

PATRICIA HERNÁNDEZ

My name is Patricia Hernández. I've lived in LA County all my life. I live in the San Fernando Valley. I'm 51 years old.

'I cannot remember the first time he hit me.'

I met the father of my sons when I was 15. He graduated before I did, and we were on and off. He was a senior. I was a sophomore. He graduated. We stopped seeing each other. Then my senior year of high school, we ended up hooking back up. He was working; I was going to school. I was also working at the time. My goal was to get out of my parents' house because I am the oldest of six and I had to take care of all my siblings. There were all kinds of struggles, so I was like, *I just got to get out*. I loved this man. I wanted to be with him and [I thought], *my life is going to be so much better*.

After high school, I moved in with him. I was about 18. We were good friends. We were young and dumb and growing up and learning who we each individually were at the time. [He was] very outgoing, very funny. He was also kind of on the shier side, but he was still part of the in-crowd. I was part of the in-crowd. Like all relationships, they start off great. For a while, everything was fine. He started hanging around a bunch of new friends and I noticed those friends had some sort of influence on him. I had a feeling he was cheating on me. My guards were up. I'm kind of like, *I'm going to get the proof that I'm going to need, and I'll figure it out*. But maybe about a year, a year-and-a-half into us living together, I think my attitude changed and then his attitude changed. We started to clash.

[My parents] were not supportive of me seeing him at 15 years old. My mom was okay with me dating him in my senior year of high school. My mom is and has always been very nice to people. Almost to a fault. She's always accepted people and encourages the positive attributes in people. However, my dad was a very Mexican machista man, and he did not want his first daughter to date a Black man. That was a rough time for my father and me. Fast forward, everything is good. Everything is fine. We have a son. Even my dad starts to have a relationship with my [boyfriend] at the time. He began to embrace him. Like I said, these friends came into the picture, and I really thought he was cheating on me. And he was. But it got to the point where I guess we were getting on each other's nerves or something. I'm not an argumentative person so it wasn't like I was picking fights. I was just like, *screw it*.

I cannot remember the first time he hit me. Ironically, I remember the last time, but I don't remember the first time. We were not getting along anymore. We had a circle of friends; there was four or five of us that were all couples. I was friends with the girls and my girlfriends would encourage me to leave

him. They rescued me. I remember the first time one of them was like, “Come on. You cannot stay here.” I left with her, went to her apartment. But I was like, “I need to get back.”

I'm surprised he did what he did while my friend was there.'

I remember feeling like I needed to get back because that was my house. Me and my son, we lived there. So [my boyfriend and I are] not getting along, we're not getting along. I guess at some point, we were making up and then I get pregnant. I remember I was at my friend's house, the same friend that rescued me, and he and I had just had a fight. I was afraid to tell him I was pregnant. I told my girlfriend. She was like, “I'll go with you in case you think he'll do something to you.” I'll never forget when I walked in the door. At the front door, there is a piece of paper with some scissors stabbed and pushed into the door and it said, “Can't wash my clothes.” It was in ugly, mean, angry writing. And I hear him. He's there and I go upstairs. He's looking enraged. Then he sees my friend behind me, and I had my son in my arms, and his face changed as soon as he saw my friend. At some point I said, “Well, you know, I'm pregnant.” I don't know how it came out. I told him I'm pregnant. He got so mad. He pushed me up against the wall. He tried to choke me. I was like, “Stop it. I'm pregnant.” My friend was there, and she was like, “Stop it. She's telling you the truth. She's pregnant.” And he backed off. I'm surprised he did what he did while my friend was there. He didn't do anything more to me. He left. I walked into the bedroom and all of my clothes and all of my baby's clothes were piled on the bed. This guy had taken out every liquid you could find in the house, and he doused our clothes with it. I was like, *you could do anything you want with my clothes, but the baby's clothes? You pulled clothes out of the drawers?* My friend was like, “You cannot be here.” I was like, “I can't.” I went over to her place.

At some point, I got an apartment, and it was closer to my friend's house. I was on my own. I wasn't even there a month when the 1994 earthquake hit and that building got yellow tagged (buildings safe only for limited use). I was scared. He did check on me. He was like, “Just come back to the apartment, I'll move out.” I said, “Okay, good.” He did. He was gone for about a week. But then I'm like, *well, I'm pregnant, I should try to make this work.* My culture is all about making it work, staying together for the family, the kids and all this and that. I saw my parents go through domestic violence. I knew it wasn't right, but that's what I knew. *If they could get through it, and my aunts and all these other people that I knew got through it, why shouldn't I?* But I knew that this is not right, and I don't want to be a punching bag.

