

Rise magazine is written by and for parents involved in the child welfare system. Its mission is to help parents advocate for themselves and their children.

Rise

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BY AND FOR
PARENTS IN THE
CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Facing Violence at Home

Witnessing violence harms children, and children often enter foster care because of violence at home. But facing and ending violence can be complicated.

In this issue, parents explore partner violence—the controlling patterns of batterers, the fights that flare up under stress, and the aggression driven by mental illness or substance abuse—and describe the steps they took to get violence out of their lives.

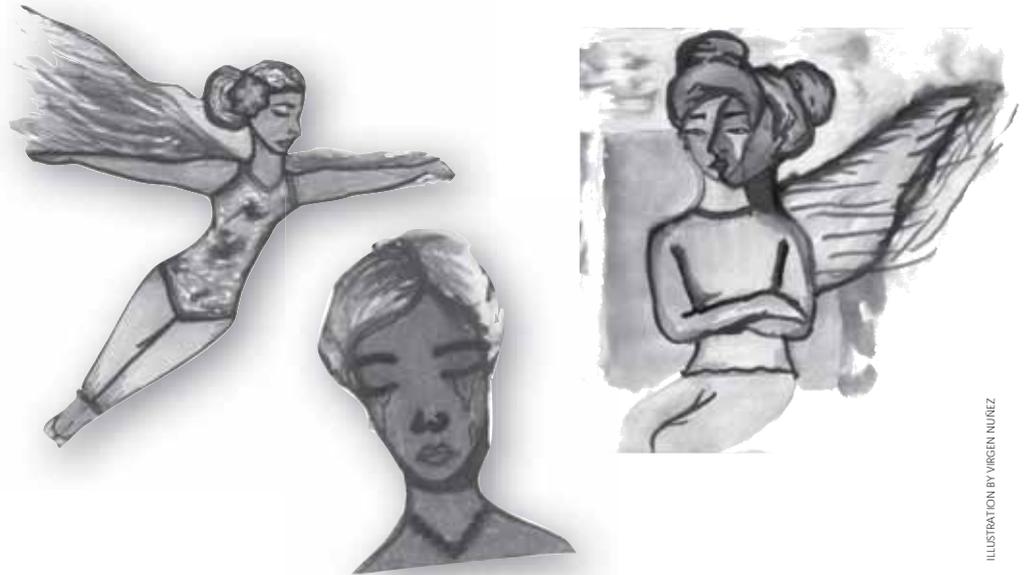


ILLUSTRATION BY VIRGEN NUÑEZ

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Addiction can make it harder to leave an abusive relationship.

Mind Games

Lying to myself felt like the only way to stay sane.

BY JACKIE CRISP

I rolled the meth pipe between my fingers and looked around the bathroom where I was secretly getting high despite my enormous eight-and-a-half month pregnant belly. My boyfriend, Mike, had torn all my things off the walls the last time he had beat me in there, and I'd decided to redecorate.

As I climbed on the counter, I fell back, wracked with labor pains. Then I saw my reflection in the mirror and the sick reality that my addiction had tricked me again was apparent on my face. I would be responsible for bringing an addicted baby into this world. I felt like I would never be a good person.

Running to Drugs

At the time, I was 34 years old and had been using meth and other drugs for 22 years. I already had three kids that I had been a terrible mother to. Joel was out on his own at only

17. He worked and did well for himself. Jordan was 6 and lived with his father in Texas. Jazmin was 8 and lived with Mike and me near Seattle, Washington, but I felt like I didn't deserve to have her.

I had been with Mike for about two years. With Mike, I got to pretend. When he hit me, I saw it as love. When I told him about all the things that I wanted to do better, he seemed to believe me, even though I didn't believe myself.

From a very young age I needed the lies I told myself to survive abuse and sexual abuse. Once I became a parent, I truly did not understand how I could be such a contradiction. I loved my kids but addiction and self-deception were greater forces. I welcomed self-deception like a warm blanket on a cold winter night. It was comfortable playing the victim on a permanent basis and being angry at

everyone except the person responsible: me.

A Peaceful Moment

When we arrived at the hospital, the labor pains were so intense, I couldn't stop crying. Right in front of the nurses Mike said, "Just shut up, nobody wants to hear you cry." For the first time in my life, I talked back to him. "Leave me alone, or get out."

I had our baby exactly 12 minutes later. We had a beautiful baby boy, Jalen. Maybe Mike would love me now. I had convinced myself that, when Jalen came, we would magically become the kind of family that took holidays, ate dinner together, talked nice to each other, and stayed together no matter what.

Then Jazmin flashed through my mind. Before she went to stay a few days at my mom's, I had promised that she would be able to watch her

brother's birth. Everything had happened so fast, though.

Choosing My Children

Picking up the phone, I knew that as soon as Mike knew Jazmin was coming, he would leave. As sweet as Jazmin is, Mike loathed her and made her feel so bad about herself. As much as I wanted him to stay, I was choosing her this time. I hung up with a smile on my face. Jazmin was on her way.

Then Mike was holding the baby. He looked so gentle—what an amazing miracle. I loved him and the baby both so much. But a few minutes later when I came out of the restroom, Mike was gone. No goodbye, no I love you. Only moments before I had been positive that his leaving wouldn't affect me. But the way he left—he always had a way of cutting my heart to the core.

The Terrible Beast Inside

I tried hard not to show my sadness when my mom brought Jazzie-girl to the hospital to stay the night. She was so excited, and that made it a little easier to forget Mike for a while. We had dinner, watched movies and sat in the whirlpool bath. It was wonderful.

