

Surviving a Lifetime of Abuse

by Diann Diaz

Survival. It's hard work, especially my definition: sustaining, overcoming and transforming deeply painful experiences into something positive.

I'm 43. I have survived incest, child abuse, domestic violence and child abuse of my son. I am now happily married and a grandmother five times over. I use my past on a daily basis for my profession. I have taken my history and crafted it as a tool to help prevent domestic and sexual violence and to help others take their experiences and become survivors.

I am the Peaceline Coordinator with the Women's Resource Center of the New River Valley in Radford, Va. I teach middle-school and high-school-aged youth that violence in relationships is wrong. I teach them about healthy relationships. I am approached on a regular basis by those who have been sexually assaulted. They disclose their situations to me, and I connect them with the resources they need to become a survivor.

The first child abuse I can remember was when I was 3. My mother pushed me down a flight of stairs that led to a concrete basement. A few weeks after that push, I had my first seizure, which led to a three-day coma. I remember being told my seizure was from a high fever because my mother covered me with too many blankets.

I yearned to be loved by my parents, but I never felt it from them. Growing up, I had pets. Each spare minute was savored with them, whether it was my German shepherd, cats, rabbits or horses. This is where I learned unconditional love. When I was 9, I began riding horses. We lived on a 15-acre parcel of land, which contained endless fields for me to gallop my dark brown quarter-horse, "Mama." A gorgeous creek flowed at the end of our property. I would often find myself packing a lunch and riding "Mama" for the afternoon – away from my mother. I would take my horse to the river and it would be just the two of us. My horse and I had many conversations. No one argued. No voice was raised.

At age 14, my innocence was taken away from me – my favorite uncle raped me.

My mother wasn't even surprised. She already knew that my uncle had sexually assaulted his daughters. Nothing was done to help me or to punish my uncle.

Shock. Disillusionment. Anger. Why did my mother allow me to travel half way across the country and stay at a sex-offender's home? I felt worthless. No one cared. No one loved me.

I became a straight “A” teen that started drinking heavily and was verbally abusive toward her parents. They sent me to boarding school.

My parents soon divorced. My father moved to Costa Rica.

When I returned from boarding school, my mother then thought life would be different. She partied constantly. She took me to her clubs when she partied. At 15, she took me with her to bars and poured whiskey in my coke glass to “loosen me up.” I thought it was pretty cool. Soon I became her bait. I would dance and attract men. Many of them would come home with us once the bars closed. After one of those “nights out with mom,” one of the men had entered my bedroom. He sat down on my bed to “talk.” As he began talking I became frightened. Without him even realizing it, I reached behind my bed and grabbed the golf club I kept there. I swung it around and clobbered him. He left and told my mother; she was so furious with me. But I kept the golf club anyway.

At 17, I was accepted into college a year early. I left home and lived on campus. The following year I met the man who became my first husband. He was 31; I was 18. He was so handsome. He made me feel so important, and I was mesmerized by every word spoken from his lips. We had only been dating a few months before he proposed. I was 19. We married just two days before I graduated from college. My family knew nothing about the wedding.

A week after I graduated from college we moved to Florida. We eventually found a job together managing a hotel 24/7. One of us had to be at the hotel at all times, which became stressful. My husband drank daily. As the stress heightened, so did his drinking and his heavy hand. His words were even worse. He would use my previous sexual assault from my uncle to make me feel guilty or ashamed if I would not happily have sex with him. My husband wanted sex at least two or three times a day. At that time, I knew nothing other than to give in. Each and every time I gave him my mind, body and soul, I would lie there and pretend to be somewhere else. I was taught at an early age that I was worthless, so this situation to me was normal.

My husband told me how to fold the towels, how the dishes would be put away. He yelled at me if my chores were not done correctly. If I was ever late with any chore, when he had had too much to drink, a fist would meet my face. Whenever I would go grocery shopping, he would question me if I was gone too long. He had me programmed – my timing, my activities.

