

First and foremost I would like to thank all of you for coming and supporting us in taking this important step in our lives. Friends, family and sponsors your kind words, patience, and donations have made an enormous impact on many lives including mine. My name is [REDACTED] and this is the story of my journey down the rabbit hole of an abusive relationship.

Complete control over another's life is not given in one day; it is an ebbing process full of isolation, which until you have regained full control of your life, you don't even realize it occurred. His control over me started with the food I ate, no process foods, no sugars, no fast food, and no microwaves. At first I thought he was just extremely healthy and was concerned for my health, I didn't realize that his rules did not apply to him but only to me. Then began control over my dress, nothing even slightly revealing in public or I would embarrass him because my body was unattractive. After I became pregnant he began to control what movies were in the house, what I should read, whom I should be around and when I could see them, I eventually lost contact with family and friends and became a recluse only leaving for work or if he was with me. He controlled which therapist I would see, and the church we would attend. Ever so often I would sneak away to a friend's house to eat micro-waved mac n cheese and cheetos because that was what I was craving, then feel guilty because he would tell me that I wasn't giving our child a good start in life. The abuse extended to all matters of my life. Financially I was responsible for all bills and began working three jobs to support us up until my ninth month of pregnancy; he would get a job then quit or be fired because of his anger. Any medical bills for my high-risk pregnancy were my responsibility because my name was the one on the bills. If any of our friends would suspect what home was really like he would tell them that I was crazy, bi-polar, unreasonable, a liar, none of which were true. He admitted occasionally he was a jerk to me, his words not mine, but that he was sorry and found God and it would never happen again. They would believe him and congratulate him for sticking it out with me.

Control beget fear and fear ruled my life. I became a clock-watcher. Everyday I would dread 5 o'clock, time to go home, make sure the house was completely clean, cook a meal from scratch, clean up the meal, etc, all the while listening to all the ways in which I was inferior to all the other women he could be with, and how I should count myself lucky to be with him and lucky that he didn't physically violate me. I thought things would get better when he got a job where he would be away from home a few days a week; but that just meant he had to squeeze in all that control and manipulation into a shorter period of time. I dreaded Monday-Thursday and the click of the key in the door. All I wanted was to be loved and love in return. I believed him when he said I couldn't support myself, that I couldn't raise our daughter alone, that I would be a horrible mother, and would always be that single mother crying on the bathroom floor because no one would want me.

There are common misconceptions about domestic violence that permeate our society. Many of which you have probably heard before; that domestic violence is solely physical abuse, that a woman who chooses to stay in an abusive relationship deserves the treatment she receives, or that it affects only weak individuals. Domestic violence is not just contained to physical threats, or actions. It encompasses emotional, financial, and spiritual control and manipulation. It could be all or a few of these categories; however the effects of which can take a lifetime to overcome. The recovery is a gradual, ever changing process, and comes with many hard realizations. The national number of times it takes for a woman to actually leave an abusive relationship is 7 or 8. The ladies at

AADA understand the process of realization, mourning, acceptance and empowerment. They demonstrate patience when it is needed, strength when wanted, and compassion always.

These victims are intelligent, capable beings whose only crime per se is wanting the dream many of us share, to love and be loved. I myself have two degrees and will shortly be working on a third; weakness and intelligence have nothing to do with abuse. We come from a variety of backgrounds, educational levels, races and creeds; however the tie that unites us is love. How do we show it? What does it mean? Whom do we give our love to? For myself this concept of love was muddled.

I had the preconceived notion that love meant doing whatever is necessary to boost, bolster, care, and support my partner; most often at the expense of myself. That notion intensified with the arrival of our daughter, and I fell more in love with the fantasy of what I thought our family was than the reality it had become. In the beginning I was able to maintain a façade of normalcy in public, but over the years the energy to maintain faded, and friends and family began to get glimpses into our reality.

