

## SHANISE AND ANONYMOUS

[Anonymous]. I grew up pretty much on Edwards Air Force Base. As an adult, I came back and lived in the Palmdale/Lancaster area, which is in Los Angeles County.

My name is Shanise, otherwise known as Shaun. I have been a resident back here in California since 2014.

*'We're almost in our own little silo.'*

We grew up in a large family, a total of seven siblings. Six girls, we have one brother. We grew up in our little military bubble. Having an upbringing in the military world, we're almost in our own little silo. It's a bit different than the normal exposure to the rest of the world. Coming into the world, we may have been a bit green. So different experiences in early dating, I do believe, were ultimately pretty relevant for the way that things happened.

Coming from a large family was the other factor. Our oldest sister is our angel. We all did experience loss, the whole family, very young. She passed April 17, 1991, so that makes me 3. She was 11 when she passed.

Experiencing a loss and our parents having so many children, there were definitely experiences and things that happened during my upbringing, during childhood, that are very significant to why I'm here today, as a survivor, as a thriver.

It's so interesting. It took me 20 years to be able to tell my story. We would tell each other little bits and pieces. But I felt like we didn't know each other's story until we started [the nonprofit] Three Hart Connection.

### Anonymous

I went to high school with a bunch of boys that were very hard on my looks, making comments about my skin tone. I grew up extremely insecure. There was a boy I was interested in, and he told me, "I don't date shadows. You're too dark." I was being picked on. I was trying hard to fit in because I thought I was not attractive. I ran away from home because of all of that stuff that was going on and after they found out that I ran away, the teasing got really bad. From there, I ended up going to a school where I could graduate early.

I joined the Air Force very shortly after [graduation]. I went in extremely naive. Also, because I finished high school a year early, I went in as a 17-year-old who had very limited dating experience. It was almost like people could smell the insecurity on me. There were guys that were 23, 25, 26, 30 and older that were trying to date me. At the time, being somebody who grew up not being considered attractive, I thought that was very flattering. Now that I'm older, I realized that dating somebody that much older than me is not good.

I didn't realize I needed the validation of feeling attractive, feeling beautiful. I dated the first guy who looked my way. He was older than me. He was somebody that was temporarily stationed at the base. He was there for training. He took to me. He seemed super interested in me super-fast. It was a very abusive relationship. The first time that he ever hit me, we were sitting in a car. I was talking about something, and he hauled off and punched me in the face. I believe we were on our way to go meet his parents. I know that he came from a super troubled background. I felt sorry for him. In my head, I figured this was a one-off situation.

*I really remember feeling like I was going to die that day.'*

But it turned out to be so many different situations. I would want to go hang out with my friends. He would guard the door and not let me out. My suitemate would hear us arguing and fighting because I'm trying to get out of my room, and she would record us. In that situation, I got away from him and tried to walk over to a friend's dorm. This was when I was at my very first base and very young, still 17. He followed me from the dorm room over to her. He grabbed me, put me in the car and drove me to a lake. We sat at this lake for the longest time. I remember the sun going down and it being dark. I remember feeling like I was going to die that day. I thought that he was going to do something to me and put me in the lake.

We made it back to the dorm hours later. He had taken the ring that he had given me and thrown it into the lake. I was a mess. But he took me back to the dorm and I told him, "I think you should stay in your room. I'll stay in my room tonight. Let's sleep separate." He's like, "No. If you don't [come with me], I'm going to kill myself." I went along. I kept thinking to myself, *what if he really does kill himself? That'll be my fault.* I was just so young. I went back to his dorm with him.

There also was an instance where he did rape me. A couple of nights after the incident by the lake, we were sleeping. I woke up with him on top of me and told him, "No! I don't want to have sex with you." But he did what he wanted to do. He didn't like the way that I was acting after. We worked at the same hospital, had to be there at the same time. So, we both had to get up, get our uniforms on and go to work. He drove me over by what's called security forces and we sat outside of the building. He was like, "Are you

going to report me for rape?” I remember feeling like I didn't know what to do. I should call his bluff and go in there, but I didn't. We ended up going to work.

*‘He would threaten me with a knife.’*

It was pretty much a relationship of him fighting me all the time. There were instances where he dragged me through the day room in the dorm and nobody did anything. They just watched him drag me through it. There was another night where a guy did stand up for me; I worked with him in the hospital. He was like, “What are you doing? Why are you dragging her through the hallway like that?” That was the only time anybody ever stepped in. But there were so many instances where we would be in front of people, and they wouldn't do anything. That was their mentality – “That's between you two. I stay out of it.” There were so many instances where he would put his hands on me, he would threaten me with a knife.