But after several hours, my mind went into overdrive. I knew what Mike was up to, and I was sure it would rekindle his love for me if I caught him cheating. I felt that was exactly what I needed—for the cycle to start over. Creating a chaotic mess gave me something to do and a reason to feel like I was a victim, not responsible for my own life.

When my cousin showed up, I asked her to stay with Jazmin and I drove home. I could feel the warm July air on my face as I walked up the steps of our house and let myself in. Inside, the sound of someone I loved deceiving me again filled my ears. I welcomed the betrayal. I knew what would follow: promises and kisses. I loved the feeling of knowing he owed me.

My addiction to Mike was a terrible beast. I loved to hang on to the edge

of sanity, feeling desperate; it was a reminder I was alive.

Sick and Stuck

On the way back to the hospital, my sobbing threatened my safety on that lonely road back to my children.

As I walked back into the maternity ward, I passed the nurses and smiled. They asked me if I needed anything. My mind was screaming yes, but I answered no.



Being back in the hospital brought me back to the reality of my addiction. I felt suddenly sure that the lies in my life were about to be discovered. I knew the hospital drug tested babies, and I felt my dream of becoming a good mother coming to an end.

"This is not real, I am not real, I am dreaming." I began forming new lies. I wasn't ready for reality.

'Please God, No'

When I opened my eyes the next morning, I was startled to see a nurse standing over me. "We found drugs in your baby's system; you cannot leave the hospital until child protective services comes to talk to you."

I felt nauseous, I started to sweat, and I could barely breathe. My mind raced through all of the things I had done wrong in my life. I said to myself, "I am so sorry, I won't do it again. Please God, no. Somebody help me. I never meant to hurt my baby, or choose a man over my little girl. I love them with all of my heart."

My head was a sea of promises, remorse and pleas. The doom had come. I feared losing my children, facing Mike, and not being able to use. I decided I could never tell the truth. No matter how ridiculous or unbelievable a story I came up with, I had to lie.

How Could I Face Myself?

When CPS came, I managed to convince the worker that Mike was the problem, and that someone had slipped something into my drink without me knowing. They agreed that Jazmin, Jalen and I could go to my mom's house, away from Mike, and that I would have to get my urine tested, get a "drug and alcohol assessment" and stay sober. CPS was being generous.

My family knew that I would keep getting high but they bailed me out because they loved me and didn't know what else to do. There was no way they were willing to let the children go into foster care—Jazmin had been through enough already.

But the hole I had dug myself into looked as big as the Grand Canyon. How could I face who I was, the paths I had chosen, or what I had

done to all of my children?

The next few days I took painkillers to get through, but my body was screaming for the real high. I felt I could barely survive. I saw drugs as my only hope for sanity, my only hope to feel good again.

Released from Reality

It wasn't long before I had my random drug test scheduled for twice at the beginning of a week. I knew I could get away with getting high that day after the drug test. I told myself, "Just this once."

On my way to get the drugs, my heart was beating fast and I was sweating. I remember looking in the rearview mirror and wondering why I didn't have the power to call someone and ask for help. I thought, "I'm a fake and a liar. Why do people trust me? Why do they think I could do what it would take to get custody of my kids?" I didn't think I could get clean and give up Mike. It was just too much.

Jackie entered drug treatment a year after she lost custody of her children. She reunified with Jazmin and Jalen on her birthday, March 23, 2006.

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Beyond Shame and Denial

Keeping your kids safe from domestic violence.

BY NICOLE GOODWIN AND ERICA ORR

Domestic violence is considered harmful to children and you can be charged with neglect if there is domestic violence in your home. However, domestic violence cases also are complex. We spoke with Lauren Shapiro, founder and director of the Brooklyn Family Defense Project, and Derek Silvers, director of Friends to Fathers, about parents' legal rights and obligations if there is violence in their homes.

Q: What do parents need to know about domestic violence and child welfare?

Shapiro: In 1999, a New York City mother named Sharwline Nicholson sued the city child welfare system for removing her children solely because she was the victim of an act of domestic violence. What the Nicholson ruling makes clear is that children should not be removed from a parent unless they are at imminent risk of danger. The court also has to weigh the harm that may be done to children by removal. In practice, however, a lot of children are removed—not just from the person considered the batterer, but also from the person considered the victim, even when the child isn't clearly at imminent risk.

In part that's because these are complicated cases. We know that about half of batterers abuse their children, too. The child welfare system tries to look at a family's past history of violence, factors like the age of the child, the reaction of the child, and how severe the violence was. A one-time incident is not even supposed to be considered neglect. But slapping someone is very different than cutting someone with a knife, and if you hit your partner while holding the child, even just one time, they're going to see you as getting so out of control that you're not aware of your child's safety.

A lot of investigations do not end in

removal, but to keep her children out of foster care, often mom has to agree to go into a shelter or enforce an order of protection. Parents also are expected to go to counseling for batterers or survivors. The child welfare system and the court will want to see that you are taking serious steps to keep your children safe.

Q: What makes domestic violence cases complicated?

Silvers: Friends to Fathers supports child welfare-affected fathers in becoming more accountable for their actions and able to reunify with their families. In a domestic violence class of 15, I'd say a good 7 to 10 of the men are perpetrators. They are clearly the batterers. Some men try to control who a woman talks to, what she does, how she looks. They'll hit her and shame her to maintain that control. But other cases are more complicated. Some men really need help with anger management, not domestic violence.

It's often confusing to understand what is going on because many men have big problems with denial, minimizing and blaming.

If you've had a bad day at work, and you hold in all your anger until you get home, you're showing that you have excellent anger-management skills. If you then take your pain out on the one person you feel you have power and control over, that's domestic violence. But if there's a man who one day is just so stressed, his partner is nagging him, he doesn't have enough money to give her, and he loses control—he pushes her or



ILLUSTRATION BY PATRICIA BATTLES

says something very abusive—we think that man needs an anger-management class to improve how he deals with conflict and nurtures his relationship. Many men need to learn to express themselves appropriately and respect their partners.

