

KELIE JENNARD STURGIS

My name is Kelie Jennard Sturgis. I am 58 years old. I grew up in Inglewood, California, graduated from Inglewood High School. I live right next to USC (University of Southern California), which [some people] call “the hood.” I don't call it that. I call it South Central. That's where I grew up.

‘It was very difficult.’

I'm part of the Lakota tribe. I'm mixed. I come from a middle-income family. My grandmother and grandfather bought their property back in 1943 before my mother was born. They came from Texas. My mom was a police officer. I lived with my grandparents, and I lived off and on with my mother because my mother worked undercover. My grandfather was traveling a lot. Usually, it was me and my grandmother. My grandmother was very quiet. She's my guardian angel.

I was bullied a lot when I was young. I was bullied because I was smart. My hair was long because I was mixed. My grandfather was a very famous blues singer, so we did tend to have more money than others. I had different activities after school; on Fridays we would go out to eat for dinner. When my grandfather did come home, then everybody – movie stars, other singers – would come over. That was another thing of making me bullied, people were like, “Oh, you think you too good?” I had to learn Aikido to protect myself. I felt isolated. Difficulty is the reason why I have the strong personality I do. I was very scared, timid, wanting to get along with everybody, want everybody to get along with me, so it was very difficult.

Some other things did take place that were in the domestic violence world. My mom had a DV (domestic violence) dating situation when she was 14. Another kid from school and she never told anybody. My mom had low self-esteem. She had me and she married [my dad] at 19. That was the old-fashioned way. But she didn't love him. She got divorced from him a year-and-a-half after I was born. Then she got married to my stepfather who, to this day, was like my father. They got divorced after 3-4 years. I never asked her what happened.

‘She didn't come back for me.’

For whatever reason, [my mom] had this low self-esteem and she went through men like you wouldn't believe. She had a boyfriend; I think he's deceased [now]. From the day when I first met him, I didn't like him at all. He's very mean, one of those people who think that they're above everybody else. He was very arrogant, and he was a big guy, like a football player. I was nine. One night I happen to be over there, and I hear her scream. I'm in my bedroom. I yell, “Mom! Mom! Mom!” She came to the door. She's

like, “Baby, it's okay.” I'm like, “No, that's not okay. Why are you screaming? What is he doing to you?” “No, it's okay. You go back to bed.” That kind of stopped him from beating her any more than that.

The next day, because she was fearful of him – I didn't know at the time this was his second time hitting her – she took me over to my grandmother's house, but she packed all my stuff. Everything that was over at her house, she packed it all up. When she did that, my world changed. Everything changed for me. She stayed in this relationship for maybe another six months and when he got ready to hit her [for the] third time, she said, “I have my gun with me.” Then she finally got out. Instead of her coming to get me, she moved in with another man. He gave her a place [where] she could get on her feet. He was a really nice guy. Then [when I was] in the sixth grade, that's when she got her place. She only got a one-bedroom. She didn't come back for me. I didn't understand why. It tore us apart.

[She] started partying, wanted to be free. She was self-medicating. I'm getting even angrier. I'm getting even more defensive. That became the moment we didn't get along. Even to this day, I don't talk to my mother. It's hard. It's not about forgiving. I forgive her. But because I forgive her, she wants me to be like, “Oh, I'm your mother.” That's all past. You can't go backward. She wants me to be this kid again. But this kid stopped at the age of 13 when I had to start making decisions for myself.

My mother wasn't a mother to me.'

I had to move to my mother's for two years, from 13 to 15, because my grandmother had to go back to Texas to take care of a family member. You think that your mother is going to be there because you missed this whole four years in between and she's still partying. She still will go down and get drunk. I come home from school, there'll be \$5 on the table to get me something to eat and then I do my homework. It was very hard. I let my grades go down because I was trying to get her attention to stay home with me and she wouldn't. Instead of her paying attention to me, she would jump on teachers. I'm getting upset more. I'm like, *now, what does it take to get your attention? I don't know what else to do to get your attention.*

That was hard for me, those two years. She was never there. That's when I got saved. I went to church with a friend of mine because all my friends knew what was going on. I had a good friend. I went to go spend the night at her house one weekend and I went to church with them. I heard God's word speaking to me. I was 13. The church that I went to, they would pick me up for bible study and children's youth church because that's where I wanted to be.

When I turned 15, I found my way back over to my grandmother's house. I was very happy there. I became a leader because of everything I was going through. I became a person who was standing up for the people who would get bullied. Then, because my mother wasn't a mother to me, I started taking this mother role with my friends. “Why do you have to wear makeup? You know, you don't need to wear makeup. What

are you going to do? What are you saying to the young boys? Do you really want to grow up that fast? What is out there for you? What are you projecting on yourself?”

