

In sharing my story, I am not going to share all of the details...just enough to give you context, otherwise this would be a lengthy endeavor! ☺ I am going to share the pivotal moment in all three situations that stand out to me as a turning point in my life, while also highlighting the unjust and the seemingly impossible choices a victim is forced to make.

I grew up in an abusive home with my mother and a perverse, cruel stepfather. My father was not in the picture, but I had strong role models in my beloved maternal grandparents. They were my rock, as was my faith. Church and my grandparents' home were my safe havens and I often sobbed when I left either and headed home. A defining moment that I go back to when I think about this period of my life, started with being awakened to yet another loud argument between my mother and stepfather. I would gather my two younger sisters in my bed and try to console them when this occurred... This night I heard the front door slam...and I heard my mother sobbing and begging to be let in...it was snowing and bitter cold. I prayed for God to intervene as I listened to my stepfather rant and rave...and then there was a knock on my window...it was my mom, in her nightgown and barefoot, begging me to go and open the back door. I remember thinking and deliberating what to do. Letting her in would mean a dire consequence for me. And as my 8 year old mind contemplated, I knew I would do the right thing, regardless. What I didn't realize was that all 8 year olds didn't grapple with those types of decisions. The consequence in this case doesn't stand out as a strong memory, but the thought process I went through in choosing to do the right thing, is very strong.

The second time domestic violence altered my life, I was a young woman, married just six weeks. My mother had finally escaped my first stepfather, but had immediately gotten involved with another controlling, unhappy man. She had two younger daughters, ages 5 and 11. My new husband had a daughter, age 6. Labor Day weekend had been a fun weekend and as we returned home, life seemed to be so good. It was 1986, we didn't have cell phones, so home answering machines were prevalent. As I walked in the house, it was blinking with a message. The message was from my uncle, my mom's brother, asking my husband to call him. It struck me as odd – he had been with us all weekend. My husband came in and called and from the look on his face as he listened, I knew something was seriously wrong. I asked if it was my grandparents and he shook his head...and then, I asked if it was my mom. As he nodded his head, I said..."he killed her, didn't he?" I will never know where that came from...he hadn't ever been violent physically, just emotionally. As the horror of the situation slowly crept into my consciousness, I recalled a sort of bizarre conversation my mom and I had shared a couple of months back. I don't remember what the context was, but she had asked me if anything ever happened to her, if I would take care of the "little girls", my younger sisters. I had assured her that I most certainly would. I knew that now, that was my mission –

taking care of the girls. My stepfather had also shot himself, but was in ICU. I drove all night to get to the girls and although the girls knew something was wrong, they didn't know details. I was there to tell them that Mom was gone when they woke up the next morning... A heartbreaking moment in itself. We were in an attorney's office at 9am and I had temporary custody by 1. The defining moment was when I made the decision to take full responsibility for the girls...knowing full well that my husband did not have the capacity to love children that were not his own...children that were not of his race. My grandparents were crushed, devastated at the loss of their only daughter...and they also needed my support. They were not in a place to provide support to me in my decision. Making that decision, I knew that my marriage would probably not survive and that many of my dreams...finishing school, competing in my beloved rodeo competitions, travel...all of those would be put on hold. And for a period of time, I was angry at my mother. Angry that her choices and bad decisions had again impacted my life and put me in an impossible situation where doing the right thing was at significant cost. However, I was resolute that my children, including my stepdaughter and sisters, would have a different life; that stability and love would prevail in their lives.

And my marriage did not survive. Three birth children later, I found myself alone; a single mom with six children, as my stepdaughter chose to come with me in the divorce, as well. I met a man who didn't have children, who was fun and carefree. Much the opposite of who I was... We married and for a period of time, life was very good. We had a daughter who he adored. But as his career faltered, and mine blossomed, trouble crept in. The alcoholism that his father struggled with now became my husband's struggle. After a period of time, I felt as though I now had eight children, rather than seven. And my husband began to exhibit bi-polar characteristics. I never knew which person would walk through the door...I tried very hard to be less, so he could be more, in our home and social circles, so that he could maintain his superiority. We eventually divorced and I tried to move on. He did not. He spiraled into alcoholism and mental illness. He once told me that marrying me was the biggest accomplishment of his life. That statement came back to haunt me many times as his tortured mind reasoned that I was now the reason for every failure in his life. He stalked me; hacked my email account; called my cell phone every two minutes 24 hours a day. And he threatened to kill my children and me. I didn't speak out. I tried to reason with him; I tried to keep peace. I know this is a familiar refrain to many of you in the audience. I felt that if I reported it, it would take away the last of his pride and I couldn't do that. And I was embarrassed that I found myself in this situation. I knew better! I was a successful professional; I served on the State Crime Victims Board and our local School Board, among many other civic activities. The point of decision that stands out in my mind is the night I started out the door to take the garbage and I hesitated. He often told me he climbed a tower where he could see my house and waited with a gun for me to come out. He told me that he had watched me through his scope.... That night I consciously accepted that he was probably going to kill me and that until he did, I

