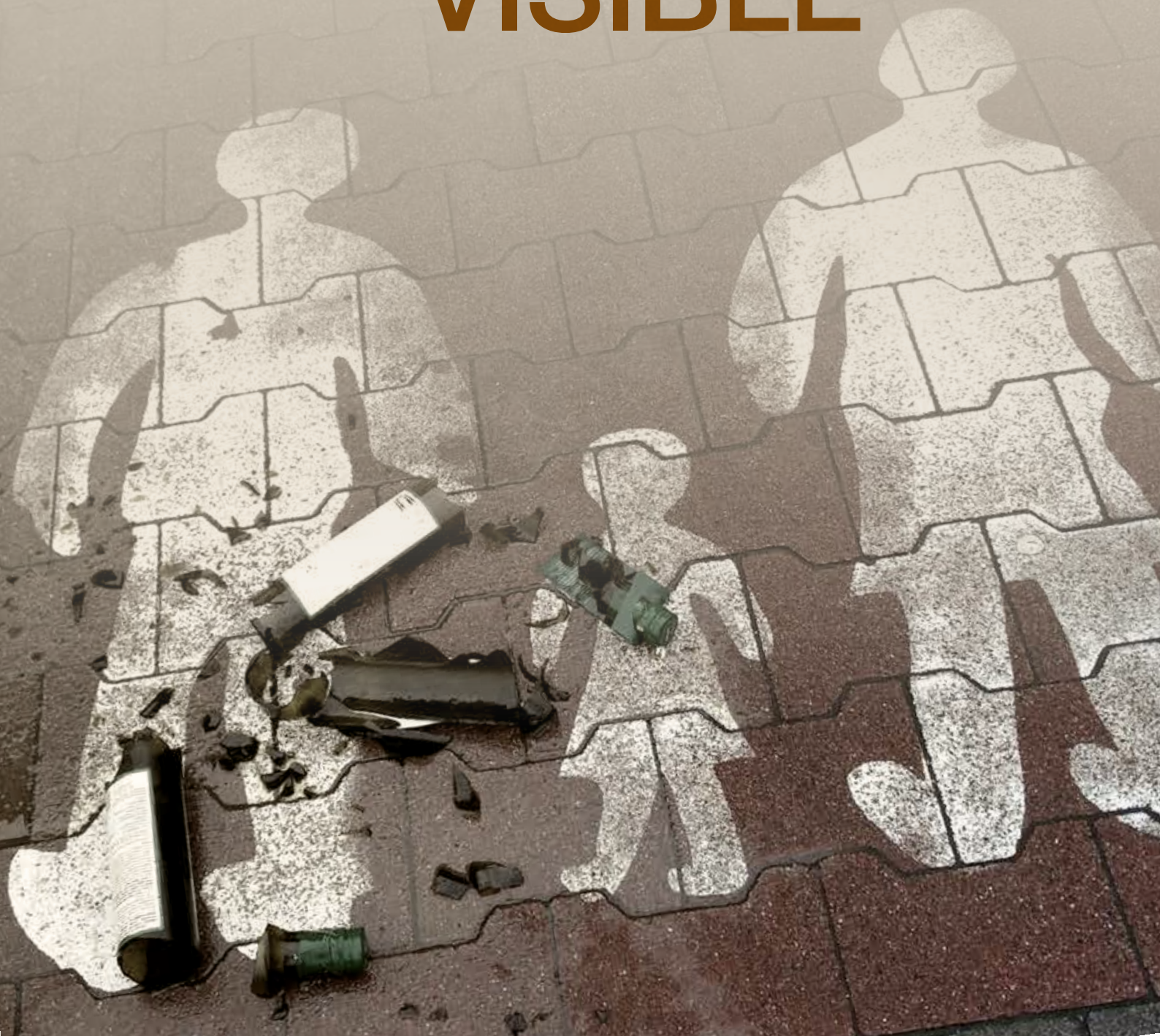


Western Australian Centre for Rural Health

Making the Invisible **VISIBLE**





Making the Invisible Visible

Why is an organisation like the Western Australian Centre for Rural Health involved in Family and Domestic Violence Prevention?

Introduction

Professor Sandra Thompson, Director

At the WA Centre for Rural Health, we were eager to sign on to the Community Respect and Equality Agreement, committing us as an organisation to work with others around the primary prevention of family, domestic and gender violence (FDV). This book of personal stories highlights to all our staff and to other organisations why we should be committed to increasing awareness and understanding of FDV, and working to address the factors that underpin FDV. That there were so many people in our organisation with relevant experience willing to contribute shows just what a problem family and gender violence is in Australia.

Through our work, we know of the exposure of children that we work with to FDV, impacting on their attendance at school, their behaviour and their mental health. Those impacts resonate throughout the entire life course.

Through our training, and as these stories show, even when their FDV experience is well in the past, it impacts on life and career choices, on an individual's ability to trust others and their ongoing relationships.

These are generally not experiences that people talk about.

All of the stories assembled here were written by staff members; some are also PhD students. Even within the relatively privileged environment of a university workplace, multiple people have had deeply disturbing experiences of family and gender violence. As the stories show, not all FDV is about physical assault. In all these cases, there was escalation of violence, control and intimidation over time. While alcohol and mental illness may be part of these personal stories, the common element is of men exerting coercive control over others and intimidating others, who are mostly women and children.

It is time for us as individuals, as community members, men and women, and as members of organisations to recognise that family, domestic and gender violence is too pervasive in our community. We must work together to say #ViolenceIsNEVERok

I thank the staff who have written their deeply felt and personal stories here; they are poignant, harrowing, insightful and painful stories. All the authors would prefer that the events they describe had not occurred and that they were not in a position to tell them. Some are old, some are recent; many are ongoing.


