

STEPHANIE SEPEDA

My name is Stephanie Sepeda. I have lived in the Pomona area for about nine years. I have been in LA County since 2009.

'I was a magnet for sexual abuse.'

Growing up, I lived with my grandparents who were immigrants from Mexico. I remember my mom being in and out of my life. She would take me away from my grandparents here and there, supposedly to visit me. She was very cold toward me. No relationship. No sense of love or comfort as a mother.

I remember her taking me to houses where there would be a lot of partying. My earliest memories are her leaving me in the room where men would have their way with me. I was 4-6 years old. I remember her getting into another relationship and this person molested me several times. I look back and I feel like I was a magnet for sexual abuse.

I felt like I couldn't tell my grandparents. Their home was a safe haven. I have so many beautiful memories there. They protected me; they loved me. I felt like a normal little girl. I felt like I was going to hurt them. I felt like I was protecting them in a sense. I didn't verbally resist my mom, but I didn't want to be with her. I didn't even consider her my mom. My grandparents were my mom.

I started becoming bulimic. I would make myself throw up. I didn't understand that I was comforting myself with food. I knew that it was wrong. I wanted to desperately tell somebody. Internally, I was screaming. I had all this pain going on and I didn't understand why this happened to me, but I kept it a secret. It mentally affected me. I wet the bed a lot until I was 7. I felt guilty. I felt dirty. I felt full of shame. I felt like it was my fault, and I didn't understand why this all took place.

'I was a broken little girl.'

At 11 years old, my mom started coming around again. She had other kids by then and she would have me be the babysitter. She completely took me away from my grandparents. She would sell everything. We wouldn't have furniture. We wouldn't have food. I got introduced to the streets. I got introduced to drugs. I remember her being gone for days. Having to take my siblings to school, having to wash their clothes, having to try to get food or ask people to buy us food. I quit school at seventh grade.

My mom would come in and out, so I hit the streets. I was a full-blown addict. I was lured and held hostage for days and repeatedly raped. I was taken advantage of by many gang members. I didn't understand older men. I was a magnet.

Where I'm at today, I recognize that men were preying on me. I was a broken little girl who was in the streets, who had no family. That's what men and pimps prey on – children like me. I was a full-blown addict already, in a relationship with domestic violence at 13 years old. Running around, lost. Through the years, I learned that the wrong men liked little girls, so I started prostituting myself out as a survival skill. I was considered a runaway, but I really didn't have a home to run away from. There was no structure; there was no home. I still felt responsible.

I tried to live a normal life. I tried to put myself in a continuation school. That was my dream, to go to school, because I loved school. I would read the newspaper so I can learn big words, so I could continue to read. I lacked math skills. I had all this trauma, so I started numbing myself in drugs. As I got older, 16, 17, 18, I wanted a life. I pretended everything was okay, but I was in denial of the severity of my drug addiction. I started going deeper in drugs. Because of my addiction, I started getting arrested around 18-19 years old. For 10 years, I was in and out of jail.

I never realized how much trauma I had.'

I had four kids. My first son died at six months old; I was 17 years old. By 23, I had three kids back-to-back and an abusive, crazy marriage with a drug dealer. I had this addiction. I never realized how much trauma I had. I was addicted to crack cocaine. I was so numb on drugs and, because of that, my kids went into foster care. I continued my addiction moving forward, being in domestic violence – all this repeated cycle.

I got tired of hurting my three older kids. I was tired of not being a parent. I was tired of being addicted to drugs and I desperately wanted to do good. I desperately wanted to be a mother. I wanted to go back to school, and I would try to go to school, but I would continue to relapse. I didn't have any consistency of staying clean. The Los Angeles Dream Center, that's where I went in 2009 to get clean.

When I came out here to LA, I was almost killed in 2011. I got clean, but then I get in a relationship with a gang member. In August 2011, he beat me within an inch of my life. I remember waking up in the hospital and they're telling me, "You're going to have surgery. You're bleeding. There's hemorrhaging in the brain and it's not stopping." I remember crying and thinking, *this is it. My kids are not going to have a mom.* I had black eyes for five months. I couldn't talk. My memory was gone for a while. I would wake up screaming in the middle of the night. I was always looking behind my back. Through that, I continued to try to seek my higher power. My faith, my God, is what helped me keep going in life.

My kids were with their dad. I came out here to get clean in a program and I met somebody. I ended up leaving the program, getting an apartment, and trying to look for work. This individual beat me; I remember screaming and people pounding on the door. When they came in, he jumped from the fourth

floor. He ended up getting caught and going to prison.