What if he kills me?

I ended up moving back to the apartment [with my boyfriend]. As weird as it sounds, I felt safer there. Probably because somebody else was there. I'm still deathly afraid of earthquakes. I felt like, *at least somebody's here if something happens. They can rescue me from the building falling.* But there was a fight where he backed my car out of the garage, put my clothes and the baby's clothes in the car and told us to “get the f--k out.” I was like, *what's there to stop him from kicking us out again?* My parents had a rental [property] and there was a tenant that was moving out. I said, “Mom, can I rent out that place?” I said, “I don't think he'll do this to me at your place. It's your place. He better not do that to me, right?”

My family totally knew. My mom, as much as she loves me, told me, “Just stay. It's going to be okay.” Again, I come from a culture that says you deal with it. In Spanish it's called “te aguanta, aguantate.” [I told him], “Hey, let's get back together. Let's try this. Let's try to make it work.” I thought if I tell him I'm going to live over there [in my parents' rental], he's going to start this big ol' fight with me. And what if he kills me? That's where my fear was. *What if he kills me? What if he does something to the baby? What if he does something drastic to the baby just to hurt me?* I hate to think that way about him because when I peel back the layers, he's not that type of person, but I think he had this influence from these other guys. I saw how they were treating their girlfriends. After those friends were gone, his [old] behavior was back. But I was already away from him by then.

I'm surprised I didn't die.'

I got him to agree to move into that house with me, that rental. Staying at that house we had our last physical and most brutal and most horrible fight. It was a hot summer in August. We had just come back from Arizona and a friend of his called. He was not there to take the call. I said, “Hey, so-and-so called you.” “What did you tell him?” “I told them that you weren't here.” He was drunk and he flipped, and we got into a terrible fight. I'm surprised I didn't die. I had kick marks, his tennis shoe footprints all over me. My head felt like it was the size of a gigantic watermelon. The fight started where I lived, and it ended three houses down at my parents' house because he dragged me over there.

If it wasn't for my sister pulling up with her boyfriend at the time – this was pitch black. Nobody could see me, but people could hear me. [My sister] said later when we talked that she pulled up on a whim because my parents were not there. She was like, “I want to drive by the house to see if everything is okay.” She said that she heard somebody say, “Help me, help me.” She told her boyfriend, “Stop. That woman is yelling.” He was like, “Don't get in their business.” She said, “No. That person needs us.” She got out and she saw that it was me. Between [my sister and her boyfriend] they got [my boyfriend] off me. She took me

inside my parents' house. I was in the kitchen. I was crying. I was holding my head. I saw my son standing over there. He was crying. By now I already had my second son. My youngest baby was a year-and-a-half old. He was asleep at the house. My little three-year-old walked across [to my parents' house during the fight]. It was terrible. I'll never forget that.

[My sister] told [my boyfriend] to leave because she was calling the police. I said, "Don't call the police. Just get me to the hospital." The ambulance came. Somebody there said to me, "Do you want to press charges?" I said, "No." I was afraid. I also felt this guilt, like that's the father of my kids. They left it alone. I went to the hospital. I don't remember even the ride over there. I must have blacked out. Then there was a social worker, I believe. She said, "Do you want to press charges?" I said, "No, I don't want to press charges. I just want him to leave me alone." She said, "Well honey, you don't have a choice." That's all she said to me. I don't remember anything else. I remember coming home.

It's this psychological thing.'

Domestic violence, there's a psychological warpedness that happens. I think [my boyfriend] had to turn himself in for something else. He called me from jail. He was like, "Now I picked up this other case because you pressed charges." I said, "I didn't press charges." He said, "Well, the district attorney did." I said, "I don't know what to tell you. You put me in the hospital." He said, "You know, I'm sorry," this and that, and I started to feel bad. He was like, "Can you go to court with me and tell him that I didn't do it?" I said, "What do you want me to tell them?" I'm negotiating with my abuser. He's like, "Let's tell them that some girls came to the house, and they beat you up," and I'm like, "Okay." When it came time to go to court, I did that under oath. I could have gone to jail to save him. I don't know why. *Why would I do that?* But it's this psychological thing.