would not live in fear. Thinking back on that now, it is unbelievable to me that I accepted that. Nothing happened that night, but a couple of weeks later, he did try to kill me – with a knife. As the reality of what was happening hit me, I was filled with rage...and the thought that ran through my mind was one of absolute determination. This would not be our family's legacy...that mothers in this family are killed by domestic violence, that siblings raise each other because mothers are gone. I fought back with a vengeance, praying and using every ounce of self defense I knew. Because I had been counseled, I had the police department number dialed in my cell phone, so that I just had to push send. That saved my life. I had a broken collar bone and I was battered and bruised, but I survived. And the police found my daughter unharmed as well...even though in the attack, he told me he had already killed her. He did not survive. He attempted to jump on a train and was killed. I believe he attempted to escape, although his death certificate says suicide. That was ten years ago.

Today my life is much different. I am happy and balanced; my children are absolutely scarred, but have learned to use our life experiences as reasons to succeed, not crutches. I am the kind of mom I always wanted to be. We have a saying that hangs in our home that says, "God made us a family". Not only did He make us a family; He has been our guide in facing every tragedy, challenge, opportunity and success our family has faced. Every single day, I choose to be a survivor, not to continue to be a victim. I monitor my reactions to situations; I monitor my decisions to trust and I review instances where I maintained a healthy mind and perspective and those where I let my dysfunctions creep in. I have learned that being a perfect mother is impossible, but being a really, really good one is. And I forgive myself when I need to. Being a survivor instead of a victim is hard work and requires focus. And in my case, being a survivor greatly relies on my faith in God. I had counseling, I had love from my family and I had a strong faith that God had a plan for my life. And I have shown my children that you can falter and then pick yourself up and make a life for yourself and for them that is noteworthy. My four oldest daughters (Becca, Devan, Micaela and Avery) are married – the oldest for 16 years; the youngest for a month today! They are married to good, solid men who are emotionally healthy and great husbands and fathers. And they are amazing moms, wives and daughters. My son has Asperger's, a mild form of Autism. He will graduate from CSU in the spring – an amazing accomplishment! My daughter, Alexa, is a sophomore at Texas Tech on a full ride academic and rodeo scholarship. And my youngest, Breanne, inherited the very best of both her daddy and myself and she is a very mature, strong young woman. She just played in her District Volleyball tournament on Friday. Her team is undefeated and won Districts. Did I mention that she is 5'2" tall and starts front row? Oh...and she has a torn ACL so played with a brace. 😊 I like to think that my mom would be incredibly proud of our family and that she and my grandparents are finally at peace as she sees how God's plan for her family has evolved, from their heavenly home.

Is life perfect? Far from it. But I have emerged from the darkness and continue my life journey, using all of the tools that my experiences have given me. I love my career, making life better for others. All that I have experienced gives me a unique insight into those less fortunate. And I love my friends and family who love and support me in spite of my faults. I want to be an encouragement to those that are in the darkness, those that are emerging and those who have been there and moved on to be a survivor...as well as those who are so instrumental in each of those journeys. Be a survivor, encourage a victim to become a survivor, support those who help victims become survivors. I applaud Emmaus House and all that they do as advocates committed to helping women and children begin their journey towards lives free of violence. It is an impossible journey alone, I can attest.

It struck me that the struggle I was experiencing putting my remarks together was derived from the very same sources that domestic violence victims in crisis struggle with. So many details lead up to domestic violence being a part of our lives, a part of our existence and a part of our history. The stories are so intimately personal and they depict the victim in a way that no one wants to see themselves. At times, it is surreal; almost an out of body experience. My story is no different. It is the story of a victim whose life was irrevocably altered, not once, not twice, but three times by domestic violence. It is the story of a victim who evolved into being a survivor through faith, love and a clear vision of what I wanted my life, and my children's lives, to become, along with the support from counseling, crime victim advocates and shelter staff. Victim is defined as "a person harmed as a result of a crime, accident, or other event or action." A survivor is defined as "a person who continues to live in spite of danger or hardship." LIVE is the key word. While we start out as victims, survivors are victims who live, thrive and move forward. To go from being a victim to a survivor is victory.

Thank you for your support of this organization. Thank you for listening and God bless each of you!