We changed hotel management jobs after about a year, which allowed us more freedom in our personal lives. With more freedom, my husband and I partied. With our partying came his

loss of control. One night we were fighting. It started like any other fight – something stupid. Police were called, but my bruises weren't enough to have him arrested. Informing them my husband had thrown me up against the dresser and wall and punched me in the face wasn't enough. Telling them that we wrestled over his gun and that I threw it into the ocean wasn't enough.

The next day, he went out for a while. After hesitating, I finally called my mother. I told her everything. I called my brother who lived nearby. He came. My brother purchased an airline ticket so I could return to my mother's house in New England for a while. It wasn't the best place to go, but it was the only place.

At 20, I moved back in with my mother. She never mentioned anything about the abuse I endured, except that my husband was a jerk. For me, nothing had changed. Six years had gone by since I was sexually assaulted by my uncle. Now my husband had abused me. She at least acknowledged my husband's abuse.

She took me out drinking as soon as I returned, even with the black eye. I was in a state of shock at the time; I went along with almost anything. Two or three nights a week my mother and I would go out. She still used me as her "magnet for men." The way to survive my mother was to go along with her. I knew no other way. I honestly did not know anything was wrong with our relationship except that the situations she put me in didn't always make me feel good. Once again, men would come back to the house with us. If I didn't go to bed with them, my mother did. This even happened with one of my school friends. He wanted to sleep with me; I refused. The next morning I found him in her bed.

I met someone who I thought was wonderful. He was the brother-in-law of one of my mother's boyfriends. We spent quite a bit of time together when he was in town. He was handsome, down-to-earth, low key, soft toned. But 12 weeks after I had moved back in with my mother, I found out I was pregnant. When I told him I was pregnant he didn't seem upset. He took the news well for being married. A few weeks later he called me and asked if I was sure it was his. I can now understand why he asked that question. But my heart sank. I never spoke to him again.

I didn't want my newborn close to my mother, so pregnant and divorced, I moved back to Florida. I found an apartment and a job. My father helped me financially with a car. He wanted me to put the baby up for adoption. He didn't think I was capable of raising a child on my own.

Despite all the odds, my beautiful son came into this world on June 5, 1986. The love of my life! My angel. And now, 22 years later, he is still proving that to me. My son and I managed quite well together. I slowly began letting men back into my life.

I finally met someone – a vice president of a real estate company – someone who was well-known in the community. He was fun-loving, intelligent, charming and had three children. He doted on me and gave me the attention that I liked. He had pushed me and slapped me when we were dating, but I never really thought that he would really abuse me or my son. We dated for five months when we moved in together.

I had never been taught about healthy relationships. The pushing around, the slaps on my face and the black eyes were all normal. He even pushed me out of a moving car. I left for a few days, but I still went back to him. After a year, he proposed. I accepted.

The worthlessness I learned as a child stayed with me as an adult. The sum of all my experiences conditioned me to accept that violence in relationships was acceptable – all people interacted this way. Violence was a fact in a relationship, not the exception.

My father and I were working on healing our relationship. We met, had dinner, talked and tried to get to know one another. My son stayed home with my fiancé. When I returned home, my fiancé greeted me at the garage, which he never did. He had a funny look on his face. It made me feel eerie just looking at him. We talked and he said my son was in bed. The air felt like something was wrong. I went to check on my son.

He was lying in his bed staring at the ceiling. I went in and asked him if he was OK. He said, “Daddy spanked me.” And just hearing how he said it and the look on his face, I knew something was dreadfully wrong. I turned him over and pulled down his pants to look at his bottom.

Still to this day, I have never seen anything like my son’s bottom that night. His bottom had blood on it. It was black and blue and all scraped up. His face looked like he had seen a ghost. In retrospect, I think he was in shock. I gave him a hug and told him I loved him. I didn’t really know what to say at the time. I told him goodnight. I walked out of that bedroom and pretended that nothing was wrong. I remember thinking that if I said anything my fiancé would hurt or kill us. I went to bed and lay awake all night until he went to work the next day. It seemed like forever before he left. My son got up. My fiancé’s two children went to school.