Other times the violence and aggression appears to be a two-way street, or it's even the partner who is threatening and hitting.

The problem is that it's often confusing to understand what is going on because many men have big problems with denial, minimizing and blaming. We keep peeling back the

months, we get a picture of a father who wasn't abusive. And sometimes, even after six months, we still really don't know.

Q: How could child welfare and the courts improve their response to these cases?

Shapiro: The way the court system and the child welfare system think about violence in the home

is too limited. The child welfare system is really structured to say, "You must do this, you have to do that." But what I've learned working with people who have experienced domestic violence is that you have to empower them and listen to them. If you don't, what often happens is that they identify with the person who is hurting them, and they feel even more loyal to that person.

We work with our clients, support them and talk to them. Clients need to have the support to leave, to feel they have that choice. They also need us to understand their full stories.

We believe that real domestic violence assessments need to be done in every case. Domestic violence specialists here don't usually interview the parents themselves—they consult with child protective workers. Because of that, there's still too often too simplistic a way of looking at violence in the home.

If our client says that the violence is really mutual, and the couple wants to figure out a way to stay together and handle conflict differently, we may ask the court to approve couples counseling. But just because the violence in the home is mutual, that doesn't mean that children aren't being harmed by witnessing the violence.

layers. We meet with the man and get his self-report. Then we speak to the attorney and the case worker and sometimes the child's law guardian or therapist. There are often pictures and police reports. We keep bringing all the information together and processing it with the father.

Sometimes a father eventually realizes: "What I did was abusive." Sometimes, after three or four

Struggling But Safe

Single motherhood is better than putting up with violence.

BY ILKA PEREZ

I never thought I'd be a single mother. When I got pregnant at 19, my boyfriend and I asked each other, "How are we going to tell our parents? What about money? Where will we live?" We knew raising the baby would be hard but I thought we wanted the same things: marriage, good jobs, nice family.

As time passed, though, I knew that I was living my parents' lives all over again: my boyfriend wanted to control where I went, who I was friends with. If I was even minutes late to call him, he'd scream at me. When we argued, first came the slaps, then his weak apology: "I love you, I'm sorry."

No Room For Hurt

When I was growing up, my father kept my mother from everything she loved. She wanted to work, to go to school. My father did not let her. At home, my father was aggressive: "This dinner is disgusting. What, are you feeding pigs?" he'd say. From my bedroom, I'd hear him knocking over the pots and pans. The hardest thing was to see my mother walking down the hall in her nightgown, carrying him a tray, still trying to please him.

I'm proud of my parents. They came from Puerto Rico in their late 20s and showed all four of their children faith and love. But my dad's jealousy and control hurt my mother and

scared us all. The world was changing for women but my father didn't want to change. If I asked my mother, "Are you OK?" she would inhale all her tears and tell me, "We women need to do what we please and not let any man stop us."

I imagined everything would be equal between my husband and me. Instead, my son's father preferred hanging out drinking in the street and playing basketball to being a father. Like his father, he considered it "babysitting" to take care of his own child. When he did come around, he even tried to tell me what to do with my paycheck when he himself didn't have a job! Finally I told myself, "I

have no room in my life for someone who hurts me."

Now I see that I am part of a generational trend. Yes, single motherhood is up. But since the 1990s, domestic violence rates have been going down. Like many young women in my community, I was raised with two minds. From a young age, I learned how to change my nephew's diapers; school came second. I also learned that domestic violence was normal; painful but expected. When my girlfriends and I talked about our boyfriends, getting hit was just part of our story.

Then there was the wisdom my mother shared but didn't live by: "If

Separate but Happy

I confused loneliness with love, but I recognized abuse.

BY EVELYN SALAZAR

When I met Rene, I don't know what I saw in him because physically he wasn't too handsome. I think it was his character, his aggressiveness, which later on was what made me leave.

I met Rene at work and got close to him by asking him to help me. He started saying to me, "You owe me a lot." "I'll pay you back," I told him. "But not with money," he said, laughing. With that, Rene invited me to the movies.

Then we started to go out more. I remember one winter day sitting in the plaza between the Twin Towers. It was pretty out and we were sitting quietly, looking at the big Christmas tree and watching people walking from one side of the plaza to the other.

Rene was very on point. He always gave me Godiva chocolates and roses and sent me cute notes with precious messages written on a napkin.

Very Much Alone

At the time, I was very much alone. Even though I was only 18, I had been working for two years in New York City, thousands of miles from my family in Mexico. I'd had to postpone my biggest dream—to continue with school to study psychology—because my mother asked me to come here to work and send money to build our home.

I knew that my mother needed me. After my father died, my mother was alone and had suffered. So I armed myself with a lot of courage and came.

After so much solitude, I took refuge in Rene and soon moved in with him. We worked together and went everywhere together, having as much fun as we could. Now I have learned a little to not confuse my solitude with love.

'Nobody Touches Me!'

Then one day Rene didn't arrive home. I called him and he told me, "Yeah, I'm coming there now." But 9:00, 10:00, 11:00, 12:00 all passed and he didn't arrive. I was crying, thinking terrible things in my head. What if he'd had an accident? Or if he was simply



ILLUSTRATION BY ASAHAI AIBABI

drunk and didn't have the guts to tell me.

Rene arrived at 3 a.m., drunk, almost falling over. I was filled with even more anger. "I don't want you to think I am a cowed woman, submitting to whatever the man wants," I said.

We started to fight more and he called me "Pendeja."

