

BRIDGETT MONTOYA

My name is Bridgett Montoya. I've been living in LA all my life. I'm 30 years old. I grew up in the city of Pacoima and my mom lives here 'til this day. I am now living in North Hollywood.

'Addiction took everything from me.'

I'm a survivor of gun violence. I feel like gun violence has always been something that's very close to everybody here. It's something that I feel like, for the most part, we're okay with. Like, oh, there's a shooting. It's normal gunshots. When you don't have money to buy a home or you're living in low-income apartments, a lot of gang activity happens there. Growing up, that's kind of what I was familiar with.

Where I grew up, there were gangs. I would kick it a lot with the homies. I hung out with them. I never joined them. But I was probably like 13-14 when I started hanging out with the homies. I was drawn into that lifestyle. My sisters weren't into it, but I was into it. I liked the thrill of hanging out with them. Then I started making a lot of wrong choices for myself. I got into drug addiction and started hanging out with the wrong people.

Addiction took everything from me. It stripped me away from who I was. It stripped me away from my kids. I lost custody of two of my kids because of my drug addiction. I had my oldest when I was 19. He got taken away from me at six months. Then I had my daughter and she got taken away from me at birth. I had them like a year apart; I was 20.

When my son got taken from me and my daughter got taken from me, I wasn't allowed to live at my mom's. I had nowhere to go. I think that was the breaking point for me. I was going down a super bad path. After that, I would be on drugs. I would be dating the wrong people and out with the wrong people. I'm smoking crystal meth. It started off me snorting it. Then my addiction blew out to me smoking and I was smoking pretty often.

'I felt like everything was in slow motion.'

One day, I was pretty high, and I was hanging out. I hadn't really slept, and I was tired. When it comes to being an addict as a girl, it was kind of hard because you don't really trust falling asleep around certain people. I was with my guy friend, and I didn't really trust him and that night I didn't want to stay there. I was already dating a well-known gang member and he was always getting himself into s--t. He was also on his addiction. Both of us together, it was a bad combination.

I call him and I guess he had gone into Jack in the Box and [a rival gang] had confronted him. I was on my way to his house. He's like, "Be careful because I got caught slipping, almost got caught slipping at

the Jack.” I’m high. I rode a bike from one end of Pacoima to this end of Pacoima. I wasn't even thinking straight. I was super lit. I went over there and we were outside arguing. He was telling me to come inside, and I didn't really want to go inside. I was so high that I wasn't even making any sense. As we're arguing outside, I hear him scream, “I have a gun.” I turn around and I'm in front of him and I see a laser on his jersey. They started shooting and I see people running toward us. Right away, I got hit. I got hit in the head.

They continue to shoot and I'm frozen at the time. I got hit the second time. It hurt. I remember screaming. It burned. When I got shot, I felt like everything was in slow motion. I remember everything started going black, but I feel like I wasn't fully gone. They said that even when the ambulance came and the cops came and they were trying to identify me, I was able to mumble my name. I think one time I mumbled my mom's name.

The doctors believe that because I was so high, that's what saved my life. It kept my heart pumping and my brain pumping. I have a fragment of a bullet in my hip, and I have a whole bullet lodged in the back of my skull. I guess it went in and it cracked my skull open, so when they did surgery what they did was just kind of squish my skull back together, sew it back together. I suffered nerve damage from my knee down. I can't really wiggle my toes. My foot is not functional. It's kind of hanging there. The top of my leg, my thighs and my muscles still work. I suffer from weakness on my left side.

I was at the hospital for about 28 days. I was in a coma for about a week. They pretty much told my mom that I was not going to make it. My mom says that she will pray, and she holds my hand. It's kind of sad because we lost my dad when I was little, so my mom having to go through that scare in the hospital again was very frightening for her, traumatic. They did tell my mom that I was going to be a paraplegic. They told my mom that I wouldn't remember a lot of things. They told her that I probably wouldn't remember what happened to me before I got shot or after I got shot. They told my mom that I would never be able to carry another baby.

It was tough for a lot of reasons. When you're an addict, it's not something that you let go of. Even in the hospital room, I want to get high. I want to leave here and go get high. On top of that, having a detective show up and not being helpful. Like them wanting me to tell them who did it, what happened, hassling me. A lot of the hassle came from my past, me getting in trouble with the law before. But I feel like I wasn't treated fair. They kept blaming my son's father. The cops automatically wanting me to say that was who I was with and it wasn't even who I was with. I think they thought I was trying to protect him.

I couldn't look at myself.'

I started doing physical therapy while I was there. It hurt so bad. I couldn't get off the bed. I couldn't move my right hand at first. I couldn't sit up. I remember they were teaching me how to brush my

teeth and there's like a little mirror in the bathroom. I knew my hair had been chopped, but I didn't know how it had been chopped. As a girl, you're attached to your hair. To see it for the first time, that was painful. It was so funny, the haircut. I had a little strand of bangs. All of it bald and then like a little strand of hair. It was like a mullet; it was just horrible. I couldn't look at myself.

It's scary when you're being told you're not going to walk. When you're there and you'd have to pee, and you can't use the restroom. You have to have all these nurses and people help you. It's a lot. I got most of my strength from praying, from God and my mom's prayers. I've always been religious. There was a time when my dad died when I was eight, I didn't really believe in God for a while. But I got through so many things in life that I feel like the only way to explain my life is with God. It was a lot of that and a lot of love and the support that I received from everybody.

