

CINDY MONTOYA

My name is Cindy Montoya. I'm a lifelong Angelena. Born and raised in La Puente in the San Gabriel Valley of Los Angeles County. Now I live in Sierra Madre.

'I'm not going to let anybody else get hurt.'

I hadn't quite turned 18. It was about three days after I graduated from high school. I was really excited about the summer. I was about to go teach [at a] cheerleading camp. I would be traveling throughout the U.S. for the first time, for my first real job. I also just found out that I had gotten accepted into UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles), the first one in my family to go to college. I had lots of things that I was really excited about. The future was looking bright. My parents were so proud. I'll never forget how proud they were that I had been accepted into UCLA.

It was probably around 2 a.m. [when] I woke up startled, with a hand on my mouth, and a voice that said, "Do not say an effing word or I'll blow your effing head off." I could feel something on my head. But when you're in a deep sleep, you don't know if you're having a nightmare. *Is this for real?* I've been told I went into shock. It was surreal.

As soon as I opened my eyes, I could see the shadows. My assailant had on all black – black hoodie, dark pants, a big shadow. [He was] a very big man that had taken me by the arm. He took the covers off, got me out of bed and said, "You need to be very quiet. We're going to go for a little walk."

At this time, my heart's beating fast. I'm still trying to wake up. I'm petrified. But immediately I start thinking, *is somebody going to hear this?* I know my mom is in the nearby bedroom. My dad worked graveyard, so he wasn't around. My younger brother was on the other side of the house. I was trying to think in my head, *oh, what do I do? I mean, do I want somebody to hear me? Or can that mean that they could be harmed? Is this my time? Is this how it's going to end?* Being a good Catholic girl, I started to think, *maybe I'm going to be a martyr. I'm not going to let anybody else get hurt.* My thoughts were racing. My younger sister, who is seven years younger, had been feeling sick; she was in bed with my mom. I'm assessing all of this.

'I could feel the head of the gun on my waist.'

As he's walking me through [the house], he has a really firm grip on me. I could feel the head of the gun on my waist. I honestly don't know how my mom knew or what woke her up. I think it's just the

instinct of knowing something is wrong, but she had to have been in a deep sleep. I consider it a miracle. She said in a very concerned voice, “Mija, are you okay?” As soon as she spoke, he pulled away. He kind of nudged me like answer her, say something. I said, “I’m fine, Mom. I’m just going to the bathroom.” And we continued to walk.

I think my mom could sense [from] my voice that I wasn’t ok, so she had gotten out of bed, and then ended up meeting face to face with the assailant. He was startled. He grabbed me tighter. Then she saw him with the gun on me, holding on to me. He immediately moved the gun to her and said, “Stay back!”

She tried to reason with him at first, like, “Please, take me. Don’t take her. She’s still young.” He was very vulgar, like, “Shut up, Shut up! We’re just going to go for a little walk.” He was drunk, too. This cloud of stench just came over me. It was a mix of alcohol and smoke. I can still smell it to this day. It’s very triggering for me. It upsets me. I just can’t be around smoke and the smell of alcohol.

He was trying to talk with her, but he was so drunk. Then he started to sexually assault me. He was touching me all over. He put his hands down my pants. I was a virgin at the time. I had never been touched at all in that way. So that was very shocking. And this was in front of my mom.

‘The gun went off.’

Immediately, she started praying. We started praying out loud, like, “Hail Mary, full of grace; Our Father,” we just kept repeating it, repeating and getting louder and louder. For whatever reason, this upset him so much. It really threw him off. He just kept saying, “Stop it! Stop it!” We just kept on going louder and louder because we noticed that it was really throwing him off. Who knows, he could have been a lapsed Catholic, but it saved our lives. As it got louder and louder, he’s putting the gun to her [my mom’s] head.

My mom went on her knees praying. He had the gun to her head. My mom went for the gun and the gun went off. He threw my mom against the heater. When he did that, I got out of his hold and went to the bathroom, locked the door, opened the windows, and started screaming for help as loud as I could. Then there was a second shot. My mom played dead, but I really thought she might have been dead.

Then he’s like, “I’m out of here.” He ran. By this time now, the neighbors were all out. Somebody had already called the police so we could hear the sirens. I was just yelling, “Mom, are you okay? Are you okay?” She still wasn’t answering. I was afraid to get out of the bathroom until the police came.

They questioned my mother and myself immediately. They’re taking notes and then another policeman came and said, “Well, we think we have a suspect. We need to put your daughter in the squad car to go identify and see.” And I was just like, “No, no, no, I don’t want to see anybody.” I was petrified. I didn’t want to go.

'I never stepped foot in my bedroom again.'

I think I went with my mom. I can't remember. They were holding on to a young, short, scrawny person. We had given the description; it wasn't even close. But we lived in a mostly Latino neighborhood. The cops were white. I knew as soon as I looked, "No. Not at all." They took me to the station, but they took me by myself and said my parents would meet me there. Looking back, I was underage. I was 17. But my parents didn't know better. We get to the station, and I go into a room. I'm in a room with a male police officer, only me and the doors are closed.