Then I gave him a slap. To my great surprise, I felt one hit my own cheek forcefully. "Stupid, nobody touches me!" he said.

My greatest force came over me and

a man really loves you, he'll encourage you to accomplish your dreams." A high school classmate once gave a presentation about domestic violence. That day I knew that I was entitled to my happiness, that I could have a voice, that I was not alone. Still, it took me years to shake the only pattern I knew.

I understand why our society fears single motherhood. Yes, it's hard on children. When I had my daughter five years after my son, I was engaged. I'd always been proud to say that I came from a two-parent family and I hadn't given up my dream of being someone's wife. But men often change when the baby arrives. By my daughter's first birthday, I saw that this relationship, too, had become all about sacrifice. My daughter's father didn't want me working and he treated my apart-

I started to hit him even harder, but when I stopped, I felt a terrible fear. I thought he was going to hit me back with all of his force too.

But he didn't do it. In his drunken exhaustion he only managed to say: "Get out of my house. I don't to see you here when I wake up, because you don't know what I'm capable of."

"Forgive Me, I Love You"

That night, I was afraid for my life. I filled two laundry bags with all of my clothes and called a friend.

The following morning I was determined to continue my life without Rene, but that same afternoon he came looking for me. "Forgive me," he said, "It'll never happen again. I was drunk. I swear to you. Forgive me. I love you."

Two months later I found out I was pregnant.

I Felt Powerless

I'm not going to pretend that we didn't consider not having the baby. But I told myself, "Don't think about yourself but about the baby."

ment like a hotel.

Doing Well By Me

Stress and struggle came along with independence. When my daughter was small, I worked two jobs and the money was still not enough. Every month I paid my rent extremely late. I had to go to food pantries or my mother's house for food, or sell things from my house to do laundry or buy groceries. At times I kept my son home from school because I didn't have the money for his field trip or lunch. I shed so many tears that I tried my best not to let my children see. I just kept telling myself: "I will do well by my children by first doing well by me."

Finally I got to a point where I felt in control of my life and my little family. I was working, I had my own place,

Even so, during my pregnancy, I felt more alone than ever. Rene and I fought many times. There were occasions when I tried to run out of there. But Rene would push me roughly onto the sofa and say, "You don't get to go when you want to." Or, "I'd let you leave right now if you weren't carrying my son. You don't matter to me."

I grew up believing in my power to achieve something beautiful for my life.

I felt powerless. Where was I going to go? I had no family or even someone to confide in.

The Final Moment

The final moment came after I had thought about it and meditated on it and weighed all of my options. That day we weren't angry.

It was a Sunday morning and we were watching the tele. I said, "Rene, I need to talk with you. This is not a hasty decision. I've come to the



ILLUSTRATION BY JAMEL BLASS

my kids were in school and daycare, and we had our routine. I was not looking for a relationship. In fact, I did not want to let anyone in.

Of course, that's when I met a man who understood from the first step that he could never control me.

conclusion that the best thing is for us is to separate. We can't keep hurting each other. It's not sane. It's not what I want for me, and it's not how I want my future."

"But I love you, I care about you," Rene said. "I know I've made mistakes but I want to form a family. Please, I want to marry you."

I Had to Leave

Despite his words, I had to leave. I'd seen my own mother suffering. I saw the fights, maltreatment, machismo. No. I grew up believing in my power to achieve something beautiful for my life. What I was living was deceptive and sad. So I left.

There were people who asked, "But why did you leave your baby's father? He's a good person. You could find someone worse." I told them, "I am not going to go through life conform-

Angel was a single father raising two children on his own. Three years ago, we took the risk of blending our families. Now that my children are 13 and 8, I have a friend to laugh with and share my days with.

Last spring, Angel and I went out to dinner, and as we walked to the car Angel stopped me. "Will you be my wife?" he asked. "Will you marry me?" I am so glad I didn't give up on love! I'm excited to show my children that marriage is real and it can work.

Still, I don't regret raising my children alone for 10 years. My daughter has learned from me that independence is worth more than a man who hits you, and my son has seen that if he wants someone to love him, he has to treat her with kindness and respect her dreams.

ing myself to a bad situation because I don't believe in myself."

Others told me, "Stay for the good of your child," but I said, "I am doing it for the good of my child. If your mother is happy, she brings you happiness and love. If you mother is bitter and lonely, she will bring you sadness and frustration."

Happier Apart

There hasn't been anything easy about living on my own with my son. Despite the obstacles, my happiness and enthusiasm have returned with more force.

I can also say that, since our son, Dylan, was born, I have seen Rene's good come out again. Dylan spends two days a week with his father. My son enjoys their time together. Rene, equal to me, has matured.

I'm proud of my decision to make a life with my child on my own. Even though Rene and I are separate, we're happier, which is better than together and fighting.

Benjamins, Blowouts and Breakups

What comes between poor fathers and their families?

INTERVIEW BY PIAZADORA FOOTMAN

In my five years of dealing with my daughter's father, he only put his hands on me once. For three months he had been out of work. I noticed him becoming more snappy and less excited about going out to eat, which we did every weekend night. That didn't stop me from putting the pressure on him. One night he exploded and even started choking me. I stabbed him with a pen. He called the police. I left.

The very next morning he came knocking at my door, asking forgiveness, and I forgave him, but we never discussed what happened or where that anger came from. A week later, I watched him cry. Now this was a sign of weakness I had never seen in him. I held him and asked him, "What's wrong?" I had to realize that his pride, ego and manhood were hurt because he was out of work and could no longer provide a lavish life for my children and me. He felt worthless.

It was amazing to me to realize that he only felt like a man when he had a job. When I understood the pressure he felt, I began to get the foods we liked from the fish market and mix him a piña colada at home, and I did my own hair and stopped getting my nails done.