There were instances where he had conversations on the phone with family members. He would get on the phone with them and tell them these things about me. He found a guy that I was interested in [from] Tech School – this was before me and him were an item. Tech School is basically college for the Air Force, where they teach you your job. I would talk about him. He got a hold of that guy and asked him questions. He got a hold of my mother. She talked to him, but she didn't really give him too much information. He did get hold of another family member and they entertained the conversation more than they should have, not knowing what kind of person he was. They have since apologized.

We both worked in the same hospital. There was a time where I didn't want to talk to him. I thought, *if I run in the women's bathroom, he's not going to come behind me*. He backed me into the women's bathroom, punching me and fighting me. One of my coworkers found us when we were in the bathroom, and he was beating me up. She reported him. He was banned from the base, but he was still in contact with me.

We didn't get married, but it was very long lasting. It led me to getting out of the military because of things that he was doing. Now that I'm older, I'm like, *why did I keep talking to him after all of that?* But I did. He would still come visit, but he couldn't get on base. I would have to walk to the gate. I didn't have a car at the time, and I would meet him at the gate. He would turn around and we'd go back to Wyoming to visit his family. After a while, my friend that reported him and his attack basically said, “Why are you still talking to him? Why are you still entertaining him? You're so beautiful. You could do so much better than this person. Why do you keep talking to him?” I realized she was right. I decided I didn't want to meet with him anymore. He wanted to spend time with me on Thanksgiving, but I wanted to go home to California. He dropped an “anonymous tip” that I threatened my life, that I wanted to kill myself. I was put in the 72-hour

hold. So, he still ruined my Thanksgiving plans from far away.

*I didn't really have a lot of help.'*

At the end of this long story, he did end up attacking me. I was stabbed. I didn't really have a lot of help in the military. As far as leadership goes, they weren't very helpful. They looked at me as the dumb girl that was with the guy that was abusive and pretty much dismissed me. It got to the point where it's like, "Let's just get her out of the military." That was hard because I had a dream of staying in for 20 years, retiring, traveling, and it didn't go the way that I had hoped. I ended up marrying somebody who was very abusive, and it set off a domino effect of different relationships that were abusive in different ways.

One of the things we talk about is generational curses, things you've seen from generations in front of you, that people have tolerated. It's like that same mindset is passed on. For me, I'm still growing through some things. Therapy's been very helpful. I was so full force ready to tell my whole entire story down to growing up, how my mind got to where it was and why I accepted so much from people. But it would hurt others to tell the full story. I will say this, I do believe that nobody's perfect. There were things that were instilled in me very young. The way that I feel about myself has a lot to do with my past. My sisters definitely supported me. But other people who I thought would be there a lot more weren't. I wasn't perfect, but the support that I expected was not there.

### Shanise

As a young teenage girl, for whatever reason, I was not attracted to the most kind young men. My first relationship, first real boyfriend, was not necessarily the healthiest. There was very poor communication and boundaries that were crossed. Especially now knowing all that we know, in education of teen dating violence, there were tons of red flags. He was mentally abusive for sure. He had dropped out of school. He's doing poorly and was talking in a way where he was going to be relying on me to take care of him. I really didn't like that. Ultimately, he was a cheater. That's a huge violation, a deal breaker for me.

Two weeks after high school, I went into the Air Force. It was a whole new world. There are people everywhere. The men were showing a lot of interest. It was nice. When you go into the military, they do tell you, "Don't be that girl." Meaning don't be that girl that sleeps around, don't be that girl that gets pregnant right away, don't be that girl ... fill in the blank, whatever you can think. But during my Tech School, I was

sexually assaulted. It was reported. I ended up dropping it because the helping agency was awful. I felt like I did so much wrong. What happened was underage drinking and I was taken advantage of. When another female who was around reported it on my behalf and I confirmed, it got out [and] my character was torn to shreds. The names that people called me, the treatment from the males, the females and even our instructors, it was humiliating. I'm a very private person. I felt like I was on display for everyone, like my body was on display. I was traumatized. I was still only 18. My training was only six weeks. After six weeks, I was able to go to my first duty station. Then when I got there, I became "that girl."

*'I had to cover up my marks with makeup.'*

The first guy that showed interest in me, someone who was in a supervisory position, we ended up in a relationship. During our relationship, I experienced sexual abuse, physical abuse, psychological abuse, isolation. The bulk of my education comes from the experience from that relationship. He is the father to my two oldest children. He was 24, so six years [older than me]. I'd say it was grooming now that I know what that means. We worked together. Granted he was super attractive, but I wasn't going to go try to be in a relationship with someone who I worked with daily. He was one of the leads in the office. He would pull me aside a lot and act like he was training me, but it would turn more into him coming on to me. I felt, I wouldn't say lucky, but I liked it.