Those contributing their story did so voluntarily and were given the

option of using their name or writing anonymously. That most of the contributors chose to be anonymous reflects their wish not to be shamed or viewed as a victim in need of sympathy, and their need to be safe, and to protect themselves and others who are part of their story. Ultimately we decided not to identify any of the authors.

My thanks also to all the members of the WACRH FDV Working Group which is actively supporting our efforts to make a difference in the workplace and in the space of primary prevention of family and gender-based violence.

“Do not be silent; there is no limit to the power that may be released through you.”

Howard Thurman
DEEP IS THE HUNGER



“I am not what
happened to me,
I am what I choose
to become.”

Nobody saw...

On the outside I was a top university student, a competitive scholarship holder, a happy mother of two young children, someone who looked like they have their life together. Underneath the facade there was a struggle going on inside me, inside my world.

The relationship started off fine. He was charming – I thought I had ‘met the one’. When I fell pregnant things quickly changed. I hear this is common. He began thinking that I was trying to manipulate and disrespect him all the time.

Slowly my life became absorbed with taking measures to protect myself and my children. Deleting all messages from friends/family because I was inevitably going to say something that was unacceptable to him. He had an issue with every one of my friends and family, to

such an extent that I was eventually isolated from every family member and friend.

I started to spend a lot of emotional energy trying to understand what was happening and why. Why was I ‘not good enough for him’? Why did I need to improve myself so that I would be marriage material? Wasn’t I great just the way I was? Then the first physical attack happened – his chosen method was strangulation. I had disrespected him so he ‘had to do it’. Sadly, being strangled was a successful measure in controlling me. The next day I cried on the train to work ‘I have to leave, I have to leave. This is not right.’ When I arrived at uni I was told that day that I had won an award. My world was very confusing. How can I be winning awards but getting strangled at night? Why hasn’t anyone noticed the dried up tears and my nervousness?

Instead of leaving I invested more energy in keeping myself and the kids safe. I would spend endless hours mapping escape routes out

of the house in case of an attack. I started to secretly unlock the back door at night so I could get out quickly – forget intruders coming in, I had to get out! This seemed normal planning to me at the time. This was my life for more than four years. I felt immensely guilty for not leaving but at the same time couldn’t imagine how I could possibly orchestrate doing it.

One day he told me he would no longer contribute to the costs of the children’s day care as it was my choice to pursue education but my job was to look after the children; it was my problem to sort out. But there was no way I was going to stop studying. I started to get into debt and then even further into debt. This was just another method of control from him. By the time I left I had no savings and massive credit card debt.

He had successfully trapped me emotionally, financially and physically. During this time I told no one and showed no signs of what was going on. I was still succeeding



academically, receiving another scholarship to do a PhD and generally being a model student. During that time I had to keep going, even though I was mentally and physically exhausted. But I would wipe those tears away, guard my heart, hold my head up, just keep going. I just kept doing, giving my best. Giving to those little children even though there was nothing left.

There were several catalysts that finally made me leave. Once when I was being strangled the look in his eyes told me one day he would not stop. I realised his contempt for me was not rational. My son said to me 'mummy, daddy is mean to you'. I realised that the children did know. As much as I had tried to hide it – my little ones knew. I told a friend and she could not hide the tears streaming quietly down her face, she told me 'you are a beautiful person and you don't deserve to be treated like this'.

A psychologist gave me the number for Pat Giles NGO. I thought they wouldn't believe me, hang up on

me or tell me that they don't help people with such minor DV cases as me. I almost didn't call. Instead they helped me with the process of leaving. Leaving itself was easy and hard at the same time. It was nice to be free again, but I was still scared (what if he breached the restraining order and attacked me, what if he took the kids away). I grappled with the guilt of getting the restraining order and leaving him – confusing I know! Life went on, I continued to excel academically, and still almost no one knew.

In leaving, I learned kindness again. I saw kindness again. From old friends who forgave me for losing touch, from new friends who took me under their wing, health professionals who helped me and Legal Aid. There was lots of support there for me the whole time, I just didn't realise it existed.

I want everyone to know that it can be happening to anyone. Just as the perpetrator is great at hiding it, we too are great at hiding it. Why? We have more to lose. Shame. Shame of people thinking we are damaged. Shame of people thinking what a bad choice we have made. Shame of staying in the relationship. Fear. Fear of being attacked. Fear of not being helped. Fear of being told to go away. Doubt. Doubt that you have imagined things to be worse than they are. Anger. Anger at him, but mostly anger at yourself for allowing yourself to be treated like this.

To the women like me who feel trapped in an unloving and violent relationship. I know you feel unseen. But just know you are seen, you are heard, you are missed. Your friends wonder what happened to that wonderful woman they once had fun with. Your family misses that beautiful, happy person they once knew. Your kids want to see you being free and happy. No one stops caring about you, even if

there is distance between you. Just know that you never stop being that wonderful person that you are. You can never lose the essence of who you are.

The time will come when you will leave too. It may not be straight away, it might take time to prepare, and it will probably be scary – but you can and will do it. Don't feel guilty for not leaving straight away. You will emerge as a strong, free woman with an army of people who you didn't even know existed waiting to help you. You will be able to be your wonderful self again. Just know that you are strong. It takes a strong woman to cry quietly at night, wipe those tears away in the morning and fool everyone the next day. There is a quote I want to share that I read in a book called Supernormal by Meg Jay: "I see myself as stronger and more capable than most people around me because of the treatment I lived through. I see myself as an optimist, not because I think bad things don't or won't happen but because I believe I can overcome whatever comes my way. I feel independent and confident. I feel tested. I feel brave."

“When it comes to abuse, you believe there's no way out. There is always help. There is always a way out.”