Do all men feel this kind of pressure? For a new perspective, I spoke with Tim Nelson, a lecturer at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government who collaborated on the book *Doing the Best I Can*. Nelson and his wife, Kathryn Edin, moved with their children to Camden, one of the poorest cities in the country, to learn about the experiences and attitudes of poor fathers.

Q: Why did you decide to write about these fathers?



A: When you look at statistics, you see that contact between low-income, unmarried fathers and their kids falls off dramatically within a few years. A study of "fragile families" has found that, by a child's fifth birthday, only half of fathers are still involved—living with their children or seeing them several times a week. A lot of that has to do with the reality that these men were not as successful as they wanted to be in turning lives around.

Many of these fathers embraced the "new fatherhood," which is about fathers having an emotional connection to their children: reading to them and playing with them, showing love and being there, not just providing the paycheck. But so much of men's identities revolve around work, and it was much harder for these men to find and keep stable jobs than they'd imagined.

At the end of the day, poor fathers had very little left over for their kids, especially if they were not living with the mothers, and that contributed to a sense of failure. If they didn't even have money to take the kids to McDonald's, they didn't even go around because they felt they had nothing to give.

Drugs were a major problem. Men would get involved with dealing when they couldn't make ends meet, and that often led to using. Men who are actively using often keep themselves separate from their children. They don't want their kids to see them in a degraded state. If we can address substance abuse head on, that would change the landscape of fatherhood. We need to be asking, "What is driving these high levels of substance abuse? How can we work with guys in treatment to make contact with their kids and stay involved?"

A: My wife and her colleagues wrote a book called *Promises I Can Keep* about the struggles of low-income unmarried mothers in Philadelphia and Camden. After the book came out in 2005, they were often asked, "What about the fathers? What is their involvement in children's lives?" There are a lot of stereotypes and

concerns about the responsibility and not having a good job, but they were also just really happy. They said, "I always wanted to have a child."

This was surprising because these men were not living in the best circumstances. Many had dropped out of school, didn't have a job, and

If men don't even have money to take their kids to McDonald's, they don't even go around because they feel they have nothing to give.

misinformation about low-income fathers. This book is a corrective to that.

One stereotype is that these guys are just after sex, and when the girl comes up pregnant, they're out of there. So we were surprised that, by and large, these guys really were excited to become fathers. Many had

some were using or dealing drugs. But a lot of them recognized that they were not on a path they wanted to be on and they saw their child as their reason to get things together.

Q: What challenges do these fathers face in turning their lives around?

Q: What leads men to drop out of their families?

A: What we saw is that poor fathers' relationships with their children's mothers were fragile. Before the pregnancy, these relationships were often very informal, or even random. The guy was seeing other women, or they'd only been together a very short time. Then they tried to get it together for the sake of the baby, like, "OK, we're having a baby together. We'd better become a real couple."

But once the couple got to the day-to-day routine of parenting, they discovered that they were not all that compatible. And after the baby came, mothers would often raise their expectations of the father. The stress and tension would often lead to blow-outs—substance abuse, infidelity, violence and so on.

In the old days, families forced couples to stay together. In these families, though, the families were usually against the relationship. They'd say to the girl, "This guy is trifling, he has no job." Or they'd say to the father, "How do you know this child's yours?" Nobody was for this couple in the family or the community. It's hard to sustain a bond under stress if it wasn't strong to begin with and everyone is feeding into a split on both sides of the family.

Men underestimated the impact the break up would have on their relationships with their children. A lot of the mothers didn't allow access to the child, or there was a lot of bitterness and tension when they did see each other. We really saw the fall off in father's involvement when, soon after the break up, both parents had found new romantic attachments. There's a tendency to cut off the whole relationship to make the new relationship work.

Q: What could help low-income fathers stay in their children's lives?

A: We asked, "If you had something to say to the government about how to make life easier for men in your situation, what would you tell them?" Child support was the main one. Many states have very harsh child support laws. In South Carolina, for instance, if you miss one payment, the police can come on your job and take you off in handcuffs, and you can serve jail time. They wanted to find a way for child support to be more flexible.

Fathers' relationships with their children and children's mothers also might not break down as much if these parents had more support around how to communicate, express feelings, and cope when you disagree. Some programs have shown that they can help people with these relational skills

We saw that when there were intermediaries between the mothers and fathers after the breakup, the father stayed involved with the child. Sometimes the mother's sister or her mother helped the father see his children without having to deal with the bitterness of the breakup. It might help if the state or other organizations could play that role.

We don't really have specific policy proposals in the book. The first hope is to show that men really do want to become fathers and be connected to their kids. We need to figure out how to partner with fathers so they can overcome their barriers.

Doing the Best I Can *will be published by the University California Press in April.*

'Child Welfare Can Become a Weapon'

Batterers use false child abuse reports to control.

BY TANYA MCLEOD

Police sirens screamed loudly as my three small children and I were escorted home to collect our belongings. We had to hide until the police could find my husband and put him in jail. My husband had threatened to kill me and take our 2-year-old son out of the country. He'd murdered our dog in order to hurt and control us.

Traumatized Again

After two weeks, they found my husband and I returned home. But even from jail, he tried to control us. He had told me, "I'm going to make you pay if you don't drop the charges." Soon after he was arrested, child protective services showed up at my door to investigate me. I had no doubt that my husband made the call.

That peaceful Saturday morning, a parade of police officers, detectives and child protective workers flooded our lives to investigate a false claim that I had tried to hire someone to kill my children. In a three month period, I was visited by more than five workers and detectives showing up at my house as early as 7 a.m. and late into the night.

Having my ex-husband arrested had given me a moment to take a deep breath. Now I felt violated, terrified and angry all over again.

