

MARTINA A

My name is Martina A. I have lived in Antelope Valley my whole life, 36 years.

‘Of course, they started seeing bruises.’

I’ve experienced domestic violence since I was 16 years old. I had abandonment issues. A single mom raised me, and she was always at work. I felt that lack of emotional connection with her and I was seeking that love and care from somebody elsewhere.

I thought I was special because I had an older boyfriend at the time. I met this guy straight from prison. Everything was okay at first. I thought I was in loves. I did have family that tried to warn me and let me know. They saw red flags before I did. I choose not to listen. I did not know what manipulation or domestic violence was at the time. Then I quickly got pregnant. About four months into my pregnancy, I started seeing the patterns of his behavior changing. I started the highs and lows of the anger, the outbursts. I started sitting back and really observing this man. I started noticing he was on drugs. He was using drugs the entire time since before I even met him.

I did not tell people about the abuse or the controlling behavior, although I’m sure they did see signs. Of course, they started seeing bruises. Once my pregnancy came almost full term, toward the end, the violence got worse. I would isolate myself. I started hiding in the restroom, trying to get away and get some peace. I also found out he was in prison for domestic violence prior. Me being 16, I was naive.

The night before I went into labor, we got into a bad physical altercation, and he punched me in my stomach. I went to sleep that night and cried myself asleep. I woke up and I was in labor. I gave birth. I delivered my child. She was a healthy, beautiful little girl. However, it was very hard because I was dealing with so much emotionally. When I was ready to go home [from the hospital], he showed up at the hospital and I could tell his behavior was off.

Immediately, I had to think, *how can I get him out of the hospital room, and away from my child?* I confronted him a little bit, but not like an explosion. I was like, “I think my sister is going to come get me. I think it’s better. She’s on her way.” He immediately noticed I was on defense and didn’t want to leave with him. He started trying to take my baby’s monitoring system off. He cut it off. At this point I had to think quickly so I told him, “Okay, I’m going to leave with you. You just got to go get the car and bring the car out front.” I immediately pushed the button for the nurse and explained what happened and they locked down the hospital.

I ended up going to my sister's home and stayed there for a few days. He was constantly trying to find me. The cops were already aware of the situation. He went to jail for a year-and-a-half only, while I'm trying to figure out how to be a new teen mother. When he got out of jail, I got back [together] with him and moved in with his family. [Then] I ended up pregnant for the second time, so now I have two kids with this man. We got our own apartment together. Shortly after he went back to jail again for a parole violation. I gave birth to my second daughter shortly after. That's when I finally got up the courage to visit him at a prison nearby before he got out and I told him in the visitation, "I can't do this no more. I'm done."

It was around Thanksgiving when he got out and I said he could see the kids for a couple hours. I went to his mom's house, dropped the kids off. Immediately, he's like, "I'm not giving you the kids back." I went to my sister's house in panic. It was Thanksgiving dinner, like a full house of multiple family members. I walked in and they saw I was in tears. I told them and they were like, "What do you want to do?" I said, "I think I need to call the police. This man needs to go to prison. I need my kids back." I drove straight to the police station and they immediately pulled up his name, pulled up his records, took my report. I had to think quickly so I called him and I told him, "You know what, you're right. Let's be back together. I'll spend Thanksgiving with you." I was able to meet him just to convince him so I could get my kids back that day. He went on the run from there until they finally caught him. He ended up getting seven-and-a-half years. I do feel like he should have gotten more because he had multiple convictions from histories of domestic violence already.

I grew up in a family where you stick it out, you stick together.'

I jumped from relationship to relationship after that. Searching for love, but truthfully it was more of co-dependency. That got me into unhealthy relationships where I was not healing, and I was going from one bad situation to another bad situation. Of course, I took on that guilt once I recognized what these situations were. I didn't know a healthy relationship versus an unhealthy [one]. I started noticing the red flags and the different patterns of behavior that were initially unrevealed because the abuser can't keep that locked up for that long.