It happens in respectable families – family violence has effects that endure

I grew up in a leafy well-to-do suburb of Perth in a 'respectable' family. Yet as a small child when domestic violence was occurring in my home, inflicted by my father against my mother, I felt so unbelievably scared. The sounds of an angry raised voice, fists beating, slapping, and the resulting cries of pain and panic still resonate deep within my soul. I was terrified, my heart pounding so hard that I thought my heart would burst out of my chest. Initially my younger sister and I would run away, hide in the garden and sob uncontrollably. As I grew older I tried to intervene, screaming and yelling out to "stop hitting my mummy", "stop hurting my mummy", though still keeping my distance. Eventually as time passed, and although still a young child, I began to intervene physically, trying

to get between him and my mum or trying to pull him away, but this sometimes resulted in me becoming a target, as my father unleashed his anger on me for interfering. Likewise my older brother, trying in earnest to protect my mother, suffered the pain of his own bruises as a result. A vivid memory is of the family cat coming too close when my father was enraged, and being strangled in front of us. He only stopped as a result of our screams of absolute horror, flinging the kitten across the room.

My father was not loving or affectionate towards us in the way you'd expect a father to be. We were brought up to be seen and not heard and to speak only when spoken to. I feel like I lived my childhood walking on egg shells to avoid an outburst and the possible repercussions – which were intensified when alcohol was involved. Today I am a very deferential person and feel this evolved more out of fear of doing the wrong thing and suffering the consequences. I was however very blessed to have a beautiful, caring, loving mother who provided us much love and affection, the equivalent of two parents' worth.

I'm sure my mother had, like most little girls, dreams of a fairy tale story, living in a beautiful castle and having Prince Charming to adore her and take care of her. However, the real princess story was different, where adoring manifested as smothering or stalking, and the castle with high walls translated to being a prisoner in her own home.

Family violence perpetrators don't realise the impact that they have, not only on their primary victim, but on those around them, particularly

children. I feel that my family violence experiences have haunted me and had a far-reaching impact on my psyche in regard to relationships with men and my capacity to trust them. I know that not all men are like my father but still today the basic anxiety exists even if only in the far reaches of my mind. I have built a metaphorical high, solid brick wall around myself, like a fortress to protect me and my emotional wellbeing. I am instinctively wary of controlling behaviours in men, as previously seen in my father, and when I am conscious of them it's like a deafening siren sounding out a commanding warning.

My experience has taught me that power and control is used by a perpetrator to generate isolation of a victim through ostracising them from friends and family and other social opportunities. A controlling perpetrator takes away the independence of their victim while framing themselves as a caring partner, by not allowing their partner to drive or work whilst saying "I can take you anywhere you need to go" or "I can provide for you, you don't need to work". With no income and no friends or family support, there is no one or nowhere to turn to in a crisis. This enforced isolation and lack of independence, tied with other controlling behaviours establishes a sense that there is no way out which can set in motion thoughts of suicide as the only perceived way to escape a perpetrator. Whilst today there are support services that can help women in such circumstances, in my mother's day there were none.

More than a year after my mother had the fortitude to separate from my father, he would use a key to

“Family is supposed to be our safe haven. Very often, it's the place where we find the deepest heartache.”



our home and turn up whenever he chose. On one occasion, my mother was dressed up and excited because she was going on a dinner date. My father arrived and let himself in, instantly grilling her about why she was dressed up. He refused to leave, stating he was staying and would question any male who turned up about his financial status, his capacity and willingness to take on a readymade family and so on. Rather than subject someone she didn't know well to that level of embarrassment, my mum cancelled the date. Forty years later, she has never gone on another date. My father had coaxed my younger sister from our home to live with him when my parents separated, and only allowed her to return if my mum agreed to give up any entitlement to shared property or assets. She complied, leaving her to restart and build her life from rock bottom, starting with nothing. I'm so proud of how strong and independent my mum is today, from this new beginning after she freed herself from her abuser.

Through my experiences I have learnt to greatly value my independence, constantly learning new practical skills such as using tools and fixing things when the opportunity arises. I actively seek to empower myself to overcome my fears and I contribute to closing the gender gap in whatever ways I can. I embrace the power of my female identity. While pleased that I am a survivor and in charge of my own destiny and happiness, I'm sad that the fairy tale doesn't fit with my reality.

Jealousy and the invisible hurt

I was never exposed to domestic violence growing up. My parents didn't have a violent relationship and we didn't see or hear about violence either. But when I got into a relationship, he was very jealous and I experienced physical and emotional abuse for a long time. I never ended up in hospital, but I got punched around. He would hit me where it didn't show. The emotional abuse was the worst, I really lost my self-esteem. I became very withdrawn, which was unlike me. I was scared to socialise or even make eye contact when I was out due to the fear of being abused.

I worked all through that time, even after I had kids. I regained my confidence through my work as I built my skills and career. Eventually I was strong enough to stand up to him and we were able to work through things and the violence stopped. We're still together and our relationship has been violence free for over 20 years now.

As an adult I have come to realise how alarmingly common domestic violence has become in

our community. I have witnessed people that I love be abused and be abusers. Professionally, I have worked with many people who disclosed that they were experiencing domestic violence. I have seen how the excessive use of drugs and alcohol contributes to the violence.

These days it's virtually impossible to stop your kids from being exposed to violence because it's everywhere – you see it in the community, on the news, in video games and on social media. But we can talk to kids about it and we can teach them early that it's never ok to use violence. Teach them to care about others rather than the need to dominate. We need to be good role models about decision making and the importance of the choices we make. Teach children and others responsibility for their choices, that there is a choice to be made at every step of the journey. Teach people not to choose violence but to walk away instead. For the sake of the next generation, we need to make clear that this resorting to violence is not normal.



