

ROBERTA-BIRDY

My name is Roberta. I grew up in the San Fernando Valley in the city of Pacoima.

I witnessed and experienced things no child or no person should go through.'

I grew up at first in a two-parent household. I witnessed a lot of domestic violence in my family and had family members involved and associated with gangs. I myself, was a victim of child sexual violence from 5 to 10 years old at the hands of my mother and my sister. My sister was a prostitute. Her boyfriend was her pimp. My mom, my sister, and my sister's boyfriend decided that it would be a good moneymaker to have a child engage in these activities. For five years of my life, I witnessed and experienced things no child should go through. I was prostituted. I was abused. I would still have to get up every day and go to school.

My father didn't know; he drank heavily. A lot of the time, he was not home or drunk. He never knew what happened to me. While that was happening in those five years, I was also bullied at school because I had uncontrollable bowel movements. I would urinate on myself. The kids would call me names. They don't want to be around me, but they never knew what my body had gone through. In my mind, it felt this was a way that my trauma and pain was trying to release itself.

I was a very lonely child, and I was manipulated into being quiet about everything that happened. My mom and my sister would [tell me] that if I said anything, my dad would beat me. As a child witnessing the violence in the home, I believed that. I was terrified. I did not have a voice and didn't have space to feel any of those emotions or process anything. I started my menstrual cycle at [age] 9, probably closer to 10. I think that's why at 10, this [sexual abuse] stopped. After that, I became a really angry person, and I started associating with the neighborhood gang. I felt drawn to them. I would see their camaraderie and I thought, *this was a family*. I was very familiar with the gang life through my older siblings and other family members. I started hanging out at [age] 11 and I joined the gang when I was 12.

I loved everything that came with the life.'

I loved everything that came with the life. I quickly became addicted to their lifestyle and addicted to violence myself, not realizing that I was being violent because violence had affected me. I learned really quick how to do all the activities that came with being involved with the gang and I had no reservations. I did not care. I was stabbed at 15 during a friend's funeral. Rivals came in during the viewing and a fight broke out. A couple of folks and I were stabbed at the time. That didn't even faze me. I've been jumped, shot at. I still wake up at times hearing bullets flying. I see now, later in my life, how trauma has really

impacted my life. I work through it every day. I'm so glad for this awareness because I don't know where my life would be right now if I didn't understand what happened to me. But that was the life.

Starting from when I was 12, I was getting incarcerated. It didn't mean anything to me. I actually looked forward to it. I felt like being locked up in a juvenile hall [was like] going to camp snoopy, and eventually jail was like whatever. I was looking forward to going to prison, but in my head, I was more concerned about not getting caught. I was a very watchful young person. I feel like that really helped prevent me from going to prison for the things that I've done in the past.

'I was afraid to leave my children.'

I eventually got involved with someone that was a lot older than me. I was 15 when I met him, and he was 22. I got pregnant at 16, had my child and he got incarcerated for about 13 years of my child's life. I was a single mom who didn't know what I was doing. I was still involved with gangs, putting my child at risk at the time, and I got involved in another relationship. That was a terrible relationship for eight years. He was abusive – physically, mentally, emotionally, sexually – every way you could think. I look back now, and I think this is what I saw in my home [growing up]. This was behavior that was modeled, so I didn't even know it was bad. I had three more children with this man. I got pregnant with my last [child] through a beat and rape. When he found out I was pregnant, he wanted me to abort the child. I didn't want to. He would beat me in hopes that I would not have the baby. I ended up having my child.

Right before my fourth child, I was hanging out in the streets doing my thing and this gang intervention organization was out there outreaching and doing their part. I remember I got to a point where I wanted to commit suicide. I contemplated suicide and how I was going to do it. I was afraid to leave my children. Because I felt like if I leave them, somebody can abuse them or hurt them because I'm not there to protect them. So, at the time, I thought, *I'm just going to give them NyQuil and put them in the car, and we're all going to drive off the highest cliff.* I was so broken and torn to allow my mind to go there, thinking that I'm protecting my children, but I was actually going to commit suicide and take them with me. I remember sitting on the living room floor and it was kind of like that devil and angel type of situation. All I can hear are all the negative things. But then I also heard this really small voice that was like, “No, you have purpose.” I eventually left that relationship.