As a child I learned that anything worth having takes hard work and determination, and unfortunately that concept was twisted from a typical motivational phrase into an excuse to stay in a relationship full of torment and control. I, like many of my compatriots, was manipulated into believing if I just tried harder, gave more of myself, cleaned more, paid more bills and generally attempted to provide a perfect and stress free household that fantasy of the happy family I had in my mind would be a reality. However his anger grew with each passing day, and his cycles of abuse became closer and closer together. At first I knew I could expect what I called a bad time or moment every few months, then it came every few weeks, by the time I was ready to leave for good it was every few days and I was exhausted emotionally, physically and mentally.

Finally one morning alone with [REDACTED] after an especially bad moment, which lasted all night, I looked at her and saw a glimpse of her future. My ex did not care if [REDACTED] was awake or asleep when he exuded his anger, he did not care that this precious gift was being a witness to abuse and ultimately feeling the hostility in the house. I knew if I didn't leave him, this would be her future. This would be what she would consider love, and I wanted a world better for her. So I took the next opportunity that came along and didn't have to wait long. Fear was still an issue, he had left us once before and returned, so I just waited for the next time he wanted to leave us to "go do his thing," and wondered if I could do it, if I could survive without him.

My freedom was given to me last February, a few days after Valentines. My father suggested I go to a support group for abuse, I knew what my ex was doing was wrong, but I thought abuse was just physical violence which at that time his anger hadn't escalated to that point, so I hesitated to go to AADA. Debby likes to say "one of the hardest choices victims make, is to walk through the door of AADA." It is because walking through the door is admitting something is wrong, admitting that you need help to overcome, and admitting to yourself after being told you aren't worth it that you truly are and deserve a better life.

On my first group session I entered feeling like an imposter, then one by one, the ladies all told their stories, each one more and more similar to my own. You could almost replace the perpetrator in each story with my ex. My awakening started to occur, I felt

like I had been trapped inside myself for years. Although I entered with the intention of just listening, when it came my turn to tell my story for the first time in years it felt like I actually could tell someone my story. At first the whole range of emotions consumed me; guilt, attachment, fear, anger, mourning of the fantasy I had built. As the weeks went by, each time I entered our safe place I was a bit stronger. I changed the locks on the doors, bought deadbolts, and reviewed my safety plan. I packed up all of his things and put them out of the house. Week by week I took back my life ever mindful of being alert and concentrated on Abby's and my safety. I took him to court for custody of my daughter, he signed over full custody last March on my father's birthday, to which my dad said he couldn't have asked for a better present. [REDACTED] however did not give up control without a fight. In June after many weeks of his anger over my newfound independence escalating, he gave me reason to put the safety plan the ladies at AADA had taught me into use. With my daughter asleep in her crib and myself trapped in the basement kitchen of my house he resorted to physical violence to "make me listen," I found the strength to enact the safety plan and snapped into action, protecting my daughter and myself. I had made it clear that no longer will I be the victim, no longer could he manipulate me, or his words and actions destroy me.

It is an unfortunate reality that thousands of rooms just like ours are filled each week in our country with thousands of victims seeking advice, compassion and a way out of the abusive cycle, which we know to well. However if you had the opportunity to ask any of the victims I'm sure all of us would say how grateful we are for programs like The Alliance Against Domestic Abuse. The lessons I have learned continue to give me strength against his onslaught of insults and manipulations that exist still today. They give me wisdom to know that what happened to me was not because of something I could have done better, but because of the choice he made to be a perpetrator. The Alliance has given [REDACTED] and myself a future brighter than anything I could have hoped for myself if had asked me at this time last year. I no longer watch the clock, his words and actions no longer have sway over my life, I don't cry in a heap on the bathroom floor, and if I want to I eat micro-waved mac n cheese and potato chips for dinner I do so. [REDACTED] and I are safe, healthy and have a total abundance of love in our house thanks to our friends who stood by us, family who listened, and of course the ladies of the Alliance Against Domestic Abuse.