The Big Day, the years before, and the aftermath

One day, when I was 15 years old, I had an argument with my father. I'd never had an argument with my father before. I don't recall a time when I did not live in fear of him, and throughout my childhood I did whatever I could not to make him angry.

On The Big Day, I was playing in a teenagers' sports competition, along with dozens of other kids, most of whom had a parent or two with them to cheer (or commiserate, or scold). For reasons too complicated and bizarre to explain, my father didn't want me to participate.

On The Big Day, I told my father to f*** off.

Long story short, my enraged father disappeared and returned an hour later, in his car, with the plan and the means to kill: a gun loaded with .22-calibre bullets and the car loaded with a full tank plus hundreds of litres of petrol in jerry cans. The efforts of one brave person prevented his entry to the sports centre (although one kid took a bullet graze in the arm). Although he successfully lit a wick to the jerry cans and started a fire inside the car, he failed in his plan to blow up the whole building, thanks to the bravery of men who took a fire extinguisher to the burning vehicle in the nick of time and thereby 'prevented a major disaster' (according to the Coroner). My father had shot himself in the head. 'Wild

man runs amok, dies in car fire', screamed the tabloid headline.

The Big Day turned out to be the best day of my life. I had not expected to outlive my father.

The years leading up to The Big Day were very scary for me. In fact, the years leading up to The Big Day constituted a crescendo of terror. I later learnt my father had a severe paranoid disorder.

By the time I started high school, he had long since rejected my mother and my two older sisters, so he communicated with no-one in the

family except me. My mother and sisters were under suspended death sentences for their involvement in the global conspiracy against him, and I knew that I was next in line to be condemned. My father gave up his job working as a teacher because he thought workplaces were wicked too, and he spent his final years being voluntarily unemployed. He couldn't even complete divorce proceedings, believing his own lawyer to be part of the conspiracy.

So, we all lived together/apart in a little house with an "Iron Corridor" down the middle. One side (with the master bedroom) was occupied by my father; on the other side cowered my mother (who slept on the lounge-room sofa) and one of my sisters. My older sister had sensibly escaped the environment as soon as she finished school. I was the only person allowed across No Man's Land. My father kept me under constant surveillance and control. I obeyed his every command, straitjacketed by fear.

It was impossible for us to prevent the occasional outburst of my father's rage – violent, uncontrollable anger with doors slammed, glass broken, family members reduced to emotional mush. There were futile visits to impotent police. Even without physical assaults,

the intimidation and control was extreme. The peace was kept, most of the time, only by obeying Father's Rules: no eye-contact or any other communications between him and his conspiratorial kin, no television/radio/laughing/talking/breathing audible across the Iron Corridor, and no visitors. All the while, we kept up the appearances of normal lives and regularly attended work, uni or school.

"Why didn't she/we leave him?"
It's a no-brainer. My mother had no money, no self-confidence, and nowhere to hide.

I haven't experienced much trauma since my father hated me to his death, at least not trauma that compares. After high school I trained as a health professional, so I have witnessed lots of other people's trauma: physical and mental pain, disability, death and grief. Working with these exposures and in a demanding role became too much; I couldn't cope. Ultimately, I stopped practising and gave up my registration. For a long time I was in and out of work, mostly brought on by self-destructing – feeling unworthy even when objectively things at work were just hitting a small road bump.

I didn't have the courage to run away from my father while he was alive. But ever afterwards, I've kept running, trying to escape this past – out of the city, out of the state, and across the country. Running away from employment has been one of my favoured modes of demonstrating the feelings of unworthiness and self-hatred that are part of my father's legacy. I often run away from relationships too, although I've discovered that it's generally simpler and safer not to establish them in the first place.

Unlike many victims of family violence, I can easily validate my own childhood story of an unceasingly toxic and frightening home environment, through recounting the events of one Big Day long ago that drew public and media attention. However, for reasons that ought to be obvious, I have shared the story only with people I trust. My mother recently passed away, but my sisters and I continue to live with the aftermath.

"The only people who get upset about you setting boundaries are the ones who were benefiting from you having none."



I did not give domestic violence much thought

When I was growing up as a young woman in Africa, I never gave much thought to domestic violence. It was not that I was not aware of it but I thought that it is something that happened to other people or other families. I naively thought that education was a protective factor. Of course now, as a survivor of domestic violence, I know that domestic violence does not discriminate and affects women of all races, ethnicities, religions, backgrounds, ages and education levels and can be also perpetuated by men of all races, ethnicities, religions, backgrounds, ages and education levels. However, in the immediate aftermath of being in a controlling and abusive relationship, I felt deep shame and embarrassment and unfortunately, I did not get any help. There was no one to talk to about my situation and no one to provide help. On the contrary, some women told me that domestic violence was the 'norm' and was something I should

learn to live with. I was advised to return to my partner in the interest of my child. It eventually took me three years to leave, and as most domestic violence victims know it is the time of separation which tends to be the most unsafe. I didn't want to put myself or my son in harm's way so my migration to Australia was in some ways the best way I could get out and as far away as possible.

In my opinion, domestic violence continues unabated because our society normalises it. Society shapes the way domestic violence is viewed and how both men and women respond to it. For many women, especially women from my culture, it is hard to leave abusive partners because a woman without a man is seen to have no value. Recently I was insulted by another African woman because of my single status, so it would be very hard for many women to make a choice to leave as they would be worried about how they would be perceived

by the wider society. In order to be eradicated, the root causes of domestic violence need to be properly understood and addressed, particularly the structural roots of domestic violence. Personally, I believe that it is rooted in how males and females are socialised from the time they are children, but it is also linked to the desire to control another person, the inability to handle interpersonal conflict in a civil manner, fear of women (misogyny) as well as lack of self-esteem. It is important that all levels of government, religious groups, institutions and community groups and families make a concerted effort to prevent domestic violence, with particular emphasis on primary prevention. That is the only way we can make a significant impact on this scourge that continues to affect an unacceptably high number of families across Australia and the world.

