

The image features a solid orange background with four white silhouettes of hands and forearms. The hands are positioned in a circle, each reaching towards the center. The top hand is at the top right, the left hand is on the left side, the bottom hand is at the bottom left, and the right hand is on the right side. The text is located in the lower-left quadrant of the image.

# Stories of Survival

Uncovering Domestic Violence  
in your Community

# Stories of Survival

## Uncovering Domestic Violence in your Community

**For hundreds of years, domestic violence didn't even have a name, it was never spoken about, and was not only privately condoned but legally allowed.**

In the 1970's attitudes began to change and women's refuges were established, but domestic violence was still dealt with behind closed doors.

Today, domestic violence is on the national agenda like never before, with people like Rosie Batty focussing our attention with her strength and bravery after a heartbreaking personal tragedy.

The words "domestic violence" are still abstract to most people, but their true meaning is fearing for your life, physical attacks and feeling like there's no way out.

SOS Women's Services has interviewed women from across NSW who have experienced domestic violence in the last few years to highlight the importance of services, and the need for a serious commitment of funding.

These stories are difficult to read because the violence is not glossed over.

These women's experiences speak of the need for well-resourced specialist services and for existing infrastructure to be improved like never before.

The women we spoke to don't regard themselves as victims and only spoke of getting back to a better life, having a good job and giving back. Domestic violence services are the circuit breaker and the stepping stone.

If we can commit billions of dollars to sports stadiums, we can put more into achieving true generational change in regard to violence.

Thank you to the women who told their stories in the hope of this becoming a reality.

**Roxanne McMurray**  
**SOS Women's Services**

May 2016

### **If you are experiencing domestic violence please contact:**

- **NSW Domestic Violence Line:** 1800 656 463
- **Link2Home:** 1800 152 152
- **1800 RESPECT:** 1800 737732
- **Lifeline:** 13 11 14
- **Women's Health NSW:** [www.whnsw.asn.au](http://www.whnsw.asn.au)

For more information visit [www.soswomensservices.com](http://www.soswomensservices.com) 

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# Layla's Story

## WESTERN SYDNEY

I had never been exposed to any violence with my parents or family and I think that's why I didn't pick up any triggers. I married my husband in 1996 after knowing him for six months, but he was nice and very charming, and I was filling a void after losing my Mum. **Two weeks after we were married we had a disagreement over what I was wearing and he slapped me across the face.** I was really shocked and drove off and when I came back a few hours later he said he was really sorry, but he put the blame on me, saying I'd made him angry because I wore clothes he didn't like. I tried to brush it off as a bad day but would give you my right arm if I could turn back the clock to that day and leave him, but you don't see it straight away. He'd get really angry if I ever expressed an opinion. I spent every day trying to make everything perfect so he wouldn't find a reason to get angry. He made me quit my job and isolated me from my family, I lost my self-confidence.

If there wasn't physical violence there was mental and verbal abuse. It was sexual abuse too because it was never consensual. He would knock me around, grab my hair and pull me through the house, bash me, hit me, spit in my face, then at night wanted to be intimate, it was the last thing I wanted but he got that too. Every time I turned him down it was awful.

**I had eight miscarriages he knocked me around so much. I didn't know how to break free because I was financially dependent on him and I was too scared to leave. The bad physical incidents were at least twice a week, the verbal and mental abuse were daily. In the last year before I left, he put a tracking device on my car and mobile and my eldest daughter's mobile.**

I was oblivious to it. One night my eldest daughter came in at 3am because she heard me crying and heard everything he said. She said if I didn't leave him she would kill herself. I left three weeks later, it was the big trigger.

I finally left for good in 2015 on a Sunday morning. The younger girls were dancing in the lounge room and he said, *you f-ing whores, turn down the music.* I asked him not to use that language and walked off, but he came after me swearing and yelling. He wasn't even meant to be in the house. I had moved out six months before to a new house but he just came and went as he pleased. He followed me into the kitchen and picked up a bowl of fruit and threw it so hard it broke the cabinet behind me. I told him to get out of the house. **He said, you're the only one who's going to be leaving and you'll be leaving in a body bag. That's the only way you'll leave me, when I kill you.** He grabbed all the keys to the house and the car and rounded all three girls up in the lounge room. He said, *I broke your mother's neck, this time I'm going to slash her, burn her and put her in a body bag and you're all going to be witness to it, do you understand?*

As soon as he left I knew that was it. I grabbed a file of documents I had secretly kept hidden and we climbed out of a bedroom window and ran. We just went to the corner park to hide, but as we were crossing the road he came back. My six year old was vomiting with fear. He mounted the kerb next to our daughter and asked where we were going but she stood firm and said we weren't getting in the car. I flagged down a couple and he drove off. The woman called a cab for us and we haven't seen him since, except in court.

My family don't understand, my father asked why I didn't leave him earlier. The short answer is, because I thought he would kill us. I was in fear of my life the whole time and that's what kept me there. I know it doesn't make sense to people but I felt it was the only way I could stay alive, by staying. Being away from him I see everything so much more clearly. But during our marriage I thought, he's my husband, the father of my three daughters, it was the first relationship I ever had. In my Catholic family divorce and separation are not an option and I felt like I had to fight for my marriage.

**He breached the AVO's so many times he eventually got six months in Long Bay jail. He's going to court again after he gets out of prison because he broke my neck. I've now got a metal plate and screws in my neck. They had to take out a bone from my hip to replace the broken vertebrae. I was in hospital for five weeks in 2014.** The surgeon was standing beside me asking me how it happened, he thought I'd been in a car accident. I kept saying I didn't know because my husband was standing right next to me speaking in Arabic saying, *you better not tell them anything, the girls are with me.* I had an opportunity right then to have him taken away but I didn't do it because I was afraid for my daughters. I thought he might hurt them.

*I was married to him for 19 years and I can't really regret it because I have three beautiful daughters and would never take that back for anything, but I wasn't living, I was only surviving, day by day.*

**When he breached the AVO for the fourth time he wrecked my father's house and broke down the doors demanding my father tell him where we were. He told my father he had ammunition and was going to shoot us. I'm not going to let her breathe without me.** He was found guilty for that breach, before he was given good behaviour bonds but this last one he got six months in jail. When the police tapes were played in court they accidentally gave out my address and phone number. He turned around, and in front of everyone said, *you better change your address now* and started laughing. He said it in front of the magistrate, police prosecutor, sheriff and other police. The police apologised for the recording but at least it got him locked up instead of getting bail again. I had bags already packed in case that happened again. **The police said I had to move again so I'm in the process of doing that while he's in prison. I know when he does get out, he's coming for me.**

I'm trying to find somewhere but it's very expensive. The Department of Housing helped with a bond when I first moved and I went to the real estate Ray White and explained my situation and they were really helpful and sympathetic. I'm trying to find a suburb he won't think I would go to. I wanted to go interstate and change our names but my daughter just got a scholarship for law at uni in Sydney which is incredible considering everything she's been through, so we can't move.

I've been going to Penrith Women's Health Centre, they were actually my first point of reference and have been absolutely amazing. I got advice from them about what to do about AVOs, my court hearing, they gave me legal advice and advice about the children. I'm also seeing a psychologist there regularly, and I've got options for things I could never afford like massages and yoga. They have a worker there for the Going Home Leaving Violence Program so I have a personal caseworker and it's fantastic, you have someone allocated to you and get one-on-one attention you don't get from the domestic violence phone line, where you have to keep retelling your story and getting passed around.

They also have an advocacy team to help you during court hearings so I feel very supported, I feel like they've always given me the right advice. If I had known that all this help was available I would have left years ago.

I thank God every day I can still walk and still breathe and that my daughters and I are still alive. My daughters all see a psychologist and the six year old won't ever sleep in her room alone and wakes up in the middle of the night screaming. She's a very anxious child and the smallest reminder of her father makes her vomit with anxiety. They all know he's in jail, I told the youngest he was in jail in America far away.

I want to go back to work and provide for my kids. I walked away from 19 years of marriage without anything, I'm starting from scratch. I want to have a job and maybe buy a home which is something he never did. I was awarded \$5,000 by Victim's Services but it's not that much for relocation and starting up. I know the Government has put a lot into domestic violence but I don't think they've put it into the more imperative stuff like helping women starting again. Whenever I called refuges they were always inundated. The emergency funds you get from Centrelink are \$300, it's barely a night somewhere. I didn't have any savings or a bank account because he took it all. We can never go out or have any activities, we barely have enough to survive, but I'll get through it and find work.

**I know that when he gets out of jail he's coming for me. I don't think he'll kill me, but he might kill my children because he knows my children mean the world to me and he would want me to suffer. Pulling the trigger on me is too easy.** He'll be in jail now very angry. I served divorce papers a few weeks ago. The sheriff called me afterwards and said, *he's not a nice man*. If my children wish to see their father in the future I won't tell them not to, but in the meantime, being without a father is safer for them than having one.

# Peta's Story

## SOUTH COAST

We met through the horse racing industry and had a three year relationship. In the beginning it was amazing, he seemed like the best partner you could ever hope for. He was loving, protective and supportive and we were inseparable. There were a few alarm bells early on which my children and friends alerted me to, but I was blinded by my feelings. When I picked him up from outings he would be very drunk and rude and make me wait in the carpark until he was ready. He would sometimes say abusive things and I would take him home and put him to bed, he definitely had a drinking problem. I didn't like it, but from past experience I'd decided that you shouldn't try and change people, and if I was able to help him enjoy our life, I could ignore the other stuff because it only happened when he was drinking.

I only moved in with him two weeks before the major incident happened. We had one of the usual incidents where I picked him up drunk and he abused me in the car, but since moving in I wanted to set some boundaries and told him I wouldn't let him speak to me like that. He tried to push me while I was driving the car so I pulled over and he leapt on me and bit me on the face. I got my daughter to pick me up and left him on the side of the road. He apologised profusely and claimed someone had spiked his drink because he came home and was really sick all night.

Two nights later he wanted to go out again which I didn't want to do but he promised he'd behave. He got into a fight with a man in a bar and got kicked out so we went home. The next day he started calling people to try and get this man, so I took his phone from him and that's when he attacked me. He pushed me around a bit then all of a sudden got way out of control. He grabbed my hair and hit my head down on the side table. I fell to the floor and was a bit dazed and realised he was stomping on my face. **The third time his foot came down I felt and heard my face crush and thought I was going to die. I can't remember anything after that until I woke up in the paddock outside.** I was bleeding everywhere and don't know how I got from my room to the paddock which was about 100 metres from the house, but I must have staggered out. I could hear him nearby in the shed.

Luckily I still had my phone in my pocket and rang a friend who lived a few doors away. I kept saying *help me* over and over and my friend was there in ten minutes. When he arrived I was crawling up the road where I could see the car lights. He picked me up and was really shocked by my appearance. He yelled out to my ex, *what did you do to her*, and then my friend got attacked as well. My ex went to the shed and got his guns out and luckily that's when the police arrived. They handcuffed him and took him away.