I was in my second long-term relationship for 11 years, [which had] verbal abuse. So I thought it was not as bad. I also ended up having my third daughter with this man. I grew up in a family where you stick it out, you stick together no matter what. It was a religious Mexican background and culture. I thought I had to make the relationship work for my kids. At that point, it was more verbal, so I tried to stick it out. But the anger that was in the home, from him having a bad day or him being upset about the smallest things started to affect the kids as they got older. I was shielding them as much as possible. I was always volunteering at their school. I was always present for every award ceremony. I was as much as possible,

trying to pour into my kids. But I realized when we came home at the end of the day, we're still dealing with this tension in our home. I finally saw how it was affecting the kids emotionally and they were shutting down. [That's when I realized that] I had to do something. That's when I picked up and was like, "This doesn't work anymore. We're not happy and it's affecting the kids. This isn't meant to be."

I choose to pick up and get my own apartment and leave. I left the house; I left everything. I got little to no child support or help. All that mattered was I got my kids and left. I did still allow a visitation schedule. Shortly after I realized health wise, I wasn't taking care of myself all those years. The one thing I did that gave me some empowerment toward leaving that relationship was the gym. The gym was a great outlet for me.

I was going to DV (domestic violence) classes during this process as well because I felt like I needed that support from the previous relationship. I was not healing; I was trying to find that outlet. Even though I was showing up to those classes, the settings and environment that was provided wasn't comfortable, I don't feel there was any type of growth. It was a class I went to, and I thought I was doing the right thing by attending. But to be honest, I feel like it barely even touched the topic. I didn't want to let that resource go because I knew I still needed to get help. I felt like that was a safety blanket for me in some ways.

I had maybe two to three friends. But there was only one friend at the time that I really poured into and felt comfortable. I think it came from my background of not trusting people at a young age. The family members I did trust and feel comfortable with, I did open up to maybe one or two of them, but of course, I got the initial reaction of, "Why don't you just leave?" I was so embarrassed that I didn't want to let them know what was going on because of that judgment. It made me feel like it was my fault for being in that situation.

'Something's not right here.'

I was working, still being a mom, going to the gym, and we moved into this new apartment. We're on the right track of getting ourselves together. I didn't feel I was doing more as far as a single mother role because I felt like I was a single mom during my whole time in these relationships. I got a routine going. I started opening up, going out more with friends to have coffee and things like that. Unfortunately, I started dating again. I still was not healed from all the trauma, then I got sucked into another relationship. I didn't know what was coming.

This man gave me so much positive affirmation and gifts. I've never had acts of kindness in any of my relationships, so I gravitated toward that. I thought it was something different. I was getting roses; if I liked something from the store, I would have it the next day. That made me feel special. That made me feel like, *wow, he's really paying attention to what I'm saying and what I'm doing. I've never had that before.* Little things, the

red flags started coming. Random things would happen on social media. I started being like, *hold on. Something's not right here.*

I started seeing the different behavior patterns. Mind you, we're not living together. I have my apartment, but we are spending a lot of time together and I'm starting to notice this. That's when I started recognizing the drug use. I started talking to his family about his history and stuff. He's like, "I used in the past. I'm not doing that. I want a different life." I still was skeptical about what everybody was saying at this point, and my guard is really up.

A month would go by and here comes a new girl trying to be flirtatious, whether it be in person or on social media. As I confronted him about these things, it was like, "No, you're the crazy one. I'm not cheating on you." I started noticing more anger would arise. It was a different tone of voice because he got irritated with me pressing the issue. I had this gut feeling like, *this is not for me.* It continued to go down that pattern, until one day I was like, "Something's not right. If you're using drugs, you need to go get help. This can't work unless you go to rehab."

It started with throwing things. When we would talk about the subject, depending on which mood he was in, he would start getting more agitated. Then it became shoving. It started out slowly. I was trying to take on his problems at that point because I was finding rehab facilities. In the meantime, trying to deal with this drug addiction, girls would randomly be popping up. Random text messages from women. He eventually moved into my apartment, and I thought that was going to help the cheating stop somehow. It was going to help me keep a better eye on him. He's not going to be around the same crowd that he's always with, so he's not going to be out using drugs.