[My father’s] third wife was only nine years older than me. She had my brother when I was 16. [His wife and I] were very close. Even though we had a good relationship, when I went to go live with [my father] for two weeks, she told me I couldn’t do something and I was like, “You can’t tell me what to do.” I think I threatened her. She told my dad when he came home, “I don’t want her here. She threatened me.” He said, “You got to go.” I was like, *I’m not going back to my mom’s house. I can’t do this.* I went to my mother’s boyfriend’s house. She was still drinking and everything.

‘I wanted a child.’

I had my son early. I planned my son because I wanted to have a child that would love me unconditionally because I was missing that love. I got pregnant when I was in 11th grade, but I had a miscarriage. That weighed on me because I had wanted a son. I wanted a child. Before I got pregnant in the 12th grade, I went to my counselor to make sure that I could still go to school. I told [my son’s] father, who I was dating then. He was two years older. He was at Cal State Northridge. I said, “I know you don’t want to have any children. I understand that. No problem. But having a miscarriage, I’m sad every day. I really wanted a child.” He already knew everything I’ve been through [with] my mom and everything. I said, “I’m not going to put that pressure on you. I’m going to tell you right now, we need to break up, so we won’t have sex. If we have sex, I am not taking birth control pills at this point.” He goes, “You are crazy.” I was like, “Yeah, I am.” He’s like, “What about school?” I said, “Oh, I’m going to school. I’ve already got that all figured out. I’m just telling you. This way nobody can come up to you and try to tell you that I’m trying to trap you. You can set the record straight. I don’t want to marry you; I just want a child.” We broke up that night. Then, I think, two weeks later, we did have sex and I ended up conceiving [my son]. I still did all my activities that you do for senior year. I got a scholarship. I went to junior college.

I can’t get into my mom’s head. I was “an accident,” compared to my son where he wasn’t an accident. She didn’t expect to have a child at 19. She did a great job up until the abuse, but then after that, she didn’t want to have any responsibility. She didn’t take responsibility ‘til I was like 15. The only reason why she did was because she got into a bad car accident and almost lost her life. That kind of stopped her from drinking and kind of woke her up.

I didn’t want to be married until [my son] was 18. You can ask my family. I was very cautious of who I brought around him. I didn’t go out a lot. I really devoted my life to my son or work. I became a police officer at 23. At first, I thought, *I’m going to be a police officer because, number one, there’s not enough good police officers. Number two, there was not enough officers period and I’m not afraid to risk my life to save somebody else’s.* Then as I

started doing it and I remember all the times that [my mom] was always out, I started realizing, *okay, another reason why I'm doing this is to show her how you're supposed to be as a police officer. You're not supposed to be sitting out drinking and getting high, you're supposed to uphold the law. If you are the one who's giving out the law, then you should be upholding that law. You should be coming home to your family.*

'Children see and feel everything.'

Stop making domestic violence taboo or any violence taboo; we need to talk to somebody. We need to go into the schools, and we need to have it in ninth grade, eleventh grade. We need to go to these ninth graders and say, "Hey, let's talk about what domestic violence looks like at your age. Let's talk about what teen dating looks like at your age. Let's talk about the warning signs." Then when you get to the 11th grade, "How are you doing? Let's go over the things that we talked about. Have you seen those signs? Do you know where you can reach out to? Here are some agencies."

I was mature because of everything I went through because I was already intellectually smart. But what about the ones who aren't? What about the ones who are fighting against it, and they have nobody to talk to? I had nobody to talk to, so I became angry. Children see and feel everything their parents are going through. Don't ever think, *well, it didn't happen around my child, so they don't know what's going on.* They know. No matter what the age is, they know. We have to be cognizant that we can't just help the victim. We need to find out how we can help that child so that we don't have a repeat cycle. From the child's point of view, that's all they know and they're going to be affected by it like I was. They're going to feel abandoned. They're going to feel like they're not loved. They're going to feel like the parent loves the abuser over them.

I want us to really stop saying, "It's an economic situation or it's an ethnicity situation." It is a health situation. It is every dynamic. It is past religion. It is past your race. It is past what economic system you come from. It does not matter. The problem is that it starts from when you're young and then it starts growing. This is why you have these abusers -- either they've seen somebody get abused or they were abused when they were young and now they think it's okay because that's the way they were raised. They don't know any different. We need to get to these babies. This needs to be in every school.

Recorded at:
Los Angeles County, CA
06/13/24
4:00 pm