I am not a victim, I am a survivor of domestic violence

During my childhood I witnessed a lot of family and domestic violence. I don't even remember the point at which it became "normalised" but I do know that it did become normalised. Living with violence affects you in many ways.

Often parents don't think their children hear it but of course – you do. You hear the shouting, the name calling, you see the holes in the walls and or doors, and you see the black eyes, broken bones and physical injuries. These sounds, visions and memories of violence travel with you through your life journey, more often than not in negative ways. Growing up I continued to witness Family and domestic violence not only in my own family life but also in my community.

I then followed the same cycle of violence that I had grown up with and lived with a man who was mentally, physically, financially, socially and emotionally violent. This relationship lasted around eight years. When you're in this kind of relationship you stay for many different reasons. You often live in HOPE – hope that he will change, hope that it will stop, hope that when he says he will never do it again, that he doesn't. Or you excuse the behaviour around sad things that he has told you about his life, or you get caught up in the "honeymoon phase". This is now what I know as intergenerational trauma.

Talking with women living in these violent relationships you will hear a variety of reasons why they stay – "I stayed for my kids" "He said he won't do it ever again" "He was drunk" "It was my fault – I should

have shut up" "I didn't do what I should have" "I love him" "I am too scared to leave – I know what he is capable of". All of these reasons are valid for these women at that particular time.

I would describe myself as an educated, strong Aboriginal woman, but during this time of living with this man I was not strong – definitely not strong enough to leave. Day by day, little by little, this man chipped away at my self-esteem, my confidence, my health, my friendships, my finances, my happiness, my job and my life to the point I suffered depression and the feeling of helplessness like I had never known before.

So many times I heard "Why don't you just leave him?" "Why do you stay?" "If you go back to him I am not helping you no more" and so much more – *not one* of these comments helped me in my darkest moments, not one if these comments helped or encouraged

me to leave. Nor did any of these comments make me feel better about myself. But what it did do was make me avoid that person, made me hide the violence that was happening to me and aided in further socially isolating me.

I have learnt many things about family, domestic and community violence some of which include:

- It takes a victim many attempts to leave before she will actually leave – she needs to be ready! – as this can be the most dangerous and most vulnerable time for victims suffering and living in violent situations.
- Domestic violence can be physical and people can see the evidence but mental, emotional, financial, social types of violence people often cannot see the evidence of this but it is not any less painful, dangerous or demoralising than the physical violence.

“Poisonous relationships can alter our perception. You can spend many years thinking you're worthless. But you're not worthless, you're unappreciated.”

- Support victims practically. Ask: Do you want me to photocopy birth certificates or ID's? Do you want to pack some bags of clothes for you and the kids that you can leave at my home in case you leave in a rush? Do you want me to call and check on you? Can we develop a code word and if you say that word I will know you need help? Do you have a safety plan and if not, let's develop one. Where will you go? Who will you call? Do you want to give me some contact numbers of your family in case he takes or breaks your phone?
- There are some great service providers working in communities that work with victims of family and domestic violence

This is much more helpful to a friend or family member suffering or living with domestic violence than making them feel that you are judging them, putting them down, or making them feel guilty or worse about themselves than they are already feeling.

Domestic violence affects everyone. It affects you, it affects your children, it affects your family, it affects your friends, it affects your job, it affects your health, and it affects your mind, body and soul.

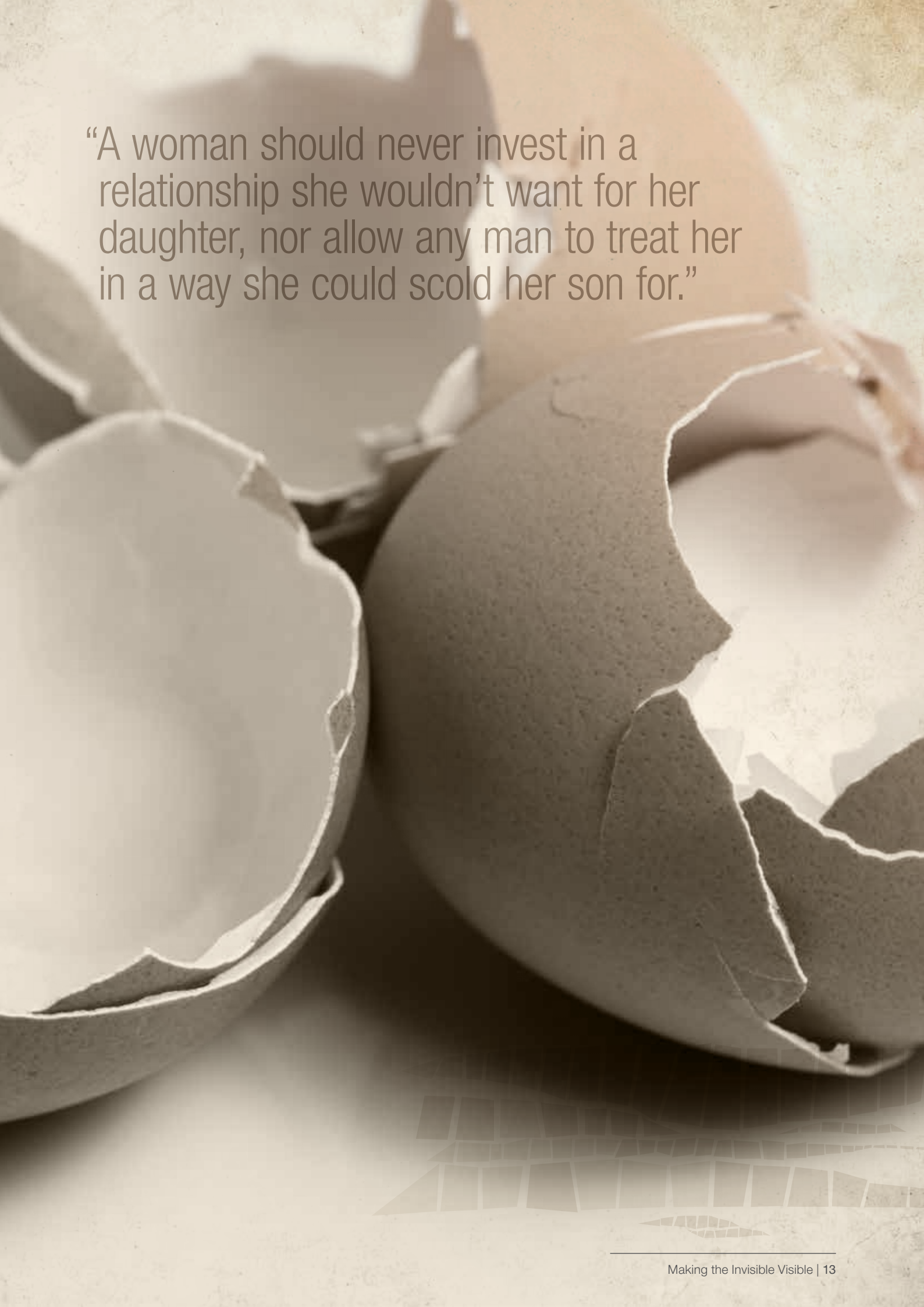
My children were affected by the violence. I can and have tried to kid myself that they weren't. My children are adults now. I remember the day that I made the decision to leave this toxic relationship. I starting preparing myself for around a month before hand, I packed clothes, I made sure I had my bank cards, my ID, my kids' ID, photocopies of important paperwork including school reports and photos. I planned where I was going, I wrote down phone numbers I knew I would need as often he would take my phone or smash it, I hid money little by little and did things like pretended I never got paid or got overpaid and had to pay some