Over a bowl of cereal, I asked my son again what happened. He told me that he had an accident in his pants and “Daddy spanked me.” My son told me that he was taken into the bathroom and spanked real hard with his toy ninja sword. I let him finish his cereal and took him to the police. Officers took photographs of my son’s injuries and interviewed both me and my son. An officer came out and told me that I was lucky that we weren’t there for a homicide case. I didn’t understand. The officer proceeded to tell me what my son had told them. The man that I loved put my son in the bathtub, took his clothes off, spanked him, held his head under water, put a brown towel around his neck, held him up in the air by the neck with the towel, kned him in the stomach, beat him on the buttocks, held him under water again.

My fiancé was charged with aggravated child abuse charges. As a vice president of a high profile commercial real estate firm, he was arrested and handcuffed while at work.

He abused my blonde-haired, blue-eyed, 5-year-old son in ways that I never thought possible. No one was ever going to hurt my son again. The cycle was going to end with me. My son and I moved out. After being harassed and continuously looking over my shoulder, we moved to the town where I grew up – all the way to Maine.

Our day in court came closer. We had a choice to either press charges or plea bargain. I asked my son what he wanted to do. All he asked was if my ex-fiancé was going to be there, and I said, yes. He said, “Well, I don’t want to see him.” That was all I needed to know. We went with the plea bargain. My ex-fiancé had to undergo one year of counseling, pay for one year of counseling for each of us, and pay a \$2,500 fine. He also was on probation for a year.

It took many years of counseling and medications for my son to be able to call himself a survivor. And I continued to wrestle with my own guilt.

In the years that followed, relationships were difficult. I yearned for attention, but each man I subsequently met I did not trust. Each time I started getting intimate, my “wall” went up. I took out my aggression and anger at all the abuse I endured on the men that wanted to be close to me. I never realized what I was doing.

It has been a long journey of healing. If you have been a victim of any type of abuse, you need to work on your issues before becoming involved in an intimate relationship. I hurt a lot of people on the way to calling myself a survivor. For that I am deeply sorry and hopefully in time, they will or have already forgiven me. I am still learning to forgive myself. The abuse I endured wasn’t my fault. The pain I inflicted on others because of what I went through was.

When my son was in high school, he and I started volunteering at a local women's center. We spoke at high schools and churches. Our first year together, we received a "Speakers of the Year" award. It is amazing to transform something so awful into something so grand. We felt a power from above drive us to volunteer. If we lived through such abuse, we wanted to share our stories to help others.

When I moved to another state, I located the closest women's center and continued my volunteer work. Soon I was asked to be on the Board of Directors. It wasn't long thereafter when I was asked to be a part of the staff.

As the coordinator of our primary prevention program, which we call Peaceline, I speak to more than 3,500 students a year. I also speak to community groups and share my personal story. I am an Emergency Advocate and meet sexual assault victims at hospitals or police stations. I conduct my own workshops. I am on the Speakers Bureau for the Rape Abuse Incest National Network (RAINN).

I have come to realize that if maybe someone reached out to me when I was younger – that contact may have helped me from having so many unhealthy relationships in my life. That contact could have prevented my son from being abused.

All my life, I struggled with a lack of self-esteem – something that I learned at an early age. That lack of self-esteem and self-worth contributed to a cycle of violence, like a washing constantly agitating. It was a cycle that took half a lifetime to stop. I kept involving myself in high-risk relationships. It wasn't until I was in charge of someone else's life that I valued more than my own that I was able to draw my line – no more. The unconditional love of my son and the love of my current husband all helped me to heal and to work on my survival. My work and my insight into sexual assault, child abuse and domestic violence all now work for the good of others and to help others break a cycle as well.

Surviving the abuse in my life has been my life-long struggle. My past has turned into a driving force in my life. I believe God paved my way to reach out and help others with my own experiences. It's still hard work. But I continue to survive.