The relationship did start off as a lie. Come to find out, he had a whole wife and children, multiple children, and we were pregnant at the same time. My children's sister is only a couple months older than my daughter. When I found that out, we didn't talk for a little bit. But he ended up wearing me back down. In my mind, this is my child's father. I had heard some things about him from our other colleagues and coworkers, but that wasn't my experience with him, so I was willing to give him a chance. He borrowed money from me and finished his divorce.

When we moved into our first apartment together, that's when the physical abuse started. I had to cover up my marks with makeup. I'd have bite marks on me and scratch marks and him slapping my face. I remember him banging my head on the ground. I was still pregnant with our first. I remember one time, a neighbor coming over. [My children's father] had just gotten kicked out of the Air Force for poor conduct. When the neighbor came over, he and the neighbor almost got into it. I did consider leaving then. But my belief system made that a bit hard. I didn't want to. I knew I wanted to have more children. I knew I wanted to be married. I wanted to emulate what my parents did.

*'That night I thought I was going to die.'*

Upon giving birth to our girl, the physical abuse continued. I did get pregnant again very quickly. My oldest are like 10 months apart. We ended up moving into base housing. Base housing was awful. His ex-wife was going through some things, and she had no place to go. I said she could come live with us for a little bit. They had a horrible, horrible relationship. His alcoholism was awful at this point. He was then abusing both of us. I remember them fighting, scrapping. I was pregnant with our son. I was trying to protect myself and all the kids and my baby girl.

The judgment, it's very different. I felt that I would get in trouble. The culture was gross. So many inappropriate relationships and people who were supposed to be there to advocate and help you, instead take your information and gossip. With my family, I felt so ashamed. I didn't really go that far into detail.

But one of the final straws was May 6, 2008, when he tried to strangle me to death, and I was pregnant with our second child. That night I thought I was going to die. I felt my body shutting off. That is one of the scariest things that I think I can recall in my life. After the attempt to end my life with the strangulation, military law enforcement were called and he was barred from that installation.

*'I felt like a rag doll.'*

Over time, he did convince me to come back and talk to him. He wanted to see the kids, so we did go back and forth for a little while. Once I broke it off with him, I was ignoring him. We have the military no contact orders, but he still stalked me. He still had the same friends that he had when he was in the military. I would be places and come outside and there would be a rose and a note on my car; there would be like mix CDs on my car. He would see me at places with people we know in common and then send messages from other phones. I was able to move to another location. He followed me there. We had a military restraining order. He was no longer in the military so that meant nothing to him. I didn't know until some years later that I could also pursue civil action as well.

He ended up following me to this other base. He ended up breaking into my apartment. The security guard helped him. They were messaging me from my own laptop in my apartment. Fortunately, I was with my family. My parents came out there and he was gone. But we can literally see his handprints and a second set on the glass sliding doors because that's how they got in. They popped the door. They were not military affiliated. That guy helped him. I don't know what he said or how he convinced him. Maybe he told him it was his own apartment.

Then I got ordered to move into military housing. We had some different instances where he ended up being barred from that base as well. But there were these apartments outside the installation at that base. You could jump a brick wall and climb over [to my house], and he climbed over. I remember being inside my house. Outside those glass sliding doors, there's a park. I saw him crouched outside behind this electricity box thing. I told my command to be on the lookout for him. But I remember waking up and he was over me and he was laughing. He was laughing. That's one of the most disgusting memories that I have. *How sick are you to be laughing? To be violating somebody?* I didn't know what was going to happen that night. I was numb. I felt like a rag doll. My kids are in the other room – our kids.

*I think 10 steps ahead.'*

I told my sergeant. He sent people over and made them drive by to keep surveillance on my house. That was nice. He was the one that told me, "You need to report this to the civilian police." I thought, *I can do that?* So, I did. But that gave me such a disgusting taste in my mouth. The two cops came over to my house to get the information and take my statement and, simply because he was the father of the kids, the guy was laughing and he was like, "Are you sure?" For a while, I did nothing after that.

There were so many incidents. Other things happened; my memories are scattered. We have the restraining order, and he was not allowed to be around the kids, and he's tried to reach out over the years. I feel way better today but it took me a while to get here. He made an impact to where the PTSD, the triggers – I can't be in a relationship with someone who gets in my face and yells. I can't be cornered. I need to know where my doors or my exits are. I think 10 steps ahead. I consider who's walking in my path. Anytime there's a man, I do a full check of head to toe. *What's in their hands? Do they look like the left hand dominant, right hand dominant? Which side am I on? What do I need to consider in case they reach out and grab me?* There's definitely some impact from that relationship that I carry even today.