back. I brought a new sim card in preparation that on the day I left I was changing my phone number – so I would not have to see the million missed calls and venomous messages that he would have left for me on my old number. I never told anybody, I just mapped it all out to the 'T'. I was leaving and I was going to be prepared as I knew that I was never ever going back. I was no longer going to put my children or myself through this toxic, nasty ongoing violence.

The day arrived and I have never been more prepared for anything in my life, I sent my kids to school as normal, I packed my final things I waited for him to leave the house and I left knowing that I would never ever return. I went to the school and picked my children up, we waited at a refuge for the bus and we left town that night. We were free. We were happy. We were starting our new life and I was never looking back. Once I reached my destination I applied for and was awarded a violence restraining order.

I often tell my story to other women not because I want sympathy, I don't need sympathy. I am a survivor, not a victim. I want them to know that they can do it, life can be happy, your children's life can be happy, you can begin to feel good about yourself and there is and can be light at the end of the tunnel and most importantly you can help other survivors of family and domestic violence.





“A woman should never invest in a relationship she wouldn’t want for her daughter, nor allow any man to treat her in a way she could scold her son for.”

Why the world would work better if people did their jobs properly: the need for law enforcement

Note: The story provided below exemplifies the intimidation and behaviour of interpersonal gender violence occurring in the author's place of residence. It meets the definition of family and domestic violence which is "considered to be behaviour which results in physical, sexual and/or psychological damage, forced social isolation, economic deprivation, or behaviour which causes the victim to live in fear."

It may sound unlikely but my problem with my neighbour arose over a neighbourhood dispute. My neighbour owned four unrestrained and unlicensed cats and I had requested Body Corporate support in ensuring that cats didn't spray on the concrete around my front door or on my front door. When it rained, the odour was so awful I couldn't have my front door open. I used all types of cleaners, enzymes and cat repellents which unfortunately didn't work.

This neighbour then wrote a scathing email to the Body Corporate members suggesting that I had a personality disorder and that I should get a big dog or even bigger husband to protect me from the trespassers in my back garden. I found out in court three years later that he had been the Christmas Day trespasser who left two bags of rubbish, an old massage table and prawn heads/shells in my private walled courtyard garden.

Since then I feel like I've lived in a prison, he harasses and intimidates me on a daily basis, in a 'gaslighting' style. *[Note from Wikipedia: Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation that seeks to sow seeds of doubt in a targeted individual or in members*

of a targeted group, making them question their own memory, perception, and sanity. Using persistent denial, misdirection, contradiction, and lying, it attempts to destabilize the victim and delegitimize the victim's belief].

I responded respectfully, requesting that he cease and desist. Unfortunately he did not cease his behaviour, it only escalated. So I applied for and was granted a Personal Violence Restraining Order (PVRO). My neighbour agreed to the PVRO without admissions. I thought WOW, this is the end of it as it's a \$62,000 fine or a couple of years in jail if he breaches it. But no, he kept going.

In fact, this is when he started in earnest, damaging my car, leaving items at my door, hissing at my flat daily at 9pm for approximately 20 minutes at a time.


I was in my own home, with a mortgage over the property. As a strong and determined woman, I refused to be intimidated in my home, so each time he breached the order I would call the police. Unfortunately they hadn't had training in Personal Violence Restraining Orders, only Domestic Violence Restraining orders, and wrongly believed that they didn't

have responsibility in dealing with breaches of PVROs. They directed me to go back to court.

I asked the Body Corporate to comply with the local council regulations about animal ownership and with the Body Corporate Act in relation to animal ownership. But my neighbour and I were both on the Body Corporate Committee, so the Chair of the Body Corporate decided that the issues between my neighbour and me were of a personal nature and not a body corporate issue, and chose not to be involved.

