the strength to share my story. Passing that strength to another survivor will be my greatest triumph and insult to that coward of an ex that decided to lay his hands on me.

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