

Surviving domestic abuse

My story, by Gabbi Millar

My name is Gabbi Millar, and I want to tell you my story of being a victim of domestic abuse and how I came through the other side as a survivor.

I had lived in Southend all my life with my parents and I had worked in the city of London as a Foreign Exchange Banker for 16 years, since leaving St Bernard's Convent. I had just been made redundant from my job in the City of London, my parents had emigrated to America...I was at an all time low in my life.

In August 1997, I met James on a train station after missing my last train home. We exchanged phone numbers and he contacted me the next day. He was incredibly complimentary and very protective...looking back some of his protectiveness was highly aggressive, but at the time I simply thought it was flattering. He told me he was on leave from the army and always made up excuses for being short of cash. We had a kind of whirlwind romance and were constantly together for a month - then I did something really stupid, I married him.

Almost at once things changed. I was making us a meal and burned one of the sausages, when James suddenly, with no warning at all, punched me straight in the face and kicked me as I fell. I was numb with shock, but I had not registered what had really happened at this stage.

Not long afterwards he moved me from my beloved Southend to West London to where his family lived. Then I got the next shock, he was arrested. Far from being on leave from the army, he was on bail for carrying a knife in the street and he had absconded, so he was put on remand. I should have left him then, but I had discovered that I was pregnant.

As soon as he was released he began to drink very heavily and the serious abuse began. He broke three of my teeth, dislocated my jaw, fractured my cheekbone, ruptured my sinuses, broke my ribs and bruised my face so badly I couldn't properly open my eyes.

He would bite me, kick me, hit me with anything he could get his hands on - normally a bottle of Jack Daniels whisky. Anything would start the abuse - if there was no milk in the fridge, if my newborn baby cried, or if I looked at him the wrong way.

Usually, he'd cry and beg me to forgive him afterwards. I would have to pretend everything was alright, if I seemed the slightest bit unhappy he would beat me again.

I had no money - I was forced to shoplift food for my baby, I had no job - he wouldn't allow me to work, and I had no friends or family - I was totally alone. If my mum called me he would stand next to me to ensure that I didn't disclose any information. I had not been allowed to have my hair cut since being with James and was certainly not allowed to wear any make-up or wear fashionable clothes.

Myself and the neighbours called the police 36 times in 18 months, I prosecuted him and he was sentenced to six months in prison, but whilst in prison he persuaded me to have him back, which I did.

And, guess what, he came home and within two days I was being beaten again, I was being forced to eat my food whilst sitting on the floor. If my son cried I had to stand in between my son and James, he would not stop the beatings until he drew blood. Within two months he was arrested, remanded and was sentenced to 8 months in prison. By this point Social Services were involved and they moved me to another area of West London but not far enough away...it didn't take long for him to find me, I can only assume his family had told him of my whereabouts.

He turned up on 14th February 2000 and once in my property he beat me up so bad that he thought he had killed me. He had a bottle of Jack Daniels whisky with him and he continued in a drunken frenzy to hit me around the head with this. He then kept me tied to a chair for the next two weeks, where he continually sexually abused me, stating he would never leave me as he knew I would prosecute him. I had no way of contacting the outside world. Thankfully Social Services had been

trying to contact me, and when they couldn't, they informed the police who then broke the door down and found me black and blue and tied to a chair.

He was arrested, charged with threats to kill, false imprisonment and GBH and remanded immediately.

At this point something in me snapped, I was told by the specialist domestic abuse police officer that if I didn't get away, he would kill me. I don't know where I found the last bit of strength, but I phoned my mum and told her the truth and I managed to secure myself a place in Southend Refuge. I arrived at the refuge on 29th February 2000. I changed my name and divorced him whilst he was serving 18 months for the last catalogue of assaults.

Myself and my son, who was now 18 months old, were in refuge for 10 months where I had intense therapy and very slowly, very painfully, brick by brick, I came to terms with exactly what had happened to me and rebuilt me and my son's life. During my time in refuge, my face finally started to settle down after all the beatings and having nearly lost my eye. Then we were eventually re-housed by Southend Borough Council.

James is now serving life imprisonment with a minimum tariff of 15 years, for brutally killing a young homeless person by hitting him around the head with a bottle of Jack Daniels whisky...that could so easily have been me.

In 2004 from a prison cell he took me to the High Court in London, wishing to have contact with my son. Due to him not being able to work he was granted full Legal Aid. I was by now working full time at the Southend Women's Refuge so I was not entitled to full Legal Aid; therefore I had to pay to protect my son from a murderer.

The Judge ordered a No Contact Order which made a new legal ruling, a person with parental responsibility not being allowed to see their child was previously unheard of. James is allowed to apply for contact again but must take leave of Court to do so, so the control was still occurring from inside a prison cell.

My son is now 11 years of age and has not seen his father since he was 11 months old. I would like to think that he will now leave us alone...although I still do not believe this is the end of my story.

These events happened some ten years ago now and I am pleased to report that the support available for victims and children is now even better than it was for me. I would urge victims of domestic abuse to speak up and get the help and support you need.