My children were affected by the investigation as well. Their father's abuse had already traumatized them. Then, every time someone knocked on the door, they feared that I was about to be pulled from them.

Regaining My Power

Luckily, more than 10 years ago, I became a member of the Voices of Women Organizing Project (VOW), a grassroots advocacy organization of survivors of domestic violence in New York City who are working to improve the many systems battered women

and their children rely on for safety and justice. At VOW, I heard from other women who had been in the same situation—their batterer manipulated the child welfare system to punish them.

Today I am VOW's senior campaign organizer. VOW has become the vehicle that helps me turn my pain into power. In 2008, we created the Rights of Children campaign to discourage false and malicious child abuse reporting. This past year, we also began working with NYC Children's Services, the city child welfare agency, to train its workers. We wanted them to understand that batterers often make false reports as a way to punish their victims for leaving, or use the threat of it as a way to control them.

Changing the System

Sometimes women will say, "Look, I know who did this. It was my ex-husband, or his girlfriend." Other times, women are afraid to even speak up about who might be reporting them. We tell workers to ask certain questions: "Are you in court fighting for custody, visitation, or divorce? Have you recently sought an order of protection?"

We train workers to understand that these are key red flags. We explain: "Especially if the victim is in a confidential shelter and the batterer doesn't know where she is, he feels like he has no more control. Now the batterer is drowning, he's reaching for anything. That's when the children can become pawns and child welfare can become a weapon in his arsenal."

Ultimately, our goal is to change the way the system handles these false reports. Right now, batterers are not held responsible. We hope that by working with the child welfare system, we can make sure that victims are not re-victimized by the system.

Fighting for Sanity

When I felt alone, hitting my husband made me feel alive.

BY ERICA ORR

I grew up experiencing many different kinds of abuse. When I was 12 I started taking medication to stabilize my emotions, but when I was 21 and married with three children, I tried to stop taking them. Then I felt distant, like I was in my own world, what I call Erica's world, where it's all about me and no one has feelings but me.

A part of me wanted to go back to being alone. I had a lonely feeling my whole life. Without that lonely feeling I felt kind of dead.

I was also afraid of having my family depend on me. I doubted myself as a mother and as a wife. I didn't feel worthy of playing those roles, and I also felt like I didn't matter anymore, like meeting the needs of my husband and children was more important than taking care of my own needs.

Lashing Out

Like me, my husband, Michael, grew up in foster care. He copes by keeping his emotions inside. When Michael acted unemotional, it made me feel like he didn't really love me. I began to think he was only with me because of the kids, and that if the situation were different he would have been gone.

So I lashed out at him. I blamed Michael for trapping me and for making me feel so empty, so lost and so unloved. I would start by saying mean, sarcastic things to him, like, "You're fat," "You're ugly," "You're a deadbeat," "I should have never married you," "You are my biggest regret."

A part of me was really thinking, "I love you. You are the best I ever

had." Instead I said all the horrible things to him that I really felt about myself. I didn't realize it at the time, but I wanted to make him angry. At least I would feel something from him.

My Husband, the Monster?

But Michael started giving me a taste of my own medicine, saying to me what I said to him. I just got angrier and angrier. Then I would throw things at him and hit him.

At first he would try to guard himself or move away. Sometimes he would try to ignore me and play his video games. But when I kept up my attack, he'd push me away or restrain me like they would have done if I were hospitalized. Then I would call the police and exaggerate everything Michael had done to make him seem like a monster. I was in so much pain

and I was so angry that I felt like I needed to punish someone.

Eventually my therapist called child protective services on me. Soon after, I threw something at Michael and then I hit him. Almost reflexively, he hit me back and I fell into the closet. After he hit me, he came and held me and asked if I was OK. But I didn't care. I called ACS and reported him, and they took our children away from us for two weeks. That was a wake-up call.

After that, I did start taking my medication again, and with the help of my therapist I began to calm down. Once I was calmer, we tried to explain to ACS what really happened, but it seemed like the caseworkers already had their minds made up. Michael was the perpetrator and I was the victim.

'Not Me, Not Ever'

Did my mother become the aggressor so she wouldn't be the victim?

BY NICOLE GOODWIN

My mother grew up in South Carolina with about 11 siblings, maybe more. When I was a child, she'd tell me about her mother's heartache; she had to bury four of her sons. But the stories that really rattled me were the ones about the abuse her mother took from her dad.

"He used to beat her," she'd say as a matter of fact. No emotion, no sorrow. No anger or judgment. Just as plain as if she were remarking on the weather outside. "Specially when he was drunk. He would beat her, then he would beat on us." Not once did she say that my grandmother fought back. As far as I could tell, my

grandmother took her lumps like a loyal dog.

Self-Protection ABCs

My mother was not going to let a man hurt or control her. She had a lot of advice for me about how to protect myself, too. Some of her best were:

- "You have to keep an ace in the hole." Even if you have a man—even if that man is good to you—you should never fully trust him. Always have another man in the background ready to take his place.
- "Always have your name on the

lease." If you don't, you're a fool, 'cause someday he can and will throw you out.

- "Beware the cleanup woman." There is always a woman out there looking to steal your man. She will out-cook you, out-clean you, and outsmart you just to steal him from you. So don't keep women friends.

- "Always have a pot of hot grits ready." If your man ever cheats on you, or beats you, or both, have a pot of hot grits or rice ready to throw on him to teach him a lesson.

My mom didn't trust any man, or

any woman for that matter. But by the mid-1980's, she had given birth to six children and she lived with my stepfather, two of my siblings and me. Three of my siblings lived with relatives down south.

