

Alicia's Story

From the time she was a little girl, Alicia just wanted everyone in her family to be safe. Even at the tender age of five, she did whatever she could to keep her father from abusing her mother, even sitting on his lap when she thought her mother might be in danger.

"I would just go and physically sit in between them," Alicia remembers. "There was both rage and physical abuse on my father's part."

Alicia was the youngest of six and said she was the child in which both of her parents would confide. "I became the mediator between my parents and the protector of my mother," she says.

She made a promise to herself that when she grew up, she would never allow anyone to hurt her. "I really made a commitment to never be in an abusive relationship, but I ended up in one," she says matter-of-factly.

After graduating from college with a Bachelor's degree in Journalism, she married a man who abused her, just as her father had abused her mother.

Like many violent relationships, in the beginning everything seemed fine. But after the first year of marriage, her husband started abusing drugs and tried to control every aspect of her life, eventually turning to violence as well.

"A year into the marriage he changed," Alicia recalls. "His philosophy when we were dating was that we were 'just dating,' but once I became his wife he said he owned me." She stayed in the marriage because she thought if she could just make him feel better, she could change him.

She felt she needed to save her husband from his traumatic past. "When he was a boy, he witnessed his father kill his mother," Alicia says. "I had a savior complex and thought that if I just loved him enough, I could help him forget about his own childhood."

"He internalized the trauma, and the experience froze him developmentally," Alicia says. "And so that was his legacy, and along with my legacy. . . together it was just a mess."

In addition to the drug addiction and emotional abuse, he threw things at her, hit walls, and destroyed their belongings. "There was a lot of raging, and he stole money out of my purse and my check whenever I got paid."

The situation only got worse, and nothing made sense to Alicia. She was college educated, had a corporate job, and knew all of the signs of abuse. She realized she had assumed the same role with her husband that her mother had taken on with her father.

"And I took on the role with gusto," she says. "But I knew that wasn't my job. I was a human and a woman, but I wasn't a trained professional to be able to handle that."

Struggling to make her life work meant shouldering the responsibilities of the sole breadwinner, caretaker for the children, and wife to an abusive man – it was self-destructive and unhealthy, and she knew it. Every time she would leave him, her husband would have their priest call her; and because she was devoted to her faith, she always returned.

"It wasn't that I was being beat up every day, it was that I was with someone who thought of me with zero value, and when there was physical abuse, it was intense," she can now acknowledge. "It was just knowing that he couldn't stand the sight of me and didn't want to be around me, and yet he said if I left he would kill me."

Once she found herself pregnant with their third child, she felt the need to try and save the marriage once again. She remembers days when she complied with his every command out of fear, always with the goal of protecting her own children from the abuse.

But the day came when she knew it was time to leave and never return. She was cooking when the phone rang so she didn't answer it. Before she knew it, her husband threw a large bottle of cooking oil at her pregnant stomach – her seven-months-pregnant stomach.

"I thought to myself, if my child isn't even here yet and she's already impacted, I've just got to get out of here." She escaped first to her parents' home and then called STAND! because her husband was stalking her. "My parents and family felt they were in danger; everyone around me felt like they were in danger, even everybody at work," she recalls.

After discussing her options with a STAND! Caseworker, she moved into STAND!'s Transitional Housing program with her three children. She now says that without STAND!'s help – safe housing, therapy, child care, job counseling, and encouragement to continue her education – she never would have permanently escaped the violence.

"When I was going through the abuse for all those years, I was just losing myself, my spirit, and my esteem," Alicia admits. "I was losing my ability to think, but STAND! gave me my life back, gave me the ability to create a normal environment for my kids, to dance and play with them, take them to childcare, and have a normal life."

Alicia said STAND! did "not allow her to be isolated," and immediately gave her a schedule that included meeting with a counselor to draw up a self-sufficiency plan and process her abuse. "STAND! made me feel as if I could just get right up," she says.

This new feeling of hope stood in stark contrast to the year she spent at her parents' house where she felt "completely isolated." Her mother had taken care of her daughter while Alicia stayed in bed all day long. "I was clinically depressed," she says.

She recalls her lowest point when she was so numb that she couldn't even cry. "I just didn't feel anything anymore. I wasn't feeling desperate, I wasn't feeling sad, I wasn't feeling afraid, I wasn't feeling a thing. But when I got real scared, that's what got me moving."

These days, with her kind smile and peaceful presence that warms up any room, Alicia is now worlds away from the years of abuse that once terrified and consumed her life and those of her children.

With the help and encouragement of STAND!, today she is a successful, independent woman who supports her three children in a safe and thriving home. She has even completed a Masters degree in Education from Mills College.

What she feels most passionate about now is educating people on the devastating effects that domestic violence has on children, whether they are witnesses or direct victims.

"Children are affected by domestic violence whether they are in the same room or see it or not," Alicia says. "It took me my whole experience with my husband and children to see what each one of them had to go through individually," she says.

These days, she works for STAND! and says there is no place she would rather be. "Yes, I've come full circle, and I don't think that any amount of money in the world could match the work that I want to do here. I would even pay STAND! every day to work here, I would," Alicia says.

STAND! empowered Alicia to take up the cause of ending domestic violence in her life and the community, and the way she has committed herself to that cause is an inspiration to us all.