I'm grateful for probation officers that really take the time to invest and really care about you because I had a lot that didn't. This one specific probation officer was like, “Look, Roberta, you need to do something with your life.” There were specific people along the line that said something positive to me that I didn't care about at that moment in time. But when I was at that crossroads, I remembered. I decided not to [commit suicide]. I ended up reaching out to that [gang intervention] organization that was always out

there. I was like, “I need help.” I was so rough around the edges. I'm so grateful and thankful for the time that they spent with me because they knew I could be better.

‘I would not have been able to make it otherwise.’

I started volunteering, answering the phones and doing the little things they asked me to do. After that, they hired me. At the time, there weren't female gang intervention workers — at least not for this organization. So, I did the same work that the guys did. I had the experience because I was from the streets, and I knew. That's how my journey began. It took about five years. I was still trying to disassociate with the life, but having this organization and this group of people and these mentors was huge for me, because I would not have been able to make it otherwise. My friends in the streets weren't going to help me. My family wasn't going to help me. But it was these people, at first strangers, who took the opportunity to invest in me and to help me in my healing journey.

I'll never forget this time a mother – her son was murdered – came into the office and she came right over to me because I was one of the very few females that worked in the office at the time. She was crying and something hit me to the core of my soul. I felt so bad. This mom was in so much pain because someone murdered her child and, at one time in my life, I participated in activities such as that. It totally changed my life. In my head, I said, *I don't ever want another person to feel this way. I don't ever want to feel this way as a parent.* I made a promise to myself to do whatever I could to be a solution to this problem, to this monster called violence. That was 25 years ago.

For 20 years, I've worked in organizations at different capacities, working directly in the streets to become a case manager, program director, and really evolving with the work and allowing myself to evolve personally. In 2018, I started my own nonprofit organization Project Hope Ca. We support those that have been impacted by violence and incarceration. Now I can be the one on the opposite end, providing that support and that mentorship and that guidance and journeying with people. Even if I don't see the end result, at least I was part of planting a seed or watering that seed and being there. I think back to when I was at that crossroads contemplating suicide, those people that interacted with me in my life probably will never know where I'm at now. They made an impact just by saying something positive to me when I really needed it the most. I have thought of them, and I can see their faces. They'll be a part of my book one day, no names but their actions, and I'm hoping that one day, they'll be like, “Hey, wait a minute. I know this person.”

‘We need to remember that we survived.’

Seek support. I was going to do something that could have literally removed myself and my kids from this earth when I could have sought out support. There's so much support out there now, but I feel like a lot of folks don't feel the courage or feel safe enough to do so. That's why it's so important to share stories, because in the past, everything was quietly swept under the rug. People don't know where to go, where to start, and then they don't have the courage, out of shame or guilt. I would say seek support and believe in your worth no matter what. Get around people that can support you. If I didn't allow myself to let my walls down enough to allow these people in, then I don't know where I would be. Stay hopeful. I know it's hard to be hopeful in what feels like a hopeless situation. That's a big reason why I share my story and do the work that I do, because if I can help even one person begin that healing journey and be able to live the life that I am now able to live, it's worth it. Forgiveness allows me to be free, and I want to be able to offer that for others. I think, especially as survivors, we need to remember that we survived. We're survivors, but there's people out there that are victims right now. I look at it as my calling in life to be there to support them and help them become survivors.

Having more access to support services, whether it's shelters or counseling, and making it an easy process, not where it's like you have to jump through all these hoops and everything to get the support you need. All of those barriers can prevent folks from really getting the services that they need. Many of them give up because they're so lost. We also still need to improve response times from local government and first responders. They should be trauma-informed and be able to understand how to care and handle certain situations with empathy and understanding. To be quick, but to be compassionate in their responses. I feel that would make a significant difference for victims.