I was interviewed by police using the new system they brought in where they interview you on the spot with a camera. It was the first time it was used on the south coast. They had to convince me to do it because I was in shock, but they said it would save me from getting up on the stand later and the judge would be able to see exactly what happened at the time. They walked me through the scene and what had happened and filmed it all. The video is horrific because I was so badly injured. Both my eyes were virtually closed and my whole face was skewiff, everything from the nose down had been pushed over to one side, my head had been crushed. It was difficult to speak on the video because one side of my face was paralysed. I thought he was going to kill me. His eyes were completely different, they had turned black and looked evil. He's a jockey and is only small but had this super strength. **The police were great, they were absolutely fantastic and stuck with me the whole six months for the aftermath.**

I was taken by ambulance to hospital. I was in emergency but they couldn't do anything because I was too swollen so I was there for a week. He got charged with grievous bodily harm and assault but was bailed the next day to our house where my children were living, which I was extremely upset about. The police were very apologetic and said it was a mistake. **Before I had even got out of hospital my ex had a new girlfriend and had moved her in, even though my blood was still splattered around the bedroom. She had a four year old child as well.** He didn't even care what he'd done. He wrote letters of remorse for the court but laughed at me as we walked in.

It was three weeks before I could have surgery so I had to find accommodation and got some of my stuff from the house with the help of the police. I got transferred to a bigger hospital and had facial surgery which took two days. I had a pin in one cheek and had my other cheek and jaw realigned but the paralysis has stayed, my mouth droops a bit on one side and I don't talk quite the same. I lived in a caravan park for two months with my youngest child.

*I spoke to my local paper about how great the refuge was. The reason women don't report domestic violence is because of the social aftermath, the court process, the lack of financial stability, there's so many reasons. But there is life afterwards if you take that first step, you can recover.*

He pleaded guilty in court and it took a few months with adjournments to go through it. During this time he faced court for another assault on a man and was told he'd have to behave himself. His sentencing for my attack was still a month away and in that time we crossed paths when I was with my Dad. He attacked my 70 year old Dad who has cancer and emphysema and had to be pulled off by witnesses. The police arrested him and he went straight to jail for breaching his bail. My case went to court two weeks later, the judge was pretty good and sentenced him to six months for the assault on the other man and 18 months for my assault, so it was two and a half years all up. I hoped he might get rehabilitated, I was pressured a bit to accept the facts of what he did but at least we got a conviction.

My Dad came and stayed with me in the caravan park but my friends disappeared. My ex was a well-known jockey in racing and they closed ranks around him, it's a very in-house scene. The head of the racing industry and the stewards were very supportive and offered me and my daughters free counselling, but there's an unspoken rule that you're not allowed to say anything bad about another person in the industry, so he was protected by that. Everyone at the south coast track was warned not to talk about it. The best support I got, which I'm forever thankful for, was from the south-east women's refuge in Moruya. They were magnificent. I didn't want to go to a women's refuge because I didn't regard myself as homeless, but my daughter contacted them and the most beautiful woman turned up. She said they were going to help me and from that day on they've been absolutely magnificent. They were the ones at court with me, they found me a temporary house, they've just been incredible, I still talk to them now.

I'm better than I was, I had PTSD - it's not as bad now because I know he's in jail but I still have nightmares and anxiety out in public. I just got a new job which will help me build my new house. I used to own a motel and sold it to build a new house but after the attack I couldn't get a bank loan because I lost my job.

It was an accounting job, but I couldn't drive or go into town to do the banking with the way my face looked. It's a small town and I was told I couldn't work there anymore. I own a horse and I'm still going to the races because I've decided to hold my head high and not allow them to force me out.

I spoke to my local paper about how great the refuge was. **The reason women don't report domestic violence is because of the social aftermath, the court process, the lack of financial stability, there's so many reasons.** But there is life afterwards if you take that first step, you can recover. The sentence he got was ok, at least it was a fixed term with no parole, but he's in a really low security prison and working and earning money. Corrections will let me know when he's released so I can extend the AVO, but he'll be coming back to this area and I'm worried about that, he could be on a revenge path. I don't want to move away because I bought a block of land and I don't want my daughter to have to leave school, so I'm going to try and be brave and hold my head high, but I don't know if he's been rehabilitated or will come out angry that I'm the person who put him in jail. He had no remorse for what he did, he still tells people I lied about it and he never did it even though he's in jail.

I think it's great that people are so aware of domestic violence and people are talking about it more. I'd like to see more support in court, the police prosecutors rightly just want to get the job done and get a conviction and not go through the whole process of cross examination, but I wish I had. The magistrate never saw my video so he was just reading off a piece of paper. **Maybe specialist domestic violence courts are a good idea, or at the very least courts should set aside a day for domestic violence cases so we're not just thrown in with the drink drivers.**

# Nikki's Story

## SOUTH WEST SYDNEY

My Dad is a Palestinian Arab and my mother is Lebanese and valuing women isn't really a big part of their culture. I loved to study and my Dad didn't like the fact that I was opinionated. He always called me a troublemaker and didn't like me studying, in his mind women only cooked and cleaned, but my Mum instigated the violence against me and used to encourage him to hit me. I'm not really sure why I got abused, but it was psychological as well as physical. One of the earliest times I remember is when I was about three and my Dad grabbed me by my hair and lifted me up by the hair which was very painful. Another time I wouldn't sit next to him at church because I wanted to sit with my friends and he beat me when we got home. **I don't remember what happened after that because I passed out, I was about eight years old.** He was very brutal about everything, he never really beat my other siblings because they stayed quiet, but I didn't. I confided in a friend when I was 12 but I thought it was normal and everyone got beaten.

When I was in Year 7 we were doing something on abusive relationships and one of the examples was the same as my life and I freaked out. I asked my teacher and she said no woman deserves to be beaten so I became more aware it was wrong. I had an auntie who always said she wanted to adopt me, I didn't really understand why. When my father came home from work my mother would complain to him about me and say he should hit me. She egged it on and I really hated her for it. Sometimes when he'd beat me when I was a little kid, I'd just see her watching and that was the worst part because I'd scream out for her to help me, but she never did. In my Dad's country, the children belong to the father so he could do whatever he wanted.

Eventually I confided in my friend's mother and she told me to go to her if I needed somewhere to stay. I went for a while but it was too hard for her because she was a single mum so that's when I went into foster care. The incident that made me leave was because my Dad worked at night and slept in the day, and my sister and I were fighting over the remote. He got up and grabbed the remote and threw it at my head.

I told him to leave me alone and he started choking me and threatening to kill me. He punched me in the eye and was holding me down, choking me. When he let go I ran out of the house to my friend's house. I had a black eye and marks over my neck, but my friend's Mum said she couldn't keep me there because I was under 18, so she told me to call the police which I did. **My Dad was arrested and had an AVO put on him. The family's reaction was phenomenal, they said I had shamed the family and my whole family denied it.** All my siblings got interviewed by police and they all denied it, I think it was hard for the police to believe I was the only one who got beaten but they were still very supportive.

My Dad was held in custody but got granted bail. He upheld the conditions of the AVO which was to stay away from me. Once I got into foster care, my carer was so lovely, she bought me everything from scratch, I started off with everything new. It sounds strange but I was a young girl and didn't have clean clothes and felt really embarrassed about it, like I was a burden on everyone. They tried to place me with a Muslim family at first but I said no, I wanted to be as far away from my culture as possible. My foster carer was an Italian woman, it was one-on-one with no other kids and it was perfect, she helped me through my issues.

I got homesick just because your family is what's familiar, but once I adjusted it was really good. I was going really well at school before I left home and wanted to go to Sydney Girls which is selective. I did the entrance exam and got in but FACS wouldn't let me go, they refused to pay for it. They said I wasn't showing signs of mental instability and my parents were remorseful and wanted to restore me back to my family. My family had no counselling, we tried counselling once and it was an atrocity, there was just yelling and screaming.

**FACS made me have compulsory visits at home and while I was there my parents threatened me. I felt like I was the one being punished. I was in foster care from when I was 13 to nearly 16.** I was supposed to stay until I was 18 but FACS staff said they had lost a lot of funding and so just started sending kids back home.

*When my father came home from work my mother would complain to him about me and say he should hit me. She egged it on and I really hated her for it.*

*If those services weren't there anymore I don't think I'd be alive, I would have had nowhere to go and they put me on a pathway that helped me get an education and helped me become so financially stable I'm in a private rental now. I'd probably be living under a bridge somewhere without them. Now I'll be able to have a good life and give back.*

My parents had done nothing to change, they had come to my foster carer's house and had fights with her. They kept telling me they didn't want me because I had shamed the family but FACS didn't see that. I tried to tell my case worker that my father had said he'd bash me if I came back home. They said they couldn't prove anything and it was my word against theirs, so unless there were physical signs of abuse they couldn't do anything.

My foster carer went to visit a dying friend in New York and the moment she left FACS terminated my placement with her. They told me I had to go home and told my carer not to take me in again. I tried to get into a refuge but couldn't, so I threw out my phone and moved in with my boyfriend which was a really bad idea at 15. It didn't last long because his mother couldn't have me living there. I stayed on a park bench for a week. I lost contact with my foster carer because she was getting abusive phone calls and visits from my family and I felt like I was being a burden on her. I felt like FACS didn't want to know about me because I was just a financial burden. I was couch surfing for a while but ended up back home because it was too hard to survive.

My parents were very dismissive and no-one really spoke to me, but they let me back in because FACS made them take me. It was ok for a couple of months until my brother threw me in the bathtub and punched me in the face and started choking me. Everyone said I had brought shame on the family and he called me a slut for leaving home. I went to school with bruises all over me and called my old foster carer who called the police. **My brother and father were arrested but when they went to court nothing happened, apparently there wasn't enough evidence and my family said I was a liar and had thrown myself down the stairs.** My foster carer was ready to adopt me because she didn't want me to go back, she knew what I was facing because they were at her house all the time abusing her. She's amazing, she helped me get a scholarship to university which is where I am now.

