

## How I went from Victim to Victor

Brooke Luevano

Like most young ladies, I had a vision of an idealistic future, which included getting married, and having a family. I had always been a hopeless romantic. I grew up watching Disney fairytales and I dreamed that a prince on a white horse would sweep me off my feet and that we would live happily ever after. My first marriage taught me a very harsh lesson on reality.

Thinking I had fallen in love, I rushed into marriage with a guy that I met in the bar I worked at as a cocktail waitress. Less than one year after meeting him we were married and expecting our first child. When I became pregnant I started to see red flags in his behavior, which I reasoned away. As time went on the red flags turned into controlling and abusive habits which destroyed our marriage and tore me down from being positive, happy, and optimistic into becoming depressed, isolated, and trapped. I stayed in the marriage and had three children convincing myself that I could fix us. After seven years of living in hell and realizing that things would continue to escalate, I knew I had to get out. I knew this was not the way to raise my children and that I deserved better than the life I had. I feared for my life and my children's safety.

I knew I had to get out, but I had no idea how to do that. I had not worked since before the marriage, so I had none of my own money or resources, and I now had three children to take care of that were 5 years, 2 years, and 5 months old. I had reached out for help to family and friends and had been turned away. Most believed I was exaggerating my circumstances. Those who did believe me were incapable of offering assistance. One day I realized.... Really realized... that the only way I was ever going to get out of this living hell was to save myself. I had to do it for my children even more than for myself. So I took the first terrifying step, and I searched on the internet for divorce lawyers (scared my husband would discover my activity and punish me). I made some phone calls and reached out not knowing if there was anyone out there who could, or would, help me.

That first step lead me to another, which lead me to another. I finally talked to someone who suggested I go to the Battered Womens' Shelter (I didn't even know such a place existed previously). I took two suitcases filled mostly with diapers, clothes, toys, and other essentials for my children. I took only the very bare essentials for myself, and I left behind everything else we owned not knowing if I could ever come back or see it again. I never knew when my husband would come home and I was terrified he'd catch me trying to leave. I was rushing as fast as I could. Thinking he would kill the cat if I left her behind, I grabbed her and took her to my mom's without telling her anything other than I was leaving my husband and I needed her to take the cat to protect her for me.

I withdrew \$500.00 out of our joint checking account knowing that if I ever did such a thing there would be severe consequences. I hid the money away not knowing if there would be food at the shelter. I didn't know if we would have a place to sleep or what lay ahead at all. It was the scariest and riskiest decision I have ever made. I knew that there was no turning back. The moment I packed those suitcases my mind was made up. No matter what lay ahead of me, no matter how challenging, I would not give up. Failure was not an option... my children needed me to be strong for them, and for myself.

I spent two months at the shelter. We were kept in a very secure and secret location where my husband couldn't find us. We were given legal assistance (which, I was told, is only granted to 1/300 cases from the shelter). When my husband found out I left he harassed all of my friends and family threatening them to find out who was hiding us. When the judge ordered for him to move out of our home and for us to return, I was relieved and scared at the same time. I was given two months to find somewhere to live and get a job to support my children and I. How could I manage that by myself, with very little work experience or college education, no family support, and three young children? The waiting list in San Antonio was two years out. I decided that smaller towns would have shorter waiting lists, so I called around to all of them in my surrounding area and explained my situation. New Braunfels Housing Authority helped me get set up in a very small two-bedroom apartment... but it was a place to live.

The Texas Workforce Commission got me a starter job at Goodwill making minimum wage... but we had an income source. They also guided me toward their Daycare Assistance Program, which made daycare affordable for me. Suddenly life was possible again. I received Medicaid, Food Stamps, TANF, and WIC. I needed all the help I could get, but I was determined to rise above and keep working until I became wholly self-sufficient. I found a job as a nanny, then at a flower shop, then as a cashier at a gas station, and then as a receptionist at a senior center. By the time I left the senior center a year and a half later, I was the Program Coordinator for the Home Repair Department and was earning more than any job I had previously. After being single for three years and getting myself settled into a better lifestyle, I re-married to a good man (I was much more careful and wise with my decision the second time) who helps us operate as a whole family unit.

I took many risks that people thought I was crazy to take, but now I am the owner and operator of a small administrative business, the office manager of my husband's construction business, mother to five beautiful children, and a proud participant with this Self-Empowerment Program. I look forward to assisting you find your power to write your own success story!