It was an amazingly terrible thing to grow up in my home. Almost every day my mother and stepfather would fight. If it wasn't about us kids, it was about money, or my mother accusing my stepfather of being unfaithful, or of drinking too much, which he did, or that he never took her out for a night on the town. In the end, it didn't matter what it was about. They would always manage to be in each

Double Life

I was the perfect mother on the outside but I was battered at home.

BY ANONYMOUS

What does addiction look like? Can you tell a battered woman from the outside? In my life it looked like birthday parties, PTA involvement, regular pediatrician visits, church going, school attendance, and then Mommy's boyfriend is abusive and a few nights a week, Mommy is getting high.

For 15 years I lived a double life. One side of me: The almost perfect mother, daughter and friend. I had a 20-year work history and I owned my own home. My daughter was always well groomed with all of the little girly things that young ladies should have.

My daughter knew Mommy loved her. I volunteered at her school, and when she'd hear that Mommy was in the PTA room, she'd come and peek in with pride. My involvement with her and the school motivated her, and she graduated elementary school with honors and awards.

But then there was the other side of me: A cocaine addict with an abusive boyfriend.

For years, I didn't believe my addiction or my abusive relationship hurt my daughter. Looking back, I can see that my abuser's yelling and name-calling must have had an effect. Seeing Mommy always anxious must have made my daughter anxious. Seeing Mommy cry must have made my daughter feel helpless.

Self-Medication

When I started using cocaine in 1987, I liked the up feeling it gave me. I started using soon after my father died, and cocaine took away my

grief. For three years, my cocaine use was casual, but then I began dating a man who was unfaithful and hurtful. Cocaine went from being "weekend only" to taking over our week, and the relationship became twisted and ugly. When I finally left him, my use

I really did want to quit using cocaine. But I didn't deal with my grief and the depression. Then "B" and I broke up when my daughter was only six months old. Once child welfare closed the case, I started using again in moderation.



ILLUSTRATION BY FREDDY BRUCE

A Wreck Inside

Then I met a man who seemed like he could help me but who actually was an abusive addict. I could never tell what was true or false about Anthony. He acted as if he didn't want me to use cocaine, but then he would take me to buy some.

Soon Anthony began to freak if I didn't come home directly from work or if I took my daughter to do something special. He'd call my home over and over, interrogating my mother and my friends, bullying them for information.

Anthony liked to create chaos and alienate me from family and friends. He would say awful things like, "You're a piece of sh-t, you've never accomplished anything."

'You Don't Act Like My Baby'

During that time, my love for my daughter kept me going and work helped me connect to the outside world when I was feeling so isolated. Still, inside I was a wreck. My mother once told me lovingly, "You don't act like my baby. That man takes you out of yourself." I still feel ashamed that I was not able to break off that relationship while my mother was alive.

For a long stretch—years—I did

break it off, but I constantly heard from friends that Anthony asked about my daughter and me. I still felt a flame because I remembered the good times and because on the surface, Anthony—like me—seemed very put together, very different from who he was underneath.

We got back together when my daughter was 6; the stalking and the name-calling soon started up again like clockwork. But by then I was pregnant. During my second pregnancy, I really tried to control my drug use. I'd stop for a while, but after an ugly episode, I'd use again.

My mother once told me lovingly, 'You don't act like my baby.'

Like my daughter, my son was born positive tox. That's when child welfare removed my children. Knowing that both my children were born with substances in their system still anguishes me.

I Wasn't Believed

This time, I was determined to get to the roots of my addiction. I took it into my own hands to find a good rehab program, and I made a connection with the director there. He told me, "I'm going to work with you," and he really did. With his help, I began to come to terms with the grief and violence that kept me using.

While I was in recovery, I got an order of protection against Anthony and he was arrested for "aggravated harassment." He even told me he would put me "in a body bag" if I would not be a part of his life. I was terrified, and I got a 911 cell phone and an emergency pendant that I carried with me at all times.

'Maybe I'm Not Any Good'

Addiction can make it harder to leave an abusive relationship.

BY SABRA JACKSON

But one of my major challenges was that my child welfare worker did not take the domestic violence seriously. The worker just said, "You have to work this out with each other."

It was "B" who became a positive figure in my children's lives. After four months, the court allowed "B" to supervise my children's weekend visits home and he even became my son's godfather.

Stable Under the Surface

Now it has been 5 years since my children came home. Our lives are stable, not just on the surface, and both my children are doing wonderfully well.

Through the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), I've become an advocate for other parents in the child welfare system. I've been to many meetings where the decision is made whether to leave children at home or place them in foster care. I know what it's like to look at a family that's in disarray and to feel that Mom is so far from where she needs to be. It's hard to believe that I was once so far from where I wanted to be.

The eight months my children spent in foster care took a toll on us all. My daughter has told me that her foster mother beat her and that at times, my son was left in his playpen for hours at a time. For a least a year after she came home, my daughter would come in my room in the middle of the night and call out, "Mommy, are you there?"

Now my children know that if they call out for me, I will be there for them. But it took a lot of love, consistency, and faith in the Almighty to get here.

Domestic violence and addiction often go hand in hand. A 2002 Department of Justice report found that 1/3 of victims in domestic violence programs also had substance abuse problems and almost 2/3 of batterers also abused alcohol or drugs.

To better understand the connection between domestic violence and substance abuse, we interviewed Tracey Little, a social worker and substance abuse counselor. Little herself is a domestic violence survivor whose children were in foster care and who has been in recovery for 15 years.

Q: How does addiction contribute to domestic violence?

A: Substance abuse contributes to being abusive. Being drunk or high doesn't make a person into an abuser, but it does make people more uninhibited. Perpetrators of domestic violence also use drugs to justify their abuse, saying they only did what they did because of the drugs or alcohol. Many women also blame the violence on their partner's drug use, because psychologically it's easier to blame the drugs than to acknowledge that someone you love is choosing to hurt you.