When I was 16 I finally got my own Centrelink payments and FACS said they were closing my case because there were people worse off than me. I was very anxious but I was mentally strong, I wasn't cutting myself, and I felt like I had to commit suicide to be taken seriously. If you spoke to my foster carer you'd be astonished at the stuff they put me through. I moved in with my auntie for four months but my Dad and brother kept violating the conditions of the AVO, they were there all the time. I felt scared and called my old foster carer and she got me into The Girls' Refuge. I moved in for three months and it was amazing, even though they had some really unstable girls in there they kept it under control. Every Friday we would go out and have a gelato. **It's an all-girls refuge and the workers are so amazing, they even tucked us in at night so it felt like a real home.** It was a shame because I could only stay there for three months, but they got me a place at St Laurence House which is co-ed. There were three boys and me, it was ok, I didn't feel uncomfortable and all the staff were male, so it sort of taught me to trust men again and the manager always made sure I was ok. **But I wanted to finish off my HSC in a place where there were lots of women so I got a place at Lillians. I did my whole HSC year there and it was amazing. I lived with four or five other girls, we were all really close and cooked together at night and studied together.** It was quite disciplined and after a certain time we couldn't watch TV and had to study and have quiet time. Lillians and The Girls' Refuge put on workshops for us where we learnt a lot, the workers were so good. Even in the middle of the night if you had any issues you could just knock on their door and they'd help us.

**I got through my HSC and I got a scholarship to my dream university majoring in politics. I would never have got through it without them. I still go to Lillians for Christmas, it's the best.** If those services weren't there anymore I don't think I'd be alive, I would have had nowhere to go and they put me on a pathway that helped me get an education and helped me become so financially stable I'm in a private rental now. I'd probably be living under a bridge somewhere without them. Now I'll be able to have a good life and give back.

# Kylie's Story

## CENTRAL COAST

Three years ago I had a son but after he was born it got quite bad with my partner's emotional abuse and manipulation. He was lying all the time and really shattered me while I was trying to cope with being a new mother. I found the strength to decide I could do it on my own, but when I left I was quite broken, I felt very let down and disappointed because I couldn't keep my family together.

Being a single mum I was living at my Nana's house because I was unable to afford private rental but I was doing the best I could. That's when I met my next partner Dan who ended up being very abusive and it was very hard to un-involve myself from him. He lived a few streets away from my Nana's house so it progressed very quickly over six months, but from the time he came into my life it got really bad really quickly.

**I was initially attracted to his independence, he had his own house and it was an outlet for me because my Mum was also living at my Nan's house because Nan was suffering from dementia. I was finding it really hard to cope there and Dan was an outlet.** He put a roof over my son's head after my Nan sold her house because I had nowhere else to go and moved into his house.

*I got to a point where I couldn't do it anymore and I opened up to my Mum one day when she dropped my son off. I took my sunglasses off and she could see how black my face was. She said we were going straight to the police station.*

That's when things got really bad, he used to lock me in the house, in the car, smashed my phone, I wasn't allowed to communicate with anyone, he wouldn't even let me go to my Nan's for a couple of hours. I was totally trapped in the relationship and it was so unbelievably scary to try and escape, he chased me down the street and punched me in the face and busted my lip multiple times. It was very traumatising, and because I came from a good family and had never experienced anything like it in my life I had no idea what I was even going through.

I got to a point where I couldn't do it anymore and I opened up to my Mum one day when she dropped my son off. I took my sunglasses off and she could see how black my face was. She said we were going straight to the police station. **The violence with Dan was almost daily, there wasn't a day that went by when he didn't become violent in some form and often extreme. The police had been called to the house numerous times by neighbours and sometimes by bystanders who saw him chase me down the street.** But even when I had a busted face they talked to him a few metres away from me and he was looking at me the whole time like, *don't you say a word*. So the police were involved on a few occasions but there was no outcome until I went to the police station that day with my mother. He was charged with assault and an AVO was put in place and that's when I went to Neleh House refuge. I haven't had any contact with him since then. There were two court cases, one for the AVO and one for the assault, but I was still so scared and traumatised I didn't actually go so he wasn't charged with assault.

**When someone said the word refuge I pictured somewhere that looked like MASH the TV show. I thought I'd be scrubbing my clothes on a washboard!** When I got there I was blown away at the support that was available. It was really good for me and my son, we spent five months there and it gave me time to heal physically and emotionally. Unfortunately after that first stay I went straight back into the same cycle because I didn't do all the group work and psychology sessions.

I fell into another violent relationship which didn't last very long but I ended up losing my son because of it. He was a boyfriend from high school but he got jealous of me prioritising my son over him and had some addiction issues. I was changing my son's nappy and he grabbed me by the neck and threw me off the bed. I hit my head quite hard and got up in shock and grabbed my son and went straight to the police. An AVO was put out and he went to prison for assaulting me and a police officer. I had my own little place for a while but when he got out of prison, I stupidly took him back and two weeks later my son was taken off me.

*My son has actually been with my Dad since he was taken off me, and I'm allowed to see him twice a week now. I wouldn't have coped if he was with strangers. It used to be once a week supervised but I've gained credibility and can see him more often.*

FACS took him because my child was considered to be in a high risk situation. It wasn't just that relationship, but the whole cycle I'd been in was what they took into consideration. I should never have taken him back, I think I had some false sense of love so I tried to hold onto that. Since then I've been back at the refuge, I've gotten on my feet on my own and used all the resources properly this time and I'm in a much better place. I did courses and have been learning how to stop the cycle and the victimisation. Now I realise that even one or two incidents is too many because there shouldn't be any.

**It was incredibly painful to lose my son, I didn't see if coming from a mile away. I felt completely railroaded and was a mess.** I've always had him and always had good intentions with him and we have a really good bond, so I never thought he'd be taken off me. I haven't seen that last partner again and my primary goal is to get my son back. I've had the same support worker since I first went to the refuge and she's helping me through the whole thing. The refuge has been a lifesaver. I have really good parents but my Mum isn't someone I can reach out to because she doesn't cope with things, so I don't know where I'd be if it wasn't for the refuge and their support.

My son has actually been with my Dad since he was taken off me, and I'm allowed to see him twice a week now. I wouldn't have coped if he was with strangers. It used to be once a week supervised but I've gained credibility and can see him more often.

I want to get my son back and study so I can work Monday to Friday instead of in hospitality which is where I work now. I found out recently FACS are restoring him back into my care now I'm on my own, and thanks to the refuge I'm now in supported accommodation which has really helped me to get him back. I want to put in place everything I've learnt over the last few months. **I'm not ever going to let another abuser into my life again.** I'm definitely strong enough now not to ever let that happen again, and being financially stable plays a massive part, because having my own accommodation that I can afford means I don't have to rely on anyone again.

# Zahra's Story

## MAITLAND

I got married five years ago in Iran but my ex-husband who's from Iraq had lived in Australia for 11 years so he came back to Australia for six months to sort out our visas so we could live in Australia. I stayed in Iran and my parents were a bit worried because he started calling me a lot, up to 10 times a day. They said it wasn't normal but I didn't listen. **He always spoke to me nicely and everything seemed fine, but my parents were so concerned they got people they knew in Sydney to find out what he was like.** Everyone said he didn't drink or gamble or see other women and worked hard, and seemed like a good guy. Those things were true, but he was also very controlling and that turned into violence.

I just thought the phone calls were excessive because he was so far away and felt alone, and most of the time he was at work while he was talking to me. They were ok at first but then he started abusing me a bit, he accused me of talking to other men while I was at uni, he became jealous. When I got upset he said he'd been engaged to someone else before but found out she was cheating, and claimed that was why he couldn't trust me. I told my family about the engagement but they were still worried and said if I went to Australia and something happened they wouldn't be there to help me, but I trusted him and never thought he would be violent. He even told me once he had a fight with a friend because his friend yelled at his wife. And he always said once I got to Australia I could study and work, he would be proud to have a wife with a career.

**I got my visa and the second day I arrived in Australia the problems started. I was cooking dinner and he screamed at me for being slow.** I was really shocked and a bit worried, and he started saying strange things like I was an unlucky person and ever since I came into his life it had gone bad. I tried to talk to him for weeks about how silly it was, but there was no point because he wouldn't listen. Two months later we had an argument about him leaving dirty clothes in the lounge room and he got really angry and started hitting me on the head, probably about ten times, he hit my nose and made it bleed. I left and went to a relative's house for two months and it was really difficult.

I had been expecting him to hit me because I could see the signs, and he had started pushing me around, it had been building up. **I felt like I couldn't trust him anymore because he had tricked me into signing all my savings over to him because I couldn't read English very well, it was a terrible lie.** I had been planning to buy a few things like a car but he took control of all my money. This all happened in the first two months of living here.

When I went to my relative's house he acted like he really regretted what he'd done but I couldn't see any future because of everything he'd done in such a short time. I reported it to the police and got an AVO against him. After the police called he got really worried and kept calling me promising me to change. I was in a really difficult situation because it was terrible with the relatives I was staying with, in return for staying with them they made me work like a slave and didn't talk to me nicely, they even took my money from me. I ended up going back to my husband because I thought if I'm going to be abused by people and not treated well I may as well go back to my own house.

In the beginning he was ok and told me he was seeing a psychologist but he was a really big liar. He made up stories that weren't true like his parents had disappeared in Iraq when they were totally fine. I stayed for a while but he attacked me another three times and kept punching and hitting me so I knew I couldn't stay. **He said there was no death penalty in Australia for murder and if he killed me he would only get 10 years, and he was happy to go to jail to kill me. It was really scary.** We were only together for six months in total so it all happened really quickly. I was so afraid of him and felt like there was no way out because he was threatening me and saying he wouldn't let me work or go anywhere or see my family again, it was very controlling, he wouldn't even let me call them. I didn't have any friends in Australia so the only hope I had was my family. I had a real fear of what the future meant. **I was really really depressed and couldn't eat or sleep, and ended up in hospital after trying to overdose on sleeping pills.** I reached a point where I couldn't cope anymore and took the whole pack, I wanted to kill myself.

*I was in a really difficult situation because it was terrible with the relatives I was staying with, in return for staying with them they made me work like a slave and didn't talk to me nicely, they even took my money from me.*

*I didn't really want to go back to Iran because I would have been a divorced woman and would have been judged for being not successful in my life. Men there think they can do whatever they want with you if you're divorced, you're not given the same opportunities as someone who has never been divorced or is still single, there's a stigma, although it's better than it used to be.*

He took me to hospital and lied to the staff that I was upset because my mother was sick and I took too much Panadol. The nurses obviously didn't trust him and started asking questions. I said I wanted to die because he was hurting me, but I had taken so much I ended up unconscious and it affected my heart, so I was in hospital for five days. I told them I didn't want to see him again and the nurses really supported me. They said all the refuges in Sydney were full and wouldn't send me to a motel on my own, and could only get me into a refuge in Newcastle. I went to Carrie's Place in Maitland for three months and they really helped me. They helped me through everything and enrolled me at TAFE so I could improve my English, they were great caseworkers.

I had gone straight from hospital to the refuge, the staff asked him to send my clothes there and he actually did it, I think he was worried about what would happen and pretended to be gentle and caring. **He found out I was in Maitland when I opened a new bank account and the bank accidentally rang him. I had no strength to go to court again for an AVO after what had happened, I was too scared and depressed.** I even had some contact with my ex-husband because I felt so alone. Even though he created all these problems for me at least I knew him, but I didn't want to be with him because I could see he was still the same person.