Even when the police finally understood that they had responsibility for PVROs they told me that he would have to assault me before they would do anything. After my neighbour physically assaulted me (on a Thursday night), I spent two hours in the police station on the Friday afternoon; unfortunately the Police Officer couldn't even take an appropriate statement. When the statement was presented to me, so much of it was incorrect. Things as simple as my phone number and place of birth, but then so many of the components of the statement too. I refused to sign that.

That Friday night I was attending bookclub, and the book was



“Don’t let someone who did you wrong make you think there’s something wrong with you. Don’t devalue yourself because they didn’t value you. Know your worth even if they don’t.”

Big Little Lies. As it happened, a number of the women disclosed being victims of domestic violence. I commented that I had come from the police station after trying to make a statement and in the end had chosen not to because of all of the errors in the statement and my treatment by this particular officer. Fortunately there was an off duty police officer at that bookclub. On her advice I went back to the police station the following Monday morning and asked to speak to the officer in charge. He was unavailable, but an Acting Sergeant took my statement and then went to my neighbour’s workplace to arrest him.

I made a complaint to the Police Ombudsman about how PVROs were being dealt with by the police. I suggested rather than a full and costly investigation into this situation, that a discussion and increase in training for police about PVROs was more appropriate.

It took more than six months for the breach of the restraining order

and assault to be heard in court. The Witness Assistance Service provided me with a safe room in the court house to sit while the court was hearing the case. Fortunately the Police prosecutor prepared me well. This was just as well as I was cross examined by my neighbour’s barrister for five hours.

My neighbour received two non-recorded convictions as he had never previously had any dealings with the courts.

One Friday before a long weekend my neighbour continued breaching the restraining order. But when I called the police, they informed him and me that he hadn’t been served with the current restraining order, even though he was in court when it was issued. The police refused to serve it and said it had to be done by the courts. [The court later said this was not true and that the police could have served the PVRO (which I had taken to them in person on the Saturday morning)]. My neighbour continued to harass me for the next three days. I hadn’t

planned on going away, I was too frightened to go out, and my car had been parked 2km away for more than a year with me cycling to it when I needed it. I did this because he had continued to damage my car by putting objects on the car or by throwing eggs at it. I couldn’t go through the expense of additional insurance claims.

After this, I needed to apply for another restraining order. The PVRO Act required the judge to refer us to mediation. This mediation is supposed to be confidential, we were both provided with agreements we signed to participate in the mediation. Unfortunately the mediators did not understand the ‘gaslighting’ that my neighbour was engaging in. He kept talking to the mediators and my support person rather than me, trying to engage them in conversation about my supposed mental health issues. I tried to stop this behaviour but the mediators appeared unaware of the consequences of allowing this. Eventually I called a halt to

the mediation. The mediators decided that we should try and bring the mediation to a completion by having some agreed terms, which we both signed. Later these confidential agreed terms were presented in court by my neighbour's barrister. These terms should not have been brought to the court but ultimately it was in my interest that they were as they were accepted by the judge in a later application for a restraining order and my neighbour could be cross-examined as to why he hadn't complied with the agreed terms.

My neighbour now has three non-recorded convictions and a recorded conviction. He is a criminal, but it hasn't deterred him, his harassing and intimidating behaviour continues. I'm sick of wasting my time and energy in making statements to the police on his breaches. He's not going to stop until I'm gone from there.

The impact all this has had on me has been significant. I've not been able to apply myself to my studies, or even casual work. This situation takes up so much brain space and I can't seem to focus on anything else.

I've cut holes into my window screens so the CCTV (funded by Victims of Crime) has clear images of any antisocial behaviours my neighbour may exhibit.

I've had friends that think that the behaviour isn't too bad and that I should just put up with it – daily intimidation and harassment for 2-3 years is not something anyone should have to endure in their own home.

I've been told by police and friends to sell up and leave, move house, rent somewhere else, get a room in a share house – this all would be a significant financial and personal burden that I just can't afford.

I know all he wants is for me to move out, and that to him will be him winning.

I have resisted it for such a long time, but now, that is exactly what I am going to do. It has taken three years and so much of my time and energy but I'm going to leave. It's time for me to find a new community to live in, make new friends and enjoy my lifestyle

The cats are still unrestrained, they are still spraying on items around the communal area, he is still harassing me, I still don't park my car at home, I still have CCTV, I still feel like a prisoner in my own home. I'm going to leave and he's got a criminal conviction and he's spent a lot of money with his lawyers. The police and courts have wasted a lot of public money on this case, which started over him not restraining his cats. This money could have been better spent on important things... but because each cog in the chain hasn't done its job properly this minor matter escalated.

If only the Body Corporate had listened, this was initially about cats.

If only the council had enforced their bylaws.

If only the Police had understood their role in PVROs.

If only the Court Bailiff had served the PVRO in a timely manner.

If only the Judge had realised that mediation was not going to work.

If only the Community Justice Centre mediators understood their role.

If only I had not asked for the law to be upheld at every turn.

This has been a learning experience – my confidence waxes and wanes. My study has come to a crashing halt, my ability to concentrate is almost non-existent and my self-esteem is at a long-term low.

“Trauma is personal. It does not disappear if it is not validated. When someone enters the pain and hears the screams, healing can begin.”

Behind closed doors he was a different person

I remember as if it was yesterday, the colour of my dad's eyes – a pale, cerulean blue like the blue in my watercolour palette, his jet black hair and his happy disposition. Well that memory was of a five year old and I was the youngest of three children – a long time ago now.

My dad's mum died when he was 12 years old and the youngest of three boys to a father who by all accounts took an authoritarian approach to child raising. He lived on a farm on the outskirts of a small country town in rural South Australia.