Survivors of domestic violence use to self-medicate—to deal with the anxiety, sadness and physical pain of abuse. Addiction also can keep someone in a domestic violence situation longer. Sometimes the batterer starts their partner using and helps her to continue to use as a way to control her. Other times, batterers use the threat of being exposed as an addict to keep their partner. Finally, addiction contributes to survivors believing all the negative things the batterer says about them. A lot of people who suffer from addiction feel enormous guilt for



Or, trying to keep the abuse a secret, survivors may not go to visits, and then they get accused of abandonment.

The good news is that now—in contrast to 10 years ago—most substance abuse programs also offer domestic violence counseling and groups for trauma.

ILLUSTRATION BY ANDRES FUENTES

being addicted. They'll say, "Maybe I'm not any good. Look at what I'm doing."

Q: What are the challenges when the child welfare system gets involved?

A: One of the challenges for survivors is just being believed. Survivors aren't always able to be specific and consistent in their accounts. So much has happened, and survivors are so traumatized, that their stories can become jumbled. Plus, there's a perception that addicts are manipulative. If survivors are using drugs or alcohol, child welfare workers may not believe their stories.

A double load of shame can make it even harder to seek help.

As a result, child welfare workers may underestimate the need to plan for the safety of the survivor, such as when arranging child visits. Visits may be done jointly, or the victim is supposed to pick up the child from the batterer. Survivors don't always feel empowered to say, "This is not going to be any good." They fear that they may not get to have visits at all. Stressful visits can be a trigger for the survivor to relapse on drugs.

Q: What can survivors do to be heard and believed?

A: From the moment a survivor is ready to leave her partner, or from the moment her family is investigated by the child welfare system, she must start to document incidents in a journal. That way, the survivor will have a chronological and consistent account of the dynamics of the abuse.

More generally, my main advice to survivors is: "Don't try to do it alone." Often survivors of domestic violence who are dealing with addiction have a double load of shame. That can make it even harder for them to step up and seek help. But there are places that can educate you and help you.

A domestic violence advocacy organization or child welfare parent advocacy organization, like Child Welfare Organizing Project or Voices of Women organizing project and CONNECT in New York City, can give you information about your rights and how best to protect your relationship with your children.

A counselor also can help you see your situation more clearly. A lot of times when you're using drugs, you don't process information as clearly as before, and this can make it harder for you to decide what steps to take to keep yourself safe.

ABOUT **Rise**

Rise trains parents to write about their experiences with the child welfare system in order to support parents and parent advocacy and to guide child welfare practitioners and policymakers in becoming more responsive to the families and communities they serve.

Our tri-annual print magazine and monthly stories on our website, www.risemagazine.org, help parents advocate for themselves and their children. We work with family support and child welfare agencies to use Rise stories in parent groups and parenting education classes. We partner with parent advocacy organizations to use Rise stories in child welfare reform.

Contact Rise Director Nora McCarthy at nora@risemagazine.org or (646) 543-7099 for information about reprinting Rise stories or using Rise in your work. For help with a child welfare case, please contact our partner organization, Children Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), a parent advocacy and peer support organization in East Harlem, NY: www.cwop.org or 212-348-3000.

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Broken Bonds

BY DELIA HERNANDEZ

I'm locked up on an assault charge. I got seven flat. My boys were 9 and 10 and my daughter was 6 when I got arrested. I can't say much about my case, but what led me here is that I was in a very abusive relationship with my kids' father. He began using drugs and became physically abusive toward the kids and me.

I Got Stuck

I wish that I'd spoken up more about the abuse I was experiencing, but I was scared. He made so many threats that I feared even breathing the wrong way. I didn't want to involve anyone else in my problems. I felt that if I ran to someone for help, he would have hurt that person, too.

Looking back, I see that I wasn't thinking clearly at all. I just felt scared, anxious and helpless. I got stuck and I couldn't react to the abuse. If I had spoken the truth or showed the marks on my body, maybe I wouldn't be sitting in prison, facing a lifetime of fighting for my kids.

Paying the Highest Price

The day I was arrested, my kids were taken from me. I'm not allowed to visit my children or talk to them on the phone. I can only contact them through letters. I've lost the biggest part of my life. I never meant to hurt my children. Even though I did hurt them by committing my crime, being separated from my kids was the last thing I ever wanted.

After my arrest, I was only granted one visit. I often think back to that visit, the last time I saw the beautiful faces of my children. My kids had just come in from playing outside. They had ice cream on their shirts. I held back my tears. I hugged and kissed them and told them I loved them.

I was not allowed to speak to my children about my crime. I wonder what my kids know and if they understand why they can't visit and



ILLUSTRATION BY JANEL BLASS

why I never said goodbye.

A Broken Agreement

It's an everyday mental struggle to sit here at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, not knowing if I will get to see my children again. I wish daily that I could see or at least speak to my children. I would like to say sorry and hear how they feel.

I write to my children and I hear about my kids through my mom. She tells me that my children do miss me and would like to see me and each other.

My kids are living with different family members. We agreed on a plan for the kids to see each other on weekends. But I've learned that their legal guardians haven't kept up contact. I can only imagine how hard that's been for my kids.

I am determined to help them but it turns out that the visiting agreement we made in court was just a suggestion, not a requirement. The family court can't do anything. I was so hurt and angry when I learned the truth. Once again, I feel helpless, stuck in a situation I can't change.

I have petitioned the family court to see if we can make a different arrangement. I'm also hoping that the judge will grant me more contact with my children. This time, I will ask the judge and the social worker to explain everything to me in detail and in terms that I can understand.