I didn't really want to go back to Iran because I would have been a divorced woman and would have been judged for being not successful in my life. Men there think they can do whatever they want with you if you're divorced, you're not given the same opportunities as someone who has never been divorced or is still single, there's a stigma, although it's better than it used to be. My family knew what had happened and wanted me to come back but I wanted to stay and study and work **I felt like I had lost chances in my life and wanted to make the best of it. I wanted to show myself I was strong and could fix my life.**

I ended up going back to Iran for a few months, saw a psychologist and had support from my family, and decided I would come back, never have contact again with him again and find a job, and that's what I did. I'm renting a room from a nice Australian woman so I have someone to live with and I'm not alone. **I've learnt English pretty well now and I had a Bachelor in Accounting from Iran and did a few courses to learn the Australian way of accounting, and now I'm working as a bookkeeper. I also help other refugees learn English so everything is great now. I'm really enjoying helping other people because the women at the refuge did so much for me. I would never have reached this point without them.** They saved my life and I want to give back, even to the Government who helped me. I don't want to be on Centrelink, I want to work and pay my taxes. The Government gave me money when I needed it and now I can give back. If I was in the same situation in Iran the Government wouldn't have helped me at all, it would have been left to my family so I really appreciate it, really appreciate it, they did a lot for me and now I can contribute back

# Amber's Story

## PORT STEPHENS

We first met in 1997, he was 15 years older and because I had grown up with domestic violence I repeated the cycle. He started off being controlling and possessive to the point he would verbally abuse men who looked at me even if I got up to go to the bathroom in a restaurant. I was mortified. We got married, and as the years went on I couldn't go out anywhere, there was no going out with friends and I became very dependent. It was an extreme possessiveness. My mother told me once I was like a bird in a cage and he let me out for himself then locked me back away so no-one else could go near me. He used to get really bad road rage and terrify me trying to get people to pull over in their car, he was so aggressive, I was always walking on eggshells and couldn't be myself, I was so nervous. The only time I had a reprieve was when I was pregnant because I was fat. He verbally abused me and degraded me sexually, but most of it is too awful to describe.

**The first attack was a sexual assault, he raped me many times, one of our children is the result of a rape. If he went away for a night he'd come back accusing me of sleeping with other men and check me physically, to see if I'd played up.** I wasn't doing anything and didn't even have a car to go anywhere. He never hit me physically but he punched holes in the wall beside my head. He threw things at me and waved a really big knife at me once with a horrible look on his face. My confidence was so low, if anyone came over for dinner he'd make comments about how bad the food was, there was always something wrong. He nearly destroyed me.

**In 2012 I went to a refuge on the Gold Coast with our two children to get away from him and start a new life, but I had lost so much weight I was committed to a psychiatric hospital. The children went back to live with him.** I had post-traumatic stress disorder and was having flashbacks and nightmares, so was our youngest son because he witnessed his father waving the knife at me and threatening to smash my face in and calling me obscene names. He saw his father lock me outside the house while he was inside crying, begging him to let Mummy in. I was expressing my concerns about the children being with him but there wasn't much I could do while I was being kept in hospital.

He sent me around the twist, I was so traumatised my mind shut down. I was in the psychiatric ward for six weeks but they misdiagnosed me and labelled me with mental illnesses I've since been cleared of and never had. Their approach was to drug me the whole time, even though I told them I'd been in a domestic violence situation and had been raped by my husband, they didn't believe me, they just thought I was bipolar or schizophrenic. After I got out of there I went to the Yacaaba Centre and they organised for me to get some legal advice, they told me I had a case for medical negligence.

I stayed with a friend for six months after I came out of hospital and used to go and see my children at their father's house which was really hard. I couldn't have them with me so I had to do it to see them. A male friend I hadn't been in contact with for years sent me a Facebook message one day saying he was proud of me for leaving. I sent him my number and he called straight away and we've been together ever since. We were actually in love when I was 19 and I was working for him but we were both married to other people, so we couldn't be together then but we are now. My first husband was very abusive too. He tried to smother me with a pillow and bashed my head into the floor. I tried to reach out to my family but they all said they had enough of their own *problems* so I learnt to keep the domestic violence to myself and whenever it happened just stayed quiet about it.

*He threw things at me and waved a really big knife at me once with a horrible look on his face. My confidence was so low, if anyone came over for dinner he'd make comments about how bad the food was, there was always something wrong. He nearly destroyed me.*

Then I repeated the cycle again with my second husband. **My parents have a lot to answer for, my father would punch my mother in the face and threatened her with knives in front of me. I have a phobia of knives because of what my father and my ex-husband did, I can't even leave a knife sitting on a bench.**

I decided to put an AVO on my ex after he violently abused me for asking about a medical prescription for our son. I was with my GP at the time and was so upset I told him about the rapes and that I'd had enough. I asked my new husband if he'd support me if I decided to do something and he totally supported me. We went to the police in Port Stephens and got the AVO first, then my husband asked the police about the rapes. The officers asked if I wanted to take it further and I made a decision to hold him accountable for what he did to me, I wanted justice. A male detective called me the next day and I was interviewed over two days. He made the whole process as easy as he could, it was an amazing experience not to feel judged and the compassion he showed was really good, the police on the Gold Coast were terrible and they were women too. **I couldn't recommend the police in Nelson Bay highly enough, any time I call they're so helpful and courteous and never make me feel awkward.** We'll see what happens with the case, it might not even go to court.

Women's services like Yacaaba are needed so badly, it was thanks to the police I was referred to them and I'm now getting the help I should have been getting a long time ago. My counsellor is amazing and you need it, because domestic violence can make you feel like you're crazy. Yacaaba and refuges are so important and need funding because there's so many women and children who need help. **I think the name refuges should be changed to safe havens because refuges have a bit of a stigma attached to them, it's a bit outdated.** But at least I've finally broken my own and my family's cycle of domestic violence and I'm really happy now.

*Yacaaba and refuges are so important and need funding because there's so many women and children who need help. I think the name refuges should be changed to safe havens because refuges have a bit of a stigma attached to them, it's a bit outdated.*

# Emma's Story

## EASTERN SUBURBS, SYDNEY

I met my ex-husband in 2000 at a pub. He was gorgeous, very charming and had a beautiful smile. He had played AFL professionally and I was quite taken with him, he spoke very gently and the way he talked about things was in opposition to the behaviour that later transpired, but in the beginning he said all the things I wanted to hear. There were small signs that I didn't initially pick up, but early on my mother and one of my friends were very uncomfortable. He lost his temper a few times and was very controlling.

His mother told me her marriage had broken up because of domestic violence, his father was violent and controlling and used to physically assault her, sometimes until she was unconscious. My ex told me he had broken his ribs when he was 16 intervening in a fight between his parents and was sent to boarding school. **The stories about his father were pretty awful, the family were put under police protection and once he stood outside the house covered in petrol holding a lit match while his mother was inside with the kids.**

I thought because my ex hated his father and didn't want to be anything like him, he wouldn't be.

A few years into our relationship my friends said I wasn't myself around him and they weren't comfortable with our relationship, which I was sensitive about. I honestly believed I was so lucky to have this 6'5" handsome, strong man, who had a good profession and later owned his own business. It was confusing, he was gentle and softly spoken in public but the opposite at home, and whenever something went wrong I would question myself because people would always say I was really lucky. He's a big man and there were a few times when he would suddenly get really angry out of the blue, over small things.

I said we needed to go to a counsellor so he agreed, but said I couldn't talk about his family or anything he said or did, he gave me this long list of things that were off-limits. The counsellor said he was incredibly abusive and controlling and there was so much tension between us she wouldn't see us together. My ex wouldn't even let me speak. Then I fell pregnant.

I was a bit frightened, I had a mortgage and an unpredictable wage and an unpredictable partner. I really wanted it to work and thought it would somehow come together. I actually left him once when I was pregnant. He was happy about the pregnancy but got really aggressive and was shoving and pushing me and being really abusive, *you f-ing slag, bitch, how did I get stuck with you, I hate you*. He even threatened to take the baby and raise it on his own. That scared me. I went to stay with close friends and he called constantly begging me to come back. After three days I agreed to go back. The whole pregnancy was really turbulent and he was very controlling about it. He told the birthing centre I wasn't to have any drugs, they told him he wouldn't have a say which he was really angry about. Even afterwards he hated me breastfeeding, he said it made the children not like him and that my breasts were his not theirs. We had lots of fights about it and I felt so vulnerable through the pregnancy.

When the baby was born the hospital identified us as a domestic violence case because they saw how controlling he was. The hospital counsellor wanted to report him to FACS but I didn't want to. She came and checked on me after the birth and I was really scared because he was in the room. He kicked things and yelled at me and overturned furniture. **When the baby was six weeks old he went crazy, he knocked things over, threw video equipment and smashed it, punched his fist through the doors, kicked holes in the walls and threw my stuff out the window. It was pretty scary.**

The baby clinic sent someone to the house from Tresillian which I think the hospital had organised after being concerned. The environment was very tense and she queried all the holes in the walls and doors. She asked if I was frightened but I said no because I was frightened. She ended up calling FACS and they said they were going to see him at work to talk about domestic violence. I freaked out and was crying on the phone begging them not to and pretended he was going to counselling. I didn't know what he'd do, take our daughter, smash the house up, hurt me, but I knew it would be huge because his behaviour was already exponentially huge in comparison to small things. **He would go crazy if I put too much water in the kettle or had too many lights on at night, even if I was wearing tracksuit pants or pyjamas when he got home. As the kids got older they would bolt and hide as soon as he walked in the door.**

I tried to talk to his mother once. She said the worst thing for her was not being bashed but constantly being called a f-ing bitch and walking on eggshells around the house, never knowing what would trigger her husband.

I told her I felt the same thing but she seemed to think it was different for some reason so I couldn't talk to her. I think they normalised violence as a family. The word violence became this sticking point between us. He used to threaten to smash my face in and punched holes in the walls and doors, he put his fist through the windscreen when our son was crying and broke a window throwing a saucepan. But he always said he wasn't violent with me because he didn't actually hit me, and every incident was my fault because I irritated him or made him angry.

After our children were born he wanted me to go back to work. I started doing corporate training and he used to call me constantly at work, but he would just hold one of the children up to the phone so I could hear them crying or screaming. He would do it multiple times in a row, he threatened to throw our daughter off the balcony once because she was screaming. **When I found out I was pregnant with our son I didn't even tell him at first because I wasn't sure if I was going to keep him.** My kids are the best things I've ever done, but he was so abusive and controlling I was really worried about bringing another baby into that situation.

