

## Margarita's Story

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Hello, my name is Margarita. I am very happy to be here today to share with all of you my story of how I survived domestic violence. This is not an easy thing for me to do. But if it will help save one person, it is worth it.

I was born in Mexico. I never knew my parents and was raised by foster parents. When I was 13, my foster parents gave me to a man who said he was my father. He told me that he had married in the United States and that he wanted me to come live with him. He told me that he wanted to make up for not having been there for me before.

When I arrived there, the man handed me over to men who owned a bar where teen girls and young women were prostituted out to the bar customers. The bar owners told me that they had paid a lot of money for me and that I had to work for them to pay it off. I was forced to provide sex to the bar customers.

At 15, I became pregnant, but I had no idea who the father was. They would not let me see a doctor while I was pregnant and when my son was born, I had no idea how to take care of him but I loved him. After I gave birth, I was forced to continue to work as a prostitute. I was drugged and raped over and over. I lived like this for many years.

At 19, I met a kind man named Ernesto. He told me that he wanted to help me escape that life. Ernesto took me away from the bar and we moved in together. Ernesto seemed like such a good person and wanted to take care of me. He taught me how to cook, go grocery shopping, and other things that I had never learned how to do. I felt so safe and protected, and I was so hopeful about our life together. We moved to Concord, to an apartment we shared with his brother, to be close to Ernesto's family.

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Once in Concord, I started to see a different side of Ernesto. His family did not like me. They thought I was a low-class person because of my background. This is when Ernesto's attitude started to change towards me. He could be very nice but he also had a terrible temper.

Ernesto came home from work one day, upset and angry. He hit me and insulted me. I was so scared that I locked myself in the bathroom until he left the house. This was the day the violent abuse began.

Ernesto became very jealous after his sister-in-law, who was also my co-worker, told him that I was too friendly with the manager at my work at the Jack in a Box. I was just being kind, but she told Ernesto that I must be cheating on him. He got so angry. He called me a bitch and prostitute. He grabbed me and threw me on the bed. He yanked my hair and called me garbage. He said that I was not worth anything. He started strangling me. I couldn't breathe, and I was so scared. When he saw me struggling to breathe, he stopped and moved away from me, yelling that I was crazy, and that no one would ever love me. Sadly, I started to believe him.

I became pregnant with Ernesto's child. But Ernesto and his family were convinced that the child was not his, because they all thought I was cheating on him. Ernesto forced me to have an abortion.

My relationship with Ernesto's family continued to get worse until Ernesto and I were able to move in to our own apartment. Our relationship got a little better and I became pregnant with a little girl. Ernesto started treating me better after the birth of our daughter, and I was hopeful that our relationship was going to work out.

I went back to work, but Ernesto's behavior was changing back to his old ways. He had seasonal work at the time, and I was making more money. He would lose his temper over nothing. He would be nice one minute and

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then very angry the next. He always needed more money. I gave him my paychecks, and I knew that we had enough to cover the bills, but somehow we always ended up short. When I would ask him why, he would get very angry with me and tell me that I was crazy.

Then one of the neighbors told me that Ernesto was using drugs. I confronted him about it and he accused me of being the drug addict. I did not use drugs. Over and over again I kicked him out when I would find the drugs, but he would always beg me to return, promising to change. And I wanted to believe him, so I would let him come back.

Ernesto began to talk about Mexico and taking our 2 year old daughter there. I told him that she was too young. Then one day when I got home from work they were both gone. I was horrified. I didn't know where my child was. He called me a few days later stating that our daughter was fine and that they would be in Mexico for two months.

Ernesto sent me photos of him and my daughter with guns. I was so scared that I would never see my daughter again. Ernesto called and told me that he could take my daughter any time he wanted, that even the military did not have enough firepower to stop him, and that if I tried to come and get her, I would never find her.

When Ernesto came back without my daughter, I was terrified. I begged him to bring back her from Mexico, but he just laughed at me. Weeks went by before he went back to Mexico and brought my daughter home. Then he told me that he would take both of our daughter and my son away to Mexico if I ever left him. I believed him, so I stayed and in 2005, Ernesto and I got married, and the abuse continued.

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Ernesto's jealousy continued also. He became obsessed with the idea that I was having an affair with his brother and would yell and scream at me about it, especially when his brother died in a motorcycle accident.

I tried to leave him several times but Ernesto's threats of taking my daughter away from me and never let me see her again kept me in constant fear. I didn't think that I had the option to leave him. I was too afraid that he would take my daughter away from me.

The violence continued. One day I was in our bedroom when Ernesto came at me with a gun, smiling, and said "Are you scared?" as he put the gun against my head. I was sure that I was going to die. He started to laugh and said the gun was fake. It didn't feel like a fake gun when it was against my head. It felt real and I was so afraid.