*I felt stuck and confused.'*

I don't know where he is. He's been in and out of jail. I was able to keep tabs on him for a while. Never anything threatening in the recent years. He's had his own legal issues with traveling, having weapons in the car and different things like that. After things were taken care of for the most part, I ended up remarrying and getting out of the military.



I ended up in a horrible relationship with our pastor. I don't think I've ever experienced the magnitude of manipulation, isolation, gaslighting, threatening suicide. He's our lead pastor at our church. If I tried to break up with him, he would say, "Time to get the gun." I've never experienced that before. I felt stuck and confused. The breaking point in that relationship was humiliation. I was humiliated at our church. So many things came to light. He was being so disgusting and sleeping with so many women in our church, manipulating these young women, buying women. I felt like, *oh my gosh, is this a movie?* If you do any type of studying up on narcissistic abuse, he was textbook.

*'Who knows if I would have survived?'*

Some of the things that Shanise is saying now, I'm like, *I didn't know that happened.* And I'm sure she can say the same thing because it took me over 20 years to even tell my story. I was very embarrassed about getting kicked out of the military and really blamed myself. It was shameful coming from a military family, so I didn't tell my story. I tried to disconnect from my family and try to live my own life, but I was always very close to Shanise. I think I didn't start to hear more of their story until we got to Three Hart.

So, Three Hart Connection. We're a veteran-owned and -operated nonprofit that strives to provide services to victims and survivors of domestic violence and their families focused on mental well-being, physical fitness, and advocacy. Advocating for the needs and prevention for youth and beyond.

It started from a conversation during the pandemic. I was talking to my very good friend. Just like, "Can you imagine all the people going through DV (domestic violence) trapped in their homes right now?" "I thought of this back in the day. I wanted to come up with a program or a business to help people and to help survivors." He was like, "Well just do it." I wanted to hit the ground running. Just the state of the world at the time, I couldn't imagine myself going through what I went through then adding the pandemic on top of that. Who knows if I would have survived? Our organization is now four years old.

We're a nonprofit. We have group therapy and individual therapy led by our in-house clinician. We're taking women into a mentorship program, to get them trained up with work experience, office experience, all of that. Our ultimate goal is to get funding so we can hire these people. We're trying to get them those opportunities. Our goal is to not only do this work that we're doing with the population, which is primarily civilian, but to also stay connected to our military roots to ensure that the County, the state, everybody is aware that this happens in the military, and they need help. We needed help.

*'I don't want any other children or very young women to go through what I went through.'*



What lit a fire under my heart was the story of Vanessa Guillen's murder<sup>1</sup> and what she experienced in the military. It really brought up a lot of feelings for me. Growing up, being wiser and knowing what happened to me in the military, how the military handled me as a baby, it made me want to join Three Hart Connection.

The Vanessa Guillen story really did something to me, to where it's like, *I don't want any other children or very young women to go through what I went through.* Then as the business moved along, we met this amazing woman. Her son was murdered by someone he was dating. That story really helped me to realize that women are not the only ones that are going through it. Men can too. This made me think of children, like *what can we do to stop this when they're young?* Honestly, the limits of what you will accept from somebody starts very young. If we could teach parents that it's never too early to start talking about these things, even in friendships. Sometimes your first abusers are your very best little friend. For me, it's changed my mind of how we can teach kids to be able to eradicate abuse.

*'You are a thriver.'*

As survivors, we're forever going to be healing. But that alone has garnered the trust of so many people because we can speak from the perspective of a survivor. We try to change the language like, "victim" to "survivor" to "thriver," that's typically the term that we use. You are a thriver.

One thing I really wish that I would tell my younger self is to instill confidence and to trust your gut. There's been so many times, even as a young woman, as even as a teenager, where I knew something was wrong, and I was more hopeful. I wish I could tell myself, "People should not be treating you this way. This is not healthy. You're worth being treated kindly. You're worth being respected. You don't have to put up with this. There are so many other people in the world. You don't have to stay with one person if they don't treat you right. Don't let anybody else tell you that you don't deserve goodness or that you should settle for the bare minimum when it comes to how people treat you. Don't let anybody break that dream for you. You're not being unrealistic by having good expectations for other people."

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<sup>1</sup> Vanessa Guillen was a 20-year-old U.S. Army soldier murdered at Fort Hood by another soldier. Guillen had long had a goal of serving in the Army but had told friends and family of being sexually harassed by a superior in the time leading up to her murder.

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I would say to my younger self, “Slow down. You have one life. God willing, you have time. Take that time, use that time to learn yourself, to love yourself.” I would also say, “You deserve love. You don't have to settle. Love doesn't look like what I had experienced at that time. That was not love. Trust yourself, learn what you're comfortable with. Your life is for you to live and no one else. You're strong. You're beautiful. You are so capable. Life is amazing. And you're amazing too.”