He controlled the money, who I spent time with, what work I could do, how I behaved and what I was allowed to talk about. I couldn't even go to the gym unless I booked with him two weeks in advance. I wanted to leave him but he always threatened to take the children and at the time, he was the one with the good job, so I thought I'd lose them and my home. I didn't feel the children were safe anymore and I didn't feel safe either and wanted to leave. His behaviour really escalated, he slashed his stomach till he was bleeding and started driving through red lights on purpose when the children were in the car.

It eventually fell apart when he tried to take our son on a trip on his own. I was really concerned because they had no bond and our son wasn't comfortable with him, but he said he wanted our son to turn to him. This whole thing escalated into a terrifying incident where he forced me to take our screaming son with him to the airport, our son was hanging on to the edges of the window as his father tried to pull him out. He had lost his mind.

I told him he had to leave. **He left temporarily but didn't really leave and cut off all the money, defaulted our home loan, cut off the phone. He'd come back at two in the morning, standing over the bed abusing me, or I'd hear something smash during the night.** He would ring at night and just heavy breathe into the phone, I would hang up and he'd ring again. He took the kids' passports and all the documentation I had made of his abuse and followed me around.

*I'm doing the best I can now, I've moved on and am really glad I left. My ex continues to harass me, threatens to take the children or apply for full custody, he's even threatened to kill me. The police took out an AVO and his mate rang me and said AVO's don't do anything, if he wants to kill me he will.*

Mediation didn't work because he kept breaking the agreements about the children and not handing them back. He filed for custody but sacked his lawyer when she found out about the domestic violence. **You need a hell of a lot of money for court and the one thing that would make a huge difference to women experiencing domestic violence is unconditional legal support.** I tried to get Legal Aid about half a dozen times and was rejected every time. The legal process is so costly and drawn out. He paid for a top barrister and a team of four lawyers who sent me so many letters, sometimes five a day, it was so stressful. For a long time he denied the domestic violence, then finally admitted a few things but said he was a changed man, so he ended up with shared custody five days a fortnight.

It feels like there has to be a better way than the courts, where people who don't understand domestic violence are making decisions based on an expert witness who sits with your children for an hour before giving their opinion, impacting the rest of their lives. The expert witness gave evidence nine months after seeing our children briefly with no other contact, how can they say what's in their best interests?

*I'm doing the best I can now, I've moved on and am really glad I left. My ex continues to harass me, threatens to take the children or apply for full custody, he's even threatened to kill me. The police took out an AVO and his mate rang me and said AVO's don't do anything, if he wants to kill me he will. He's been empowered by each win through the legal system but I'm exhausted. **I'm someone with networks, resources and education and it just about destroyed me and my family. It's been a financial annihilation, and my children are deeply unhappy and continue to suffer. I think to myself, just a couple more years of this and we're all free. But I still have to get through the couple more years.***

# Judy's Story

## NORTH COAST

I met him when I was 15. He asked me to marry him a couple of months after we met which I thought was really strange because I was so young, and we ended up getting married when we were 18. Throughout that period, I didn't realise it but he was grooming me to be his wife, to be subservient and obedient.

I was six months pregnant when I got married and the day I stepped into our house was really weird because this person I thought I knew changed in an instant, almost walking through the door. He told me I had to get up and cook him breakfast, dinner, make his lunch, I was more like a servant than a wife, it was ownership. Three months after getting married we had this little baby and I wanted to be a good Mum, so I paid a lot of attention to the baby which he didn't like.

His mother used to come over and show me how to clean. She used to come over with white gloves on and check the dust on my furniture. Just over a year after having my first child we had our second, I had no idea what I was thinking, I was a baby myself. We used to move a fair bit and we were in this rented house on a very cold, rainy night and he came home drunk and the yelling and screaming started and he slapped me across the face. He went outside to have a beer and I grabbed the children. I didn't have my license at the time because abusers isolate you from family and friends, and we were living on this isolated property. I didn't have a car and the only way I could escape was by foot. **I had one child in the stroller and was carrying the other one. I walked into the bush and we sat in the bush for five hours in the freezing cold. I sat there crying while he drove up and down this dark road yelling out for me. I ended up going to a neighbour's house who I didn't even know, I just knocked on the door and she put me up for the night and told me I shouldn't go back.** I ended up calling my Mum and she picked me up and I left for six weeks, which was the first time I left him. He pestered my mother so much she told him I was at a caravan park. He drove there with one his mates who told me I should go back to him, he would change. He always had someone to back him up and I always felt obligated to go back.

He said he had total blackouts and couldn't remember anything he'd done. **One morning he came out and I had the biggest black eye because he came home drunk and smacked me really hard in the face. I asked him in the morning if he remembered doing it and he said he didn't remember any of it.** It was a continual battle for the first five years and I thought it might get better but it didn't change. We had three kids under five and I left again. My Mum was always helping me get set up in new places, getting furniture for me and telling me not to go back. I'd stay away for about a month and he'd call constantly saying he wanted to see the children. I would feel guilty and would always end up going back.

There's a lot of awareness about domestic violence now but back then no-one talked about it. A few times when the police came to the house they just said I should stop him drinking. If I said anything to him about his alcoholism he'd slap me around the house. I had a couple of car accidents because of his drunk drinking. I was pregnant once and we had a serious side-on accident with another car. I woke up in hospital having microsurgery on my eye. My sister came to live with me for eight weeks after that but she never came back to our house ever again because she saw how abusive he was. I lost my family and my sisters because I continued my relationship with my husband. I thought I had to be the dutiful wife, and in those days if you were a single mother you were frowned upon. But people tire of you if you're constantly with this person who's abusing you and they're watching you go through it.

I had been to women's refuges a few times but back then there weren't many other services around for them to prompt you to do much, it was more an opportunity to have a breathing space. We got married so young he never had a chance to be single and go out, so he was out constantly drinking to get away from the missus and the kids. From work he would go to the pub to have a beer or two, but his beer or two would end up being twenty. Alcoholics can't stop at one or two, if there's a carton there they will drink the whole carton then look for more. We ended up having four beautiful children that I am so lucky to have but it was like having five children because he was always throwing tantrums and yelling. The kids would run as soon as they heard his voice, the boys would run to the neighbour's house or stay with friends to get away.

I tried to leave him 20-30 times, it felt like I was constantly running away from him. His abuse happened two to three times a week. Every time I left I felt great, but it's fight or flight with abusive men, you're either running or fighting. **Sometimes I would try and get into my bedroom before he came home drunk and lock the door but he would bash the door down, he used to take doors off hinges to get to me to attack me.**

*I'm really happy now but it's taken a long time to get there. I went through a really bad depression last year which wasn't nice but it had to happen. I'm seeing someone but it's nice and simple. I wanted to tell this story to let people know there is a life after domestic violence. People can find happiness you just need to find your self-respect and self-love and my whole life changed the day I walked out.*

It wasn't only physical, there was a lot of mental abuse as well, it was a hurl of abuse. He blamed me for everything, the car accidents, everything that happened to him was my fault, he would never stand up and be a man and admit to his problems.

At one stage I took the kids and went to live in Sydney for 12 months to get away from him. His parents knew where I lived and one day they dropped him off at my house and said he was my problem because he had been constantly pestering them, demanding my address. It was constant for a year, and in the end they got jack of it, so there he was back on my doorstep after not having him around for 12 months. The day we left to live in Sydney my children said if he ever came back they would move out, and they did. My two eldest boys moved in with their grandmother.

We worked together in the motel industry together for 15 years and the abuse continued for our whole marriage. One of the guests came and talked to me one morning and said I heard your husband abusing you, you don't have to live like that. I only left him three years ago which was a huge step for me. I started a whole new life the day I walked away from him.

I had my car packed ready to go because I couldn't take it anymore, I felt really claustrophobic in his presence. One night he beat me really badly and I had to get up the next morning and prepare a breakfast for a hotel function. He came roaring into the kitchen and I tried to get him out but he punched me in the jaw. Some men who were working there came to my aid and stood in his way while I locked myself in the laundry until someone let me out. I ran to my car and took off. He got the sack not long after because he kept drinking at work.

**I got an AVO against him and I sat with the police officer who asked how long it had been going on. I said I'd been married for 38 years and it had been going on the whole time and tears started pouring out, because it was the first time I had really said it out loud. It was this huge relief,** I realised I had put up with it for 38 years and never walked away.

I always felt obligated to him because he was the father of my children and I thought he might see the light or get help, but he never did. I also stayed because he used to stalk me and find me every time I left. When I left this time the kids said I was never going back again, and I knew it was the final time, I was not going back.

He ended up in jail after I left him for drink driving and went back to jail again for a domestic violence assault against another woman. He must have done something pretty serious to get put away. I went through our photo albums recently and in every single picture of him he has a beer in his hand, always.

I found a job where I lived on a big property looking after a couple and their daughter doing housekeeping which was the most amazing six months because I had my own little house on the corner of the property. I started managing a motel, got myself a unit, bought new furniture. I started my own business where I help people declutter their homes and organise garage sales and that's been amazing.

He was still constantly calling me a year after I left. I never picked up the phone. He said he knew I was living near the beach and he'd find me. A lot of people knew what had happened and they all said they'd protect me. I've had an AVO since I left him and have made sure it's always updated so the police know I am still fearful of him. I went to the house he was living at with his girlfriend and told him I was seeing someone else and told him very clearly to leave me alone. I had to forgive him for everything he had done, not to condone it but so I could move on. He's never contacted me again.

*I'm really happy now but it's taken a long time to get there. I went through a really bad depression last year which wasn't nice but it had to happen. I'm seeing someone but it's nice and simple. I wanted to tell this story to let people know there is a life after domestic violence. People can find happiness, you just need to find your self-respect and self-love and my whole life changed the day I walked out.*

# Patricia's Story

## WOLLONGONG

I met him when I was 15, he was five years older, he was good looking and had just got out of the army so he seemed like a good man. His mother was a lovely woman but his father was a big drinker and only went home from the pub to sleep and get changed. I was pretty shocked because it was a totally different household to what I was used to, they were pretty rough. I found out later his father was violent too. My father died in his 80's and I can count on one hand the times he raised his voice or swore. One of the first times I met his mother I was horrified, because she was so drunk she slipped off the bar stool and split her head open. The same night his brother grabbed his wife's hair through the window of a taxi and punched her in the face after she swore at him. I told one of my friends and she said maybe my boyfriend was like that too, but he'd never done anything to me. I thought he was perfect, I was 16 and madly in love.

We were together for 33 years, we never got married and had four children. The first incident of violence happened when we were going to his parents' house and had just got off the bus. I didn't want to go because their house was really grotty and I felt really uncomfortable there. My mother had seven kids and used to get up at 4.30 every morning so the house was always spotless. I told my ex I didn't want to go to his parents and was going home. He said I would do what I was told and smacked me across the face in the street. I told him to stay away from me and we were finished. He promised me it would never happen again and kept apologising.