In late spring of 2009, Ernesto up and went to Mexico by himself. He told me that he wanted to move to Mexico permanently, and that he expected me and the children to follow him there. I was so scared I agreed, but I had no intention of going to Mexico with him. I thought that this was finally my chance to break free of him. But when I did not join him, he came back very angry.

Finally Ernesto found another woman and moved in with her. I hoped he was gone. But even though Ernesto had moved in with this woman, he kept coming around, and demanding sex from me. When I refused, he got jealous and accused me of being with other men. On three occasions, Ernesto forced me to have sex with him.

Later that same year, in November of 2009, my daughter who was 6 years old at the time saw her father on the street near his home and wanted to see him. I agreed to a visit, but did not want him to take her inside his apartment because I was scared that he would not return her. He took

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her into his apartment anyway. I waited in the car. When they didn't come out after 20 minutes, I went to the door to get our daughter and leave.

He did not want me to leave with her, and he got angry, started insulting me, and grabbed me by the throat and started choking me. This was right in front of our daughter, too. After a few seconds he let me go, shoving me against a metal railing. At the same time he tried to push our daughter back into his apartment, hitting her in the process, but then our daughter ran to me and we got out of there. I called the police and told them how fearful I was for myself and my children. Ernesto was arrested, and I was given an Emergency Protective Order and was encouraged to file a restraining order against him.

On that day the Police Officer's also gave me something that saved my family for the long-term. They gave me the STAND! Card. That evening I called the STAND! Crisis Line and spent hours on the phone with this kind woman who answered my call, and explained the violence that was surrounding my family. Immediately I was given legal resources, support group referrals, and services that could help my children. I got help at Bay Area Legal Aid to file a restraining order against Ernesto. After he received the restraining order, he threatened that he would have me deported if I didn't drop it.

I was in contact with an amazing STAND! staff member named Irene. She was a huge support to me. She listened to me, gave me advice, and helped me to be smart and strong. On several occasions I called STAND!'s 24 hour crisis line because I was afraid and did not know what to do. They were always there for me, every minute of every day.

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I had to go to court for a hearing. I was so afraid that Ernesto would have me deported, that I ended up dropping the restraining order. The Judge in the court that day told me that she understood that I have reasons for why I would drop the restraining order. But she told me that she knew that I was in trouble and that there were people that would help me, and that I did not have to live in fear.

In mid-January of 2010 Ernesto came to my home, very angry at me for being arrested and for causing him to now have a police record. He threatened me, telling me that I would "regret ruining his record" and that I had "no idea what I was getting into." After this, I decided that, even though I was scared, I had to file another restraining order.

This time I had the courage to go through with it. Soon after the restraining order went in to effect, I filed for divorce and received my U-Visa so that I can live in the United States permanently! I even got a driver's license!

I was still so afraid that Ernesto might try something and continued to be afraid for quite some time. Irene was and is always there for me to calm my fears and help give me moral support. This past August my divorce was finalized. I celebrated with friends by having a cake at my STAND! support group. I am now going to school and studying to be a social worker. My son who is now 19 years old is also working two jobs and going to college. He dreams of being a police officer and helping to protect other people who may be in danger. My daughter is now 9 years old. She is taking gymnastics classes and dreams of performing in the Olympics, representing the United States.

I want to thank the Concord Police Department for being there for my family when I needed them desperately. As an undocumented immigrant,

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I learned to fear the Police but on that day I learned that the Police are there to protect all members of its community in times of need. The police officer's that day did so much for me. They tried to calm my children and tried to make them feel safe. I want to thank the Concord Police Department and all of the police officers that keep us safe each and every day.

I would like to thank the Monument Crisis Center, especially Sandra and Jennifer, who gave my family food, support during the holidays, offered me English classes, and basic life skills training so that I could do simple things by myself like open up my own PG&E account. I would also like to thank Bay Area Legal Aid, especially Maria and Emily, who gave me free legal support including restraining orders, Visa paperwork, and filing for divorce. One more person I would like to thank is Vicky with the Catholic Charities who helped bring my family food when we were in great need of help.

Most importantly, I want to thank STAND!. My children and I would not be the safe and happy family that we are today without the support of STAND!. They gave me the courage and strength to stand up to my abuser. Though I still have contact with Ernesto, because he is the father of my daughter, I know that he cannot hurt me or my children ever again. I have a new life, which is full of potential and joy. I have a new family that is always there for me. My family is all of the STAND! employees. I want to thank all of them for the work that they do. It is now my dream to work for STAND! and to help other women in trouble as they have helped me.

Thank you!