My dad was just 20 years old when he married my mum aged 19. They had three children soon after and built a home which they moved into the year I was born. Dad was a proud man who was determined to work hard and build a happy home. Yet life was hard living on a farm in the late 50s and early 60s and making a living off the land was difficult. Dad ventured from sheep farming to dairy farming,

building a state-of-the-art dairy that was known in the district as a very progressive modern dairy. As the milk prices dropped Dad turned to working a second job to make ends meet. Pride slowly gets eroded away and somewhere along the way he turned to excessive drinking, perhaps to forget his failures as a business and family man. Dad was a generous man to the outside world, people gravitated towards him, yet behind his smile he was sad – he felt a failure. He managed to continue to work – reaching for the brandy bottle hidden in the shed each morning before he milked the cows and went on to his day job, concluding with drinking a couple of bottles of beer at night. Over time, drinking excessively took its toll – he no longer wanted to socialise with my mum's family and friends and we (mum and us kids) would go to visit my grandparents only to return to a house being locked and unable to get in. Then the fights started – dad yelling at mum and on some occasions he was physically

violent towards her. We kids would run and hide or try to defend mum and sometimes I would run down the street saying I was going to the police station (which was a long way to run when you are just a child and live a mile or so out of town!). Leaving the situation was out of the question years ago – there was nowhere to escape and no financial support for women to take their children away from the hell of family violence. There were no women's refuges so families stayed together in a dysfunctional home. During that period of the 1960s people in the community probably knew about the abuse but didn't talk about it as people didn't want to interfere in what was commonly called “a domestic situation”.

As the youngest, I noticed his resentment starting to show towards us. He no longer had dinner with us and most nights, although my mum would have dinner in the oven for when he finally came home, it was often not touched or was thrown in the rubbish bin. He started ignoring me when he came into my sister's and my bedroom to say goodnight. I have tried to understand how he could ignore me, and I can only rationalise this as I was more like my mum in appearance and my sister (with her pale blue eyes) was more like my dad... and so he completely overlooked my existence in his sick and jaded mind.

Alcohol invariably affects one's health. Dad started experiencing “blackouts” and he suffered from bouts of pancreatitis due to his excessive drinking. He was told on many occasions to give up drinking

“It is not the bruises
on the body that hurt.
It is the wounds of the
heart and the scars
on the mind.”

by his doctor. However, there was little help or support for this to actually occur. My mother tried to shield us kids from much of both the physical and emotional abuse while she bore the brunt of it. She didn't appear to confide in anyone about our domestic situation but resorted to compulsive skin picking to try and relieve her stress and anxiety (I only understood this later on). Her legs were constantly bleeding with open wounds that never healed.

I had always been a high achiever at school, certainly through primary school and the early years of high school. However, that changed as dad became more irrational and unpredictable in his behaviour. My brother and sister left home and I was left with just my mum and a very sick alcoholic father in the last 12 months before he died. We were on a downward spiral, with bills mounting and the phone disconnected because we couldn't pay the phone bill. My father finally realised he needed help to deal with his alcoholism and he was voluntarily admitted to hospital – however he contracted bronchopneumonia and died there at the age of 42 years. I had just turned 16.

Later on, as a young nurse I learned more about alcohol and the effects on the body – but not about the associated effects that percolate out to the many family members who may still suffer, years on after the abuse. However, today we have the knowledge and the support to tackle issues of alcoholism and of family violence with their associated crippling psychological and physical effects. My hope is that through community programs such as Community Respect Equality and contributing to projects like *Making the Invisible Visible* we all work together to 'break the cycle' and prevent family violence and abuse.

The importance of good role models

I don't tolerate violence. No one deserves that. I don't care who they are. There has to be a better way to resolve the conflict, whatever it is. There is no reason or excuse for anyone to be attacked, punched on, hair pulled to the ground and booted into. I have had to protect a family member that was being assaulted by her partner by spreading myself on top of her to stop him from continuing to boot her and tell the kids to go next door to call the police and ambulance. Those kids that were exposed to this drug and alcohol fuelled violence are now doing what they saw in their family. It's that intergenerational cycle.

We have protected our kids from being exposed to violence. We try not to argue in front of our kids. My mother and father didn't, so we try not to in front of our kids and we hope our kids will try to do the same. Recently we were caught up in a violent attack on my family in a public place. It was horrible. As a mother, one of the most horrifying things to experience is seeing your kids caught up in a violent situation, trying to get them to safety.

We have extended family that are involved in violence against other people, amongst themselves, against their kids, feuding at school, they don't care where they are. They say "You think you're better than us" and I always say "No. We don't think we're better than you. We think what you're doing is wrong. I don't understand it. What do you get out of it? Just walk away."

It's about choices. At every point you make a choice. We need to take control of our own decisions. We're all individuals. Just because someone wants you to go fight with them or tells you that you should fight someone, don't give in to that peer pressure, don't feel obligated because it's your uncle or aunty or nanna or pop. I know there's cultural obligations but you should be able to say no. If we don't say no, how do we stop the violence against each other? An eye for an eye will turn into a life for a life. Who's going to make that change? Are you going to be the bigger person and walk away? We need to make those choices, otherwise it's never going to stop. #ViolenceisNEVEROk

“A healthy relationship will never require you to sacrifice your friends, your dreams, or your dignity.”



Thompson SC, Greville H, editors. *Making the Invisible Visible: personal stories from one workplace to raise awareness of family violence*. Western Australian Centre for Rural Health, The University of Western Australia, 2019.



WACRH

Western Australian Centre for Rural Health

167 Fitzgerald Street
Geraldton WA 6530 Australia
T: +61 8 9966 0200
F: +61 8 9934 6034
E: admin-wacrh@uwa.edu.au