**He had a friend from work over when I was about six or seven months pregnant and after the friend left, my ex tapped me on the shoulder and as I turned around he hit me so hard I saw stars. I thought I was going to faint.** He said I spoke back to him and made him look like a fool in front of his friend. He was three times bigger than me so when he hit me it was really hard. I didn't know what to do, I was 19 and pregnant, just setting up a house. Every time he hit me he'd promise to go to counselling but he never did. I'd make appointments and he'd never show up.

I had to really think before I said anything because if he didn't like it or didn't agree, it would escalate to

physical violence. He wasn't a drinker like his father, the anger just came out of nowhere. I would watch his expression when he came in from work and if he'd had a bad day I'd tell the kids to stay in their rooms. I never had friends from work over because I knew what he was likely to do, if they made a joke and he took it the wrong way he'd have an outburst or take it out on me. I was embarrassed and it was like living on eggshells.

He used to hit the kids all the time. He would discipline them with a leather belt which we argued about. I didn't think it was right but I never had a say in anything. We all hated Christmas because every year he would go crazy about something and ruin it. One year he was working on the kids bikes and he threw a metal shifter at me which smashed into the bone in my ankle. He said if I didn't open my f-ing mouth it wouldn't have happened. He always said I deserved it. **There was some kind of physical violence every week or two unless there was a big incident, then he would buy jewellery and it would be another four or five weeks before it started again.** If he didn't like what I'd made for dinner he would upend the table and everything would smash on the floor. We were driving to his brother's new house once and he got angry because I couldn't read the map without my glasses and we missed the turn. He pulled over, grabbed my hair, and repeatedly banged my face on the dashboard and broke my tooth. When we got to his brother's house I had blood on my top and a fat lip, and his brother had an argument with him for hitting me. All the way home in the car he screamed and swore and abused me, because I ruined the day.

**I tried to leave once after an argument, he held a rifle to my head and said I could go but I wasn't taking our daughter. I thought he was going to kill us.** That was the scariest thing that happened. I actually went to his father at the pub and he helped me get my daughter. The next day when he was at work I packed some clothes and went to my parents. There were no mobiles back then but he rang the family home constantly and would come over banging on the door demanding to see us. My mother wouldn't let him in so he kicked my parents' front door off its hinges. The police came and told me if I had let him see his daughter it wouldn't have happened. That used to be their attitude in the 80's. My ex started following us all the time and would call at 1am, 3am, then he started going to my sister's house and harassing them. Every time I went back it was so he would leave everyone alone, because I knew he wouldn't stop. I did it to protect them.

Sometimes he would be good and we had some great times but when he went off it was really terrifying. **One day our son was holding wood for him and his father didn't think he was holding it straight so he punched him in the mouth and knocked two of his teeth out.**

*Sometimes people ask why I didn't leave earlier. But what could I do? I only had casual work, I couldn't afford rent or furniture for four kids and once he knew where we were he would just start harassing and stalking us. But I did finally make up my mind to leave a few years ago after he threatened to break our 12 year old's fingers.*

**Our other son was laying on the lounge one night and his father didn't like something that was said and punched him in the face. His eye was so black he couldn't go to school for a week.** My family knew he was violent but they never knew the extent of it or what he did to the kids. I would always make excuses if I couldn't go to something or had a black eye. After he hit me he'd buy me diamond earrings or a ring but I never wore them. When I left I hocked them all because I could never wear them, they brought back too many bad memories, that one's for the split lip, that's for the black eye.

Sometimes people ask why I didn't leave earlier. But what could I do? I only had casual work, I couldn't afford rent or furniture for four kids and once he knew where we were he would just start harassing and stalking us. But I did finally make up my mind to leave a few years ago after he threatened to break our 12 year old's fingers. I told my ex I'd had enough and was leaving so he fractured my nose and gave me a black eye. That was my going away present.

We lived with my sister and her husband for a couple of months until I had enough money to get my own place. My brother in law didn't want us to leave because he thought we'd be safer with them but I didn't want to hide forever. I got my own place on the south coast. **My son and I had an escape plan and we used to go through it in case his father turned up. We slept with a chair wedged under the front door in case he tried to kick the door in.** I was relieved to be away from him but still scared. I didn't like going to the shopping centre because I was frightened he'd be there. He followed our son around and followed me doing the shopping. **I just walked away from the house because dead people can't spend money. If I had tried to take him for half the house, I would have been carried out in a body bag.** I never took out an AVO either because he would have just blown my head off, I knew I'd be dead. He'd be in jail and there'd be no-one to look after our son.

I finally got him out of my life when he met another woman six months after I left and started to leave me alone. He had someone else to abuse. Unfortunately my son went and lived with him for a year because he missed his friends and hated where we were living. By that time his father's new girlfriend and her two kids had moved into our house. My son said his father was up to his old tricks and showed me a photo of the woman's son with hand marks around his neck. He said the youngest who was only nine was so frightened of him he would wet his pants.

I never thought I would get married again and didn't date for a few years, but I got remarried a year ago and everything's really good now. I don't have any contact with my ex and feel totally removed from him. Our other three children still take the grandkids to see their father because they believe they need that contact, but it ended really badly with my youngest son, he jumped out of a moving car because his father was trying to choke him. His father took our son to court for assault claiming he'd started it, after everything he'd done to everyone. I got the charges dropped by giving the court all the records of our son's psychiatrists.

**My new husband's a great guy and it's taken a great guy because I never thought I'd ever be involved with anyone again. It's so great living with someone who you can say anything to!** Every few months my husband tells me I've had nightmares or was crying in my sleep, and I know it's because I've dreamt about it, but I'm so much happier. I don't have to explain myself all the time and can have an opinion. My husband and I work together and we still come home and talk about everything, there's no swearing or arguing, we make compromises if we want to do different things.

Attitudes to domestic violence have changed so much. If I knew refuges existed I would have gone and lived in a refuge interstate, but I had no idea and people didn't talk about it. I had lost contact with my best friend but we got in contact again 18 month ago after not seeing each other for 30 years. We just went on a cruise together, she had no idea how bad it was. It's nice to be able to breathe and feel free, and safe.

# Aliya's Story

## INNER WEST, SYDNEY

I met my ex-husband when I was 18 when I had just finished high school in Turkey. I was about to go to uni and he was on holiday from Australia. We started dating and he wasn't sure if he was going to stay in Turkey or go back to Australia, so he gave me an engagement ring in the first few weeks. He got really angry one day about me wearing what he thought was a short skirt. He slapped me across the face and told me to go and change. I told my parents I didn't want to marry him and took my ring off, but my mother said he was just jealous and it showed he loved me and wanted to marry me. She pressured me to give him another chance and not to over-react. I always felt he wasn't the right person but was too young and felt pressured into it. We got married after six months so it was very quick.

The day after we were married I was staying in a big house with him and his parents and extended family. The morning after we were married at around 9am I was still sleeping because it had been such a big day. **He came into the room and pulled my hair, yelling at me for still being asleep. He dragged me into the lounge room and started slapping me in front of his family because I was asleep. That was my first day of marriage.** From that moment on I was living in a different world, my body was there but my soul was somewhere else, that's how I felt for the next seven years. His family did nothing and told me I should have got breakfast for my husband. I was shocked because we had just got married. I was also a virgin and was a bit physically affected the next morning and had tried to have a shower and rest a bit more. I didn't say anything to anyone about it but I felt like a prisoner.

We stayed in Turkey for nine months after getting married then came to Five Dock. There were so many incidents I can't remember everything. The violence happened between one and three times a week, I was always expecting it. I had a daughter and when she was only a few months old I was trying to run from him and he threw me down and started choking me. I couldn't hear anything and his face started to slowly disappear, everything looked like clouds and went white and I just heard buzzing. Suddenly he let go and it took a while

for me to hear and see again. He nearly killed me. The fights were never for a reason, anything I said or did was enough. I wasn't even allowed to shop by myself, he was very, very controlling.

One day I was going to the shops with his sister and had left some washing ready to hang up when I got back. I cooked and cleaned everything perfectly so he wouldn't get angry. He went crazy when we got back and smashed a vase of flowers across the lounge room. He started bashing me like he always did, I always had bruises over my whole face and body and tried to cover it up with heavy makeup so no-one at work could see. He went so crazy this day there was suddenly blood everywhere, all over the bed where he was bashing me. **He panicked and stopped suddenly because he realised he had torn my ear off, it was hanging off my head. His sister came back with her husband, she washed off the blood and put make-up on to try and hide it.** There was a medical centre across the road and our regular GP was there. My ex made me walk there holding his hand so no-one would think he had done anything. As soon as my doctor saw me he was really worried and started asking what happened, he was so shocked. I didn't say anything because I was too scared. My GP knew something was wrong and told my ex to wait outside while he talked to me. He kept asking how it had happened and I made up a story about playing around with kids and a sharp object cut my ear. That's what my ex and his sister and her husband all told me to say. I could tell by his face my GP didn't believe me, but he couldn't do anything so I just had stitches to put it back on.

I didn't tell anyone, I didn't even have any friends, I just went to work and came home, he didn't let me see anyone. I think he thought I would tell someone what was going on. He even stopped me from talking to my family who were still in Turkey. I was only allowed to talk to them if he or his family were listening, I could never go to another room for privacy and they were always accusing me of trying to tell my family what was happening. If my voice wasn't happy enough on the phone they'd get angry, and force me to tell my mother I was really happy. **His family did absolutely nothing about the violence and completely supported him.** He used to go out whenever he wanted, he went out all weekend and would come home the next day whenever he felt like it, he was cheating the whole time. I was just a slave, someone to cook and wash and clean and give birth. I worked all the time, right up until two days before giving birth, he just took all the money I earned and gave me nothing. I wanted to leave but couldn't. Eventually I did the best thing I'd ever done and left.

*Now he has someone else to control. I have beautiful kids, my daughter was affected by what happened because she saw so much violence, but my son is ok because I left when he was a baby. I wish I could say to all the women out there who are scared, just take one little step and everything will work out.*

When our son was a couple of months old my dad was in intensive care and I hadn't seen my family for years so they gave me permission to go and I took my son. My ex only gave me \$200 for the whole trip. I stayed for two months because a few days after I arrived my Dad passed away. I told my half-brothers nearly everything that had been going on and they wanted me to leave my husband and stay in Turkey. My brothers called him and told him to leave me alone. He started calling me crying and apologising, begging me to come back and promising to change and see a psychologist. I agreed to go back, my brothers made me promise if he did anything to go straight to the police.