But now we need a bigger place because this apartment isn't big enough for all of us. We came up with this brilliant idea to save money – move in with his family for a few months. I had this feeling in the pit of my stomach like, *do not give that up. Do not give somebody that power to live on their territory. It's a mistake waiting to happen.* But I still did it. *What's the worst that can happen?* I let my apartment go, which gave up the biggest power I had, and moved in with this man's family.

One night he did not come home, but I saw the location on my phone. It was very weird. Something was off to me. I couldn't go to sleep. I didn't know if he's out getting high with people. I didn't know if he's out with another woman. So I jumped in my car by myself. The kids were all asleep; there were adults there. I then went and followed his location, which lead me to him in a car with a female, but all I see is the female. Until I seen somebody in the passenger seat. So I pull up to the car, not knowing who or what's in that car. I didn't know what was going through my head, other than I was going to find out answers. That was my state of mind at that time, not knowing or thinking how dangerous it was. I'm following the car around. This car is trying to get away from me, trying to lose me down side streets and stuff. I'm following it but I eventually lose the car. I then went back home and went to sleep.

He shows up hours later and we get into an argument. “That was you with a female. I know that was you.” He pushed me and I grabbed onto his necklace, so I didn't fall. I fell and that turned into a fight, a physical altercation. He yelled for his mother. His mother came, and was like, “What's going on?” He was like, “Mom, she assaulted me. She ripped my necklace.” The mom immediately took his side. She said, “You need to leave.” So I grabbed my children, then quickly got them in the car and left the situation. I can't go back there. I have to get our stuff out. I have to figure out where we are going to go. We became homeless, and yet I continued, after a few days, to talk to him again. He apologized. Within a few weeks, I was back with this man.

‘I was trying to survive.’

I was working at this time. My kids were still going to school. We were still doing life. I was still co-parenting with their father the best I could. I was trying to survive day by day and take it day by day. I was on a hamster wheel spinning. Eventually, I moved into my new home. I felt that sense of, *I got this*. But for some odd reason, I still was communicating with this man and believing that he was sorry. Believing that his family was apologetic of what happened. The behavior from him didn't stop. I started making the steps to start being smarter financially, start separating myself and keeping him at a distance, although we're continuing our relationship for about six months.

I finally had the courage to say this was over. Then he kept trying to break into my home. He kept trying to cause conflict anywhere. The calls wouldn't stop; the text messages wouldn't stop. I called the police and was like, “Somebody's trying to break into my window. You guys need to get here.” They came and advised me to get a restraining order. The next day I was going to wake up and go to the courthouse and put in for a restraining order and I was in communication with his mother. I was telling her what was going on. She knew about the abuse and the cheating and all of this and still would have his back. But at this point, she's listening to me tell her, “I can't do this anymore. I'm letting you know what's going on. I have to put me and my kids first.”

She called me that morning and she's like, “I think he may take his own life. He's saying he does not want to live no more without you. Can you please at least go check at the house?” Me being the caring, helping person, I want to help and take on this man's problems. Of course, I'll go rush over there. I didn't know what I was going to walk into. I found him at his mom's house. He was hanging in the garage.

‘I'm not letting anyone take advantage of me.’

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I was numb after that situation for a while. I love this man and he did this. I felt like it was my fault at first. I went and got that huge tattoo in his honor. I was trying to honor him in any way I could. But while I'm honoring him, I'm shoving my own feelings down. I'm not dealing with any of the things he's done to me. I'm trying to mask it all to honor a man who was physically and mentally abusive to me.

I see that now. However it took time. It took about three months when I started realizing this was not my fault. I didn't do this. I started focusing on myself and my daughters while diving deeper into self-care. Working on myself and going to the doctors for my anxieties, panic attacks. I knew I had to keep going. Let's figure out a game plan. I had to focus on myself and my children and that's exactly what I did.

Now I'm continuing to work on my healing journey. I'm still continuing to grow. I found that I still have that passion to help others, but I have to do it in a safe and productive way. Not just giving myself to somebody to take advantage of my spirit of wanting to help, taking on their problems. I've learned those healthy boundaries and I'm not letting anyone take advantage of me anymore.