I think I was afraid. I think I loved him. I think I hated him. I think I felt sorry for him. He's the father of my kids. The other thing was he was my financial provider to some degree. I didn't have a job, but I was getting ready to start a job. Seriously, a week later, I start a brand-new job. I go to the job with a big old black eye. I go to work and the lady that was there was like, "What's going on?" I said, "Nothing." She said, "Your boyfriend put his hands on you, didn't he?" I broke down. I said, "Yeah." She helped me. She said, "Okay, you work in the back. I'm going to work in the front." I thanked her for that. She told me, "You don't ever have to put up with that." I was like, "Maybe I should quit. How embarrassing." She was like, "Don't you dare quit. Your kids need you to have that job. And you need that job." I said, "Yes, I do."

[My boyfriend] ended up doing some state penitentiary time because of this case. Every now and again he'd call to say hi to the kids. I am not argumentative. I am not a fighter. I'm not vindictive. I wasn't going to be like, "No, you can't talk to the kids." The boys, no matter what, that's their father. There's

nothing I could do to change that anymore. But I didn't have anybody in my very close circle or my family that had come from a divorced home, from a single [parent] home. So, I didn't know how to do that. I knew that I wanted the boys to see that you can have an amicable relationship between both parents even if you cannot be together. I never argued with him in front of them, never. I did my best to never bad mouth him in front of the boys. I was like, *the boys will one day grow up and they will figure it out*. Their relationship with him now is so different than when they were kids. But that's not my doing. That is really them taking everything and formulating their own opinion and their own relationship with him.

I keep putting one foot in front of the other.'

I genuinely think [my boyfriend] was sorry. He came out from prison, and we stayed amicable co-parents. We have done very well. We've come full circle, completely full circle. That relationship really helped me to hone in on what are some red flags that are real red flags. Not like *that's a red flag because I don't like it*. He doesn't like what I don't like. These are legit. I also learned not to be a hateful person. I have learned to forgive people.

There's a lot of stuff that happened in all that time, stuff that I'm not proud of. But I honestly can say that I accepted Jesus into my heart as my Lord and my Savior. I attribute my complete turnaround to Him. I cannot see my life without Him. I felt so alone and so belittled and humiliated and unloved and unwanted. I was not raised in church and when I accepted Christ, I really felt loved, appreciated, wanted, accepted, admired, believed in. I could be angry, but for what? That's not going to gain anything. I could wallow in my anger and misery and all that terrible stuff. But for what? It's not going to help me. I keep putting one foot in front of the other. I will get to my finish line, whatever that is.

I like now that the County is lifting [domestic violence] up as a public health issue, looking at the different [types of] domestic violence and how the perpetrators also need support. What are their underlying issues that we need to address? Because they need help too. Where is this anger coming from? I would love to see an Office of Men's Health in LA County to help address some of that because a lot of the aggressive behavior unfortunately comes from men. They need safe places and to talk about the themes that they cannot talk about or that culture and society has said, "You don't talk about that. You go to work." I would like to see domestic violence and healthy relationships discussed, especially at the teen level.

You weren't put here to be physically abused.'

I am not happy that I went through it. But I have no regrets. I think I came out a lot stronger. A lot better. There was some healing time. There was a long time before I could even think about dating. Now I

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have no problem. One question I do ask [on a first date] is, “Have you ever put your hands on a woman in an aggressive manner?” I come straight out and ask it. I don't think that that's a bad thing. I have the right to ask it. They don't have to see me anymore if they don't want to after that.

I've had the talk [with my kids]. I didn't want my sons to think that it's okay for a man to treat a woman like that. I remember saying [to my mom], “I'm not staying because I refuse to let my sons see that. They're going to be men one day and I refuse for them to think that this is how men treat women, that this is okay. This is not okay. I refuse for them to think that women need to tolerate it. I don't want them to be with a woman that's going to be tolerant to that either.” I don't know what I would have done had I not had them. It was hard. I was 19 and 21 when I had my kids. I was a baby, what did I know? I hate that I went through that. I hate that my kids went through that. But it was such an empowering experience.

I would tell others, “You weren't put here to be physically abused.” I think I would say reach out to the services, even though it seems hard. Being in a domestic violence situation does not define you. If anything, make it your platform to go further.