Fostering collaboration among agencies to promote better coordination between local government, social services, healthcare providers and nonprofits folks that are out there doing the work. An integrated approach to ensure comprehensive support for victims. Our organization is huge in creating spaces and bridges to connect. I remember not knowing where to go. As service providers, we are responsible for being in our community. We can't always wait for people to come to us and knock on our door, because a lot of times they won't. It is our responsibility to be there and to be present.

'I wasn't fully free until I was able to forgive.'

I still have that scared child in me that was told not to say anything and was told to be quiet. Where maybe it would have really helped was in elementary school. Just maybe if I would have felt safe enough to share with a teacher, I feel like that conversation could have opened up. I feel like school administrators

knew something was going on at the time, but I never felt like I had that opportunity to open up and say anything. Looking back now, I was a mess. I would go to school and my hair wasn't combed. Where were the people to save me? I think that in those moments, if somebody really had taken the time, I could have let my walls down and start opening up. But it wasn't until I was 25 years old that that journey began.

But the way my life is and was set up was all leading me to be who I am today. I survived and I'm still on my healing journey. I'll be on this journey for the rest of my life, but I'm not going to be on my healing journey alone. I'm going to take others with me, and we're going to continue to heal. We're going to continue to live the life that we deserve to live and we're going to continue to be free. My favorite f-word is forgiveness. Forgiveness is for me. I wasn't fully free until I was able to forgive.

I have sons aged 26, 30, 32, and 34 today. I tell them I didn't change; we did. We broke that pattern of everything that was before us, before me, and they're all wonderful. I have nine grandkids; it's amazing. Life is beautiful. Being a single mom and raising them and working on myself at the same time, it's very possible when you have the right people in your corner. I encourage people that I work with to find someone they can confide in. It's important to have those safe people that are going to protect you and your feelings and everything that you've gone through and what you're sharing. They're going to support you through the process of healing or whatever it is that you need. It's nice being able to create spaces like this, to be able to give hope to people – those that have been victims and those that are survivors. We need to continue to tell our story and be in shared spaces with other survivors. Every time we share a story, I feel like it's a key that gives someone else permission to begin their healing journey and tells them that they're not alone.

I recently visited the [California Institution for Women] prison in Chino for a day of healing and to share my story. It was something I'll never forget. They're like, "God kept you out there for a reason, and you're not in here with us. You're the hope." And I say, "You know what? We're hope. Because even though you're in here, you still choose to survive and to work through your trauma and pain. You're taking responsibility, and you're working on you." I said, "I'm taking all of you with me. You're in my heart. I'm just the voice. We're all together." Being able to be in spaces and share and see other survivors has been so huge and such an important part of my continual healing.

I was in pain for too long.'

I don't have a close relationship with my mom, my sister but I have a relationship. I see them every so often, but I also have to know how involved and engaged I can be before it starts triggering me. I have to also remember and be okay to say, "I'm going to love you, but from a distance." In my 30s, I brought [the abuse] up to my mom one time. I was going through a moment, and she was there, and I told her, "How

could you?” She was in total denial. She totally went around it. That was the first time she ever told me she loved me. She said, “I want you to know that I love you.” It wasn’t really genuine, but even to hear those words come out of her. It didn’t dawn on me until that moment.

The first time a good woman actually embraced me, I was about 10 years old. My mom and my sister had this weird thing where they were going to different churches to try to lure men and stuff, and they took me with them. There was one lady that saw me, and she stopped me. She asked, “Can I pray for you?” She looked at me and I remember she put my chin up and she goes, “You have the most beautiful dimples.” And I was thinking to myself, *dimples?* Like, I didn’t realize that. She gave me a hug and I feel like that hug stayed with me. Little did I know years later how important that hug was for me. We never know what we are dealing with when we encounter someone. We never know. I even tell my participants, “Be mindful to leave someone better than the way you first met them. Be intentional with folks. Even if you don’t want to say a word, smile, because you have no idea what someone’s going through.” Call me soft, but I embrace my soft girl season because I was too hard for too long. I was in pain for too long.

I’d rather smile. I’d rather be kind.

Recorded at:
Los Angeles County, CA
5/31/24
10:00 a.m.