I come out of the hospital and went to live in Simi Valley. There was no protection or nothing. There were issues on my medical, issues with physical therapy, issues with everything. It was a mess. I was at my sister's house and she took care of me. She cleaned my wounds. I couldn't walk. A month in, I started getting tired of being stuck. I remember I put my walker in front of me, in front of the wheelchair, and I would try to stand up. I would do it and I would do it and I would do it. I was trying to teach myself how to walk. I think that's why I walk with a limp. I didn't get the proper therapy.

I did [drugs] when I left. It was pain pills because I was in a lot of pain. But one time, I ended up bleeding, I got to the hospital and I left. I didn't go back home. I was back on the streets. Then from there I went to jail. At the time I got shot I was on probation. I didn't communicate with my probation officer. I went to jail because it was a violation. Because I couldn't walk, I was a liability at a regular jail. I went to a handicap jail, for women that have health issues. To be honest, I went to jail a lot of times, that was the best time. They have hospital beds and nurses there and stuff like that. While I was in jail, I got off the walker. We had a lady there that will come in and do physical therapy with us, which is so crazy to say that. Like you're going to get more help in jail than out here.

I got shot in October. I was out probably November and then December I was already in jail. I was in there until end of February, almost March. I stayed clean for a little bit and then I relapsed. It was just a lot. A lot of it comes from not wanting to feel and not wanting to face reality. Which kind of sucks because at the end of the day, even when you're in your addiction, regardless of how high you get, your reality starts sinking in. When your reality is so bad, drugs don't even help.

'I want to change and didn't want to have another kid taken from me.'

I got out of jail and then in May met my son's father. The first time we had intercourse, I get pregnant. I think my pregnancy was a lot of fear. I was told I was never going to be able to carry a baby.

He's my little miracle baby. This little boy came to my life; he is my world. Not only for him but for his brother and sister. Because of him, I am a part of his sister's life now and I'm active in their life and they really love me. They forgive me and I make it up to them every day.

I got clean. I went to an outpatient [clinic]. The outpatient, it was working but I felt like I wanted to go to rehab. I did three months at a place called Didi Hirsch. That place saved my life. I owe everything to that place; that place truly changed my whole entire life. I went there. I worked hard. I worked hard to get [my kids] back. It was one of the hardest things that I've had to do, to have to give up being selfish. But I did it. I wanted to change and didn't want to have another kid taken from me. My fight to get my kids started there.

I decided that I wanted to go back to high school and finish, do something with myself. I'm 20, maybe 22 or 23. From there, I was not just wasting my time. I started going to school and then I finished high school. I really liked it. I finished high school, like legit with an "A." I feel like it motivated me to want to continue and I signed up for college. I fell full-blown into college and school has been my saving grace. I graduated. I am eight years clean.

'I'm not used to peace.'

I applied to [Didi Hirsch] Via Avanta. I got the job because I was a client there. They opened the doors for me. Then I met this client mom and she wanted me to work for her. I was so scared. I feel like I have so much love for this rehab; I was scared to leave the rehab. I was scared to leave the girls there.

But I took the leap. I applied, right away got the job at Champions In Service. Champions In Service is a program that's dedicated to youth like me. We grew up in these gang-related areas, where there's a lot of gang violence or a lot of gang activity. What made me want to work with this agency is because I feel like it gives to us kids when no one is at home. They gave us somebody. They gave us a mentor to have with us. They gave us resources. They gave us other options. They gave us hope in a sense. I am a case manager and we carry a caseload of 20 kids. They're kids that grew up just like me. My kids love me. I'm one of them in their eyes.

I love this job because, growing up, I think that's what I was missing. My dad passed away, my mom and me starting to have a lot of issues. It was in a lot of fights, a lot of problems with my mom. I felt like I didn't feel love at home. I feel like kids like me, we go look for love on the street, getting us in all these freaking problems. I think a lot of these kids, they're being influenced the wrong way. They're able to groom kids like me. I'm very relatable to these kids. My thing with these kids is mostly like, "I'm not going to nag you. You already have everybody nagging you. Let's build up what you're going to do. You're responsible." If I'm able to at least save one kid from what happened to me then I've done my job in life.

I think we need more advocacy at school. I think we need more people like me at the schools. I think we need more mediation. I think having more activities, more peace with the older generations so that the younger generations can see peace too. I'm not used to peace. I go to my mom's house sometimes and it's always the ambulance or police sirens, a lot of activity. I went to live in Northridge and I was scared of peace; the silence was scary to me. It was too quiet, too good to be true.

I thought I was going to die an addict.'

It's been a journey. When I'm trying to put on a shoe and I'm in a hurry and it's taking me forever to put on a shoe, it's frustrating. Or when I need to tiptoe and can't reach something, or I want to climb on something, and I can't or even chasing my kids playing hide and seek. In the cold, I feel the most pain. The bullet in my head, I have severe headaches. I've already asked about the removal of the bullets, but the doctors said that it's going to be too much of a risk to try to go in and try to remove them.

I fear going to jail. Since I've been clean and sober, and I changed my life, I haven't had to feel that way, but my past still lingers. In a way it's good. That fear of losing it all. It was lucky for me not losing it all. I worked so hard to not lose it. My fear is losing it because I've worked so hard to keep what I have.

I thought I was going to die an addict. Even me getting shot at, that was something always in the back of my head. I feel like if you told me then that this will be my life today, I wouldn't even believe it. My oldest is 11. My daughter, she turned 10, and my baby, he's seven. I want my kids to know that they make mistakes, they get back up. I want them to know that Mommy didn't stop hiding. That Mommy has made a lot of mistakes and she didn't stop trying. If they fall off, they could get back up.

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