Once I was there, they began to question me. This is where I was completely shocked. He began to say, "You need to tell the truth! We did not find any bullets." Even though there was a clear bullet hole. I said, "Well, you saw the bullet hole. It went right through the window." They said that could have been a BB gun. Then they said, "We didn't find anything." Well, we ended up finding it [the bullet] later. It was lodged into the shag carpet, so they just didn't look carefully. He said, "You need to tell the truth." I said, "I am telling you the truth." And he said, "The truth is, this was a boyfriend argument that went bad, right?" I said, "No, I don't have a boyfriend." And he's like, "This is very common. You know it's okay. You can tell the truth." And I kept on insisting that I am telling the truth. And then he said, "You are kind of smirking right now."

I couldn't believe he was questioning the most traumatic event that ever happened in my life. I came out of there and my parents were waiting for me. They're like, "Are you okay? How did it go?" I was in shock apparently because my mom says I wasn't saying anything. I said, "He didn't believe any of it." My parents were livid.

We found the bullets. That's how they [the police] figured out who it was. He was arrested. They saw him climbing over the fence and he had been caught later in the week for something else. They brought him in. They knew that it was him. He was out on bail, and they never pursued it.

We ended up learning that it was a neighbor. He had been arrested before for domestic violence. It was a perfect example of a gun getting into the hands of the wrong person. My mother had befriended the wife because we knew that she was being abused. My mom was trying to tell her that she could come over to our house anytime if she needs help. Our back door was broken; if you jiggled it a little bit, it would open. The wife knew that it was, in case of emergency. We're assuming that he broke in through the backdoor.

I never stepped foot in my bedroom again. My mom and me, my younger brother and my little sister went to my aunt's house immediately. We didn't feel safe, even at my aunt's. I was still thinking, *he's going to find me, he's going to find me*. My dad ended up selling the house that they had just paid off.

'I pretty much compartmentalized it.'

I stayed away the whole summer and then I went to UCLA. I became a dance major. I pretty much compartmentalized it. I lived in an apartment maybe a half-mile or so from campus. Anytime I walked home, I created my own coping. I would have keys in my hand with the pointy part sticking out. I would change my shoes before leaving campus and put on my running shoes so I could run home. I always ran or walked in the middle of the street and waited for cars to come and then would move over. Really absurd things like that. To this day, I know I'm safe, but I never walk too close to bushes, especially in the dark. I'm very wary of even doing nighttime walks.

I was really a mess at UCLA because I was also trying to navigate college. First, I had nobody to mentor me, to tell me how to do that, so I got very, very depressed. And then I was mad at myself because *why should I be depressed when I have wonderful parents?* I gained a lot of weight. I was coping by eating a lot. I realized that once we knew who it was that he had been stalking me as I was walking home from school. I went to a Catholic school; we would wear little dresses. And I'm thinking, *was my dress too short because I showed my legs?* He was kind of creepy, you know? He would be washing his car looking at me, but [I] didn't think things like that could happen to me because I had never experienced it.

'You don't even know where to start for your healing.'

I think the anger sticks with you for a long time, beside all the trauma. You have layers of trauma, anger, grief, loss of innocence. It's the layers of all of that mixed together for survivors. You don't even know where to start for your healing.

I had been looking for some type of support system because I had night tremors for about three decades. They didn't go away until I found advocacy. Until I started my healing process. Three decades later. People told me, even my roommates in college, anybody I dated, that I was always yelling for help. My kids know that now because they grew up with me. They could hear me from their bedrooms yelling for help. I found Moms Demand [Action] after searching for years for some type of support system. When I went to my first meeting, I heard a survivor speak. She happened to be sitting next to me in the theater. I told her a brief, summarized version of my story. She said, "You are a gun violence survivor." And that was the first time [I named it]. You can be highly intelligent and very self-aware, but for some reason, for many of us, the dots don't connect.

They [Moms Demand] asked me to speak in 2018. I had never told my story in public. I didn't want to do it. I'm not a public speaker. My sons told me, "Mom, you should do this." So, I did, and I got such a response even though I could barely get the words out. From then on, I searched for some healing [while] simultaneously doing advocacy. I got to the point where I could tell my story as I am right now, without a

shaky voice or crying in the middle of it. I've learned to separate it. I am a Survivor Mentor. I now know how to help other survivors come to terms with the label of being a survivor, and how to find their voice.

We need to take care of our survivors, our victims, the families of our wounded. I want to emphasize that I wasn't shot. It's different from the grief of a parent whose child was murdered. It's a different kind of grief. It's a loss of innocence, but it's also a different kind of trauma. It's a trauma that really impacts the whole trajectory of your life.

It's such a long journey.'

What got me through it, honestly, is because I had such strong faith. But at the same time, it wasn't enough. I was keeping inside what got me depressed and leading to the eating disorder. It's finding someone immediately that you can talk to and say everything. I would tell LA County or law enforcement, you [should] immediately have someone, an advocate, come and be there to talk to that person. Because you don't know where to go. You don't know what to do. You don't know the first thing to do.

It's such a long journey. It can be so overwhelming. You need someone to say, "Let's do this first" and leave it at that. You need somebody to give you that permission to do one thing first and then take care of yourself. And we'll get through the other stuff in time. You need a diverse group of therapists, people working the paperwork, the resources, navigating the system. You can't put that on the families, especially in communities of color like mine, who really don't even know how to navigate these systems. Just having a person that can walk them through everything would be amazing.

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