The day I arrived back in Australia he picked me up at the airport with my daughter. The first thing he said was, you f-ing slut, now you're here look what I'm going to do to you. You can't go back now. He called his family and told them to all come over. They accused me of having fun even though my father had died. I was sitting there silent. I was wearing a necklace my parents bought me and his mother ripped it off my neck, cutting my neck. **They were treating me like a criminal and I knew a bashing was coming. I jumped up and grabbed the phone off the wall and ran downstairs calling the police. I had nothing, not even shoes on and it was dark so I hid behind some cars.** His father was looking for me but didn't see me. They were awful people. Four police officers turned up and took me and my son - because he was still a baby - to the police station, they were really good. They interviewed me and I managed to tell them about some of the violence including him taking off my ear, but I was shaking and crying and couldn't remember everything. I stayed at the police station overnight with my son. They took me to a hotel for a night and then a social worker from the Marion Centre women's refuge came and picked me up. I stayed for a year.

The refuge made me feel really special. When I arrived all the staff were at the front door waiting for me and all gave me a big hug. Everything started pouring out, I cried every hour, every day. If someone asked how I was, I started crying, if they said breakfast was ready I would start crying. An AVO was put in place but he and his family still tried to find me.

I didn't see my daughter for four months and I went back again because I wanted to see my daughter. The refuge told me not to go back, so did my family. My ex sold our unit and hid all the money in an account in his mother's name, even though I paid the mortgage and earned more than him. Then once all the money was hidden he told me he wanted a divorce. I packed all the kids clothes and while he was out went back to the refuge with both the kids.

**I could have tried to fight for the money but I couldn't afford to pay for a lawyer and couldn't get legal aid. I decided to let the money go, it wasn't fair but I couldn't do anything. He took the house, my tax money, all the furniture, and left me with nothing.** He kept trying to call me and drove around trying to find us. The refuge helped me to get transitional housing which I've got for two years. We got divorced seven months ago and he's leaving me alone now because he has another girlfriend. He still sees the kids but doesn't pay child support. I don't want anything to do with him and will never go back.

I still can't believe what I went through and looking back it's like a bad dream. I used to pray to God to let me die because I had no idea how I could escape. He was the sort of man who could have killed me. Even at the refuge I was scared he would come and get me, I used to check the car because I thought he'd do something to make us have an accident. Now he has someone else to control. I have beautiful kids, my daughter was affected by what happened because she saw so much violence, but my son is ok because I left when he was a baby. I wish I could say to all the women out there who are scared, just take one little step and everything will work out.

# Ayssia's Story

## GRIFFITH

I got married in 2004 in Pakistan as part of an arranged marriage and the violence started a week later when he started beating and abusing me. I went to my parents but they didn't help, they said violence was normal. My mother said my father sometimes beat her and there was nothing she could do, and my husband's father also beat his mother. In our culture, domestic violence is normal except in highly educated families. It's not like Australia where you can go to the police or a refuge or use community services to get help. In Pakistan, there are no services and most women suffer for a long time and lots of them die, you just have nowhere to go.

The first time he beat me it was because his mother called me and I didn't go to her quick enough, he kicked me in the back and slapped me across the face. He got more and more violent and threw things at me all the time. He never used my name and just called me bitch. If he had a fight with someone in his family he would take it out on me by beating me. It was every week, sometimes a few times a week, sometimes I'd get a couple of weeks break, but it was constant beatings and it was severe. One time he poured boiling water over me because I was pregnant with a girl and he didn't want a girl. He broke my nose and smashed my head into the walls, he did whatever he wanted to. A few times he hit me so hard he hurt himself doing it, so he started beating me with bamboo poles until he broke all of them too.

I had two girls in the first couple of years and he was very unhappy about it because he only wanted boys. When our first daughter was born he was so angry. His family got together and had something like a funeral because they were so upset it wasn't a boy, they wouldn't even give her a name for nine months. When I got pregnant again I didn't tell him for five months, and when he found out he burnt my hands with boiling water and beat me heavily because he said I was useless and couldn't make any boys.

**When my second daughter was born they wouldn't let me go to hospital. My husband told his sister to kill the baby if it was another girl. When she was born they just threw her on the floor and wanted to kill her.** I begged his sister not to kill her and she couldn't do it in front of me, I believe God helped me keep my daughter alive.

The violence got worse after that and he started threatening to kill me, he said he would kill us all because he didn't want us. I felt alone and desperate. If I called the police they would have just said it was a family problem because he's my husband and my owner. Women disappear all the time in Pakistan and they turn a blind eye, no-one asks where they've gone. My older daughter was very scared because her father did everything in front of her. Sometimes she would come in when I was asleep and whisper, *Mummy are you still alive?*

In 2014 I came out to Australia and we lived in Griffith. **As soon as I arrived he said he wanted to kill me, he said it was easy in Australia because there was so much bushland he could cut me into pieces and no-one would find me. I was terrified.** I had no friends or family and at the time couldn't speak English that well. He stopped hitting me as much, he said the police here were very good and he'd be charged if there was any physical signs and he'd go to jail. So he started saying he'd kill me instead.

I had to go to hospital not long after and I was so scared I told the nurse, she went and got a doctor who was from Pakistan. I told him I wanted to go back to Pakistan but he said I had permanent residency and convinced me Australia was not like Pakistan, and I could have a very good life here. He called the woman's refuge and that's how I ended up here at Kulkuna Women's Refuge.

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I couldn't leave straight away because they were waiting for a place at the refuge, and I was crying because my husband was in the waiting room because he wouldn't let me go anywhere alone. The doctor invented another appointment to let me know what to do, then I waited until my husband left for work and took my girls in a taxi and left forever. I had only been in Australia for a month before I left him, but he was so serious about killing me and showed me a massive knife he said he'd kill me with. It was so frightening, because I didn't know who to trust, but I walked in the door at the refuge and they were like angels. They were so nice and so kind, you can't imagine, they were better than my family and helped me so much. I was in the refuge for nearly a year and now I rent out my own unit.

My husband reported us missing to the police but he never found us, and I only ever saw him once more in court when I got an AVO and got divorced. He probably thought we went back to Pakistan. He was probably happy we were gone and I think he moved away because I've never seen him around the town. For the first couple of months I couldn't sleep and was still scared. **For Australians it's normal to feel safe and have police you can trust, but for me it was very special, the police were so nice. The refuge was a lifesaver and the staff were amazing and looked after me so well, they helped me get the girls into new schools.** My daughters never want to see their father again.

With the help of the staff I started to feel normal again and I want to be a good person in society so I'm studying English at TAFE. I want to do community services after that so I can work in refuges myself. That's my future plan. I also have a dream to one day go back to Pakistan and start a women's refuge. Everything is so good now, it was like I was a bird locked in a cage and now I'm free. Living here is like paradise, you Aussies don't know because you're living here, but you're born in paradise. I told my story because I want other Muslim women to know they don't have to stay in violent marriages either.

*I also have a dream to one day go back to Pakistan and start a women's refuge. Everything is so good now, it was like I was a bird locked in a cage and now I'm free. Living here is like paradise, you Aussies don't know because you're living here, but you're born in paradise. I told my story because I want other Muslim women to know they don't have to stay in violent marriages either.*

# Sarah's Story

## NEWCASTLE

My relationship was fine early on, we met 17 years ago when we were teenagers and when we got together we were really happy. There was no sign of anything being wrong and I never thought he would be the type of man to hit a woman. We never got married and had been living together for about a year when I fell pregnant. We were still really young but contraception just didn't work for me. We both went back to live with our parents because I didn't want to have a termination and that didn't sit that well with him because he didn't want to have a baby. I said he was either in or out, but he didn't want a child because he didn't want to lose his freedom, we were only 21 but we both had good jobs.

We started to grow apart and started having arguments but it wasn't violent. When our son was born I moved out on my own and we were still together but he never moved in. I wanted him to commit to me and our child but he couldn't. **His family wouldn't have anything to do with me because my father's a bikie and my biological mother was a prostitute. It's not who I am but they judged me for it, and it was definitely the reason I really wanted my own nice family.**

I confronted him one day because I had heard he was back with his ex-girlfriend and he slapped me across the face as hard as he could then hit me again. I ended up with a black eye and was really shocked. He apologised later and said he shouldn't have hit me in front of our son. I kept my mouth shut after that because I didn't want to get hit again. I fell pregnant again and he was so angry when I refused to terminate he threatened to belt me until I lost the baby. He never actually did anything when I was pregnant and after our daughter was born he didn't do anything for a while, but was nasty and verbally violent. He didn't love me like he used to, but he didn't want anyone else to have me and didn't want anyone else to raise the kids, he wanted control.

I moved into a really nice house and we got into a big fight and he smashed me around the house, he dragged me by the hair, pushed me into walls, smacked me in the face, it was really full-on, I had bruises all over me. A few months later he told me had a three year old

daughter with his ex-girlfriend and my whole world fell apart. I begged him to leave us alone and let me go but he kept coming back and being violent. I never reported it because I was too scared and thought he'd take the kids. I knew I was wasting my life and started planning to leave and one night last year when he dropped the kids off I told him to get out of my life. He got inside the house and threw me in the bathtub and smashed my phone, so I ran to the neighbours and asked them to call the police. He grabbed me by the hair and dragged me down the driveway by my knees, and only stopped because several people came to help me. The police came and he was charged with assault and ended up with a good behaviour bond and an AVO. The police were really good and very supportive.

I felt like I was standing on the edge of a cliff and I weighed everything up and decided I'd lived like this for too long, so I went to temporary accommodation for a few days and with my Dad in Maitland until I got into the refuge in Newcastle. It's so good here, the kids feel safe, I feel safe. I cut off my phone, email and Facebook so he couldn't find me. **My case worker has been great and I've done everything she's told me and gone to all the classes, and now I've got a new job lined up which I'm starting in a couple of months. A lot of positive things are happening and I'm still looking for a house but I'll get there.**

I knew I was in an unhealthy relationship but the refuge has really helped me understand it properly and the kids are much more settled being away from the violence. The refuge has really helped us get our life back, they're always there for you and help you with legal and financial stuff, they do such an amazing job. It's all hands on deck all the time. When I was in motels waiting for the refuge I was crying every night and couldn't cook for the kids, here it's a real house, we call it home. I know people are judgemental but I'm not ashamed of where I'm staying, it's a stepping stone to a better life. I would never allow myself to get into another bad relationship. The workers have taught me that violence is wrong and even once is too much, it's zero tolerance. I was seeking out what I didn't have as a child, I wanted normality but it wasn't the right relationship. I wake up happy every day now, I'm so much stronger, it's really changed my life.

*He didn't love me like he used to, but he didn't want anyone else to have me and didn't want anyone else to raise the kids, he wanted control.*

# Kristen's Story

## SYDNEY

My Mum is bipolar and when I was younger I didn't really know what it meant. She took medication and as I got older we started arguing really badly. She also had drug and alcohol problems and used to hit me and pull my hair all the time. I have memories of wanting to call the police a lot but she'd grab the phone off me and hit me with it, screaming. When I was really young she used to take me to her drug dealer's house all the time, there was a prostitute living next door with her kids who were there while she was seeing men. I remember not knowing what was going on until I found out when I was older, it was a bit damaging and weird. When I was nine FACS stepped in and decided it was best for me to move, so I went to live with my Dad.

I lived with my Dad for four years which was horrible. He was a bit of a stranger to me, I only saw him every now and then and had only spent an occasional night with him so living with him was huge. His family had a lot of money and he had a big house near the beach, I was excited he had a car because my Mum didn't even have one. He had a beautiful girlfriend and at first it seemed like a dream, but pretty quickly I saw him hitting his girlfriend, he even pushed her down concrete stairs and she broke her arm. She was in hospital for ages and they fought a lot about it. He was also abusing drugs and had a bad drinking problem, he was at the pub every day so he'd come home in a bad way. He's a very tall, big man and slapped me a few times across the face which hurt really badly. He was very intimidating and scared me a lot. He had a gambling problem too, he had lots of issues and ended up telling me I had to leave so I ended up back with my Mum. I have a Nan around but she's in a difficult situation because she had to support her daughter while trying to be there for me.

Before I went to the Girls' Refuge my mother was really abusive. We actually went on a cruise for Christmas of 2014 when I was 15 and had our usual fight. The normal thing to do would be to tell me to go away for a while until it settled down. **But she made me leave the cruise and sent me back to Sydney from Cairns on my own so I was alone on Christmas Day. She came home a week later without speaking about it.**

The last day I ever spent with her was Christmas of 2015 when I found her rolling around in the lounge room with a friend, drunk and completely smashed. I asked what was going on and they mimicked me, she said she couldn't take it anymore from me and we couldn't live together anymore. I decided to do something so I left. **I actually spent Christmas night in hospital. I was having really bad thoughts, I was suicidal, I had gone to a friend's house but my Mum was texting saying she didn't want me to ever come back. I told my friend I was going crazy and she needed to do something so she took me to hospital. I felt safe there and could talk to people. A social worker who planted the seed about going to a refuge which is where I got the idea from.**

I left the next day and stayed with an older friend in her 40's who offered me a place until I could find somewhere more permanent. I had stayed in an adult psychiatric ward for three days the year before when my mother was really threatening me. I called Kids Helpline and from what I was saying they thought I was at risk, so I was taken by ambulance to an adult psychiatric ward which scarred me for life, I hated being there. My Mum didn't visit me or call she sent me a text saying, *I told the nurses you can't come home.* I was self-harming and she used to tell me I was just doing it for attention because I had the best life ever. Living in that house with her was the loneliest place I could ever be. I had no siblings, my Dad doesn't talk to me, it's just me and my Mum. She's never taken any responsibility for anything even though I had to watch all the drug taking and was slapped across the face, pushed against the wall, had things thrown at me. It was horrible because it was just me and I had no-one to stick up for me. I'd hate to see where I'd be now if I was still living with her.

*When I was really young she used to take me to her drug dealer's house all the time, there was a prostitute living next door with her kids who were there while she was seeing men. I remember not knowing what was going on until I found out when I was older, it was a bit damaging and weird.*

**When I first got to the Girls' Refuge the initial feeling was freedom. I felt like the guy in the Shawshank Redemption, when he finds his way out of the jail and once he's out of the jail he feels amazing.**

He's crawling through the river and feels so free and in control of his life and he's so proud of himself. Although I wasn't technically in a jail I felt free of the psychological abuse and her awful behaviour. I felt really happy at the refuge. I was looking for a new school to go to, had money from Centrelink, everyone in the house supported me so I felt amazing. Depression and anxiety started catching up with me which I have to keep an eye on with the counsellors, but apart from that I was mentally fine. My mother was accusing me of throwing her under the bus but I didn't even answer her calls anymore.

I had to be my own adult which was extremely scary. I wasn't allowed to do whatever I wanted but I had to make some decisions for myself. I'm at school but it's a bit difficult because I don't feel like I'm a child like the others. **The kids at school go home to parents and brothers and sisters, whereas I'm living the life of an adult but I'm going to school as a child, so it's quite difficult to adjust.** My mindset is more like an adult, I'm not experienced like an adult but I understand things like one. I almost have to go to school and pretend to act like a teenager and that's quite hard for me, even conversations with kids are hard. I want to talk about what's happening in American politics with Donald Trump, they want to talk about what happened on Facebook. It's hard for me to adjust back to child-like situations.

I've been out of home now for three months. I'm pretty much doing everything on my own and I'm ok with that. I haven't been in contact with my Mum and I'm really happy about that.

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# Amanda's Story

## NORTHERN BEACHES, SYDNEY

My Dad had a head injury that was undiagnosed for a long time and he used to abuse us verbally and emotionally as well as physically. He wouldn't let us go to friends' houses and told us parties were evil, and if we stayed at home we'd be closer to God. He made up his own version of Christianity, he didn't attend any church because I think most of them would have sussed out there was something not right about him, so he had his own sect. When he hit us he would say God was trying to make us a better person, so there was a lot of mental abuse, but he was quite physical as well. **My sister would often be kicked down the stairs, my other sister had her head kicked into a cement wall and was knocked unconscious, he had no control.** The violence towards my mother was severe until the neighbours called the police one day and he was charged. He realised if he kept doing it he would end up in jail so he stopped hitting her and started hitting us. He would grab us and drag us and would start this uncontrollable hitting, then it would go to kicking, sometimes he would straddle us on the bed and hit us. I think part of the reason I can function now is because I've blocked most of it out, but he would go into an uncontrollable rage about once a month.

He hit me less than my sisters because I was a goody two-shoes, I always over-achieving so I could avoid getting hit. My other sisters didn't avoid it and they got smashed. I studied the things he liked and became a perfect people-pleaser so it was rarer for me to get hit. I ran away when I was 14 for two weeks and my Mum came to take me home but I told her we weren't going back there again. I said I was already insane from his behaviour but my younger sisters might have a chance if we didn't go back. I knew there was something not right with me because I had lots of social issues at school and didn't have any friends and wasn't allowed to ever do anything with anyone. I was a complete nerd, studying all through recess and lunch. I knew if I wasn't fitting into society something wasn't right and I really wanted to spare my sisters from the same thing. I thought it was an opportunity to convince Mum to actually do something about it.

Her friend we were staying with told my Mum I was right and she had no excuse. There was a refuge in Dee Why and this friend drove us there. My Mum was a uni student at the time and was financially dependent on my Dad but we went anyway.

Once we were away from him my sisters and Mum had a lot of bitterness towards me because I was his "favourite" which meant they copped more than I did and they unleashed it on me. I felt suicidal because I'd made this decision to save my sisters and it was just the beginning of the grief. **Domestic violence creates really weird and difficult dynamics between the whole family and that's why I'm a massive supporter of Bringa, because it's so efficient in its counselling they can break the cycle of dysfunction in the whole family, so the next generation can be less dysfunctional than their parents.**

For the first time my shoulders were allowed to un-tense and I wasn't hyper-vigilant that there was the risk of death around anymore. There was always that risk around my Dad so I was constantly tense, especially after witnessing him kick my sister's head into a wall and watch an ambulance take her away. He didn't get charged for it because my Mum defended him and made something up, she did that a lot. At the refuge we had really good counselling, safety, boundaries and a whole team of women that gradually loosened the brainwashing that we deserved it. They planted a seed and shed light on what functional living looked like and how it felt not living in fear. My Dad left us alone.

We stayed at the refuge for nearly four months and they found us the best house and we never went back home after that. That's when my mother started her life, she finished her psychology degree and has been running her own practice for several years and now owns several investment properties.

*At the refuge we had really good counselling, safety, boundaries and a whole team of women that gradually loosened the brainwashing that we deserved it. They planted a seed and shed light on what functional living looked like and how it felt not living in fear.*

*I had another violent relationship which only ended recently. He was an ex-soldier, ex-special forces. He was actually very smart but he had PTSD and nearly killed me. It was very hard to leave because I loved him a lot and he was very nice when he was good, but he had a lot of paranoia and he was trained to kill and torture and that was the biggest danger.*

**Bringa made her believe she could leave, she never believed it before that and was with my Dad for 20 years of chronic violence.** She always says if it wasn't for Bringa she would have gone back. She tried to separate heaps of times but always went back before we came to Bringa.

For myself, for some reason I still attract violent types of men. It could be because I stayed under my Dad's constant brainwashing for 15 years. My sisters have never had violent boyfriends, maybe the fact they had a few years less than me in that domestic violence setting means they're more functional than I am. I'm still very punitive on myself, how I work, and the partners I pick.

When I was 18 I left home and lived in a share house and I got involved with a man living there. It went on for about 18 months but it was violent. He was worse than my Dad, he threatened to burn cigarette butts on me, pinned me down really hard, kicked me, spat on my face, dragged me by the hair until clumps fell out, tore my clothes. I knew it was wrong but kept hoping it would stop or I could change it somehow. He assaulted me one day at a service station in front of witnesses and then started assaulting the witnesses and the police turned up and he was charged. As we left court I said he was going to keep hitting me and doing drugs and knew he'd break his good behaviour bond, so I made him move away to his mother's house in Queensland. We talked a few times after that but it ended.

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**I run two small businesses now and manage 20 staff and I've won a few business awards. I think my experiences mean I can withstand a lot of pressure and it drove me to survive.** I've never had any financial help from anyone, not even my parents, because I never wanted to be trapped like my Mum was. I never wanted finance to affect decisions on ethics and the safety of my children, which I want to have but will only have when I can fully fund their existence myself. I don't ever want to have a financial reason to turn a blind eye to a man's unlawful behaviour, which a lot of women have to do.

The fact that I've had a couple of violent relationships shows there's still something wrong in my wiring. There's a good chance that, because it went on for 15 years and was so chronic, I might never completely unwire it, which might mean I'm not the right person to have kids. I'm the only one in my family who has any contact with my Dad, they're tougher than me and can say no and just cut contact. I still in some ways look after him, if he's suicidal he calls me. If he needs money he calls me, but my mother and sisters never speak to him.

I've used a lot of services in my time, hospital mental support, Salvation Army, psychologists and psychiatrists, public and private, but there are no facilities out there with the same expertise as Bringa of what happens behind closed doors, it's exceptional. **All of a sudden you walk into this place, there's depth of understanding, more than 40 years combined experience, they know how to reign women in who have been in a crazy environment to a place that has boundaries and gives them clarity.** They do it so well, ten out of ten. Other places don't even come close. It would take ten other services to do what they do alone, what they're doing should be replicated because they do so much more than anyone else. They create real change. Other services seem to think you can go to a drug and alcohol counsellor when it's a domestic violence trauma, they try and help but you know they feel inadequate because it's a different area, it's time wasting. If I could sum it all up, after sampling so many of the services out there for domestic violence, Bringa is the most potent centre, it's a small amount of resources but makes big changes that are lasting.