'I had never really dealt with everything.'

As women, we tend to get caught up with these guys that have a gift of gab and tell us what we want to hear because we haven't truly healed. I got into another relationship with another gang member here in LA. I ended up relapsing with him on methamphetamines and he's pimping me out at 40 years old. Even as old as I am, he manipulated me, and he was trying to have me recruit girls. Despite everything I've been through, it didn't even dawn on me, *you're being trafficked. You're being pimped out of a hotel.* He helped me fall in love with him and he promised me the world. I was naive. "If you love me, you'll do this."

December 2014, I was so broken. By then, I had another son. When I relapsed, my son was taken away. He was six months old, and he was taken away. I was still getting high and getting with this guy. All this craziness was happening, and I didn't want to change. I was so numb and high on meth that I didn't even care that my son was going to be adopted. I had a group of people get me out of a hotel. People that I know from the LA Dream Center, they rescued me. They literally made a way. They got rid of that guy. They packed my stuff and brought me to Pomona on Valentine's Day 2015.

I had never really dealt with everything like I should have. If we don't deal with our abuse, we continue to have a pattern. I continued to pick those gang members thinking I was getting security. At a young age, I learned that. I was looking for acceptance. I was looking for love and I found that in the streets around gang members. I felt protected. As I got older, I still had those characteristics of thinking I was being protected, even though I wasn't.

I walked into the doors of Total Restoration Ministries, a one-year, faith-based program, on February 14, 2015; my life has not been the same. I have over nine years clean now. After six long years of school, I graduate with my sociology degree. I'm going to take a little time off and, next spring, I plan to go to Cal State San Bernardino for social work. At one year clean, I was able to get back into the field of working in drug treatment. I've been working in drug treatment, residential treatment, outpatient services for men and women who struggle with addiction and mental health.

'I have a heart for the streets.'

Three years ago, I was living in Pomona. It's very well known for trafficking, and I saw it in front of my apartment. I would find condoms. I would see the johns; they would pull over and try to solicit me. My son was about 6 or 7 and he didn't understand. He would ask, "Mommy, why do they only have their underwear on?" I didn't handle things the right way at times. I would tell them, "Y'all need to get out of

here. This ain't the spot.” My heart started changing toward them. I had to self-reflect; either I'm going to be a part of the problem or I'm going to be a part of the solution. I started showing them love and it started opening that relationship among women.

One individual was killed at the corner one year. I brought awareness. I wanted to have a human trafficking training. I started with a free training and luncheon, and I got a good response. From there, I did a Human Trafficking March down Holt Boulevard in the city of Pomona. I did a Human Trafficking Awareness Day and I had over 100 attendees; I got a proclamation from the City of Pomona. We all came together, and I named it “Unity in the Community for Human Trafficking.” I continued to do community events. I found my purpose.

I have a heart for the streets. I have my own nonprofit, Project Resilience, that started two years ago. We have crisis response. We have substance abuse [services], which can consist of individualized counseling, substance abuse groups, workshops for youth, fentanyl awareness. We do anti-trafficking for youth, human trafficking awareness, street outreach, offer the women hygiene kits, and then we do case management. We have all these services. We really want to make an impact on the community and help those that are hurting. A lot of the women and men think there's no hope.

We want to foster healing and transformation among the lives of individuals that we come across. My whole goal is to guide people to freedom. You don't have to be locked up in jail or prison to be locked up. We can be locked up mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. I share that. I ask individuals, “What does freedom look like to you? How does that look? What are we carrying around?” For many years, I was walking around with my baggage, my wounds, and I had all this core trauma that I wasn't dealing with. My faith is what brought healing in my life.

‘My pain has turned into a purpose.’

As far as the County, it takes funds to have organizations. I quit my job at a drug treatment [center]. We went full time at our nonprofit; there's so many people that are hurting in the City of Pomona. It can be trauma from gun violence, trauma from domestic violence, sexual abuse, trafficking, drug addiction, the unhoused population, and they're fighting among each other. There's so much hurt and pain in individuals' lives. How do they overcome that? There are so many beautiful organizations in the City of Pomona. I think that Los Angeles County needs to look into organizations that they could support. There are many that are doing amazing work.

There are people that care and want to help. There's a high percentage of individuals who've gone through a lot of trauma or pain or have similar stories to mine; we have trust issues. I wish I would have reached out for help. Where we're at in 2024, there's a lot of services. Times have changed and there is a way

Recorded at:
Alhambra,
Los Angeles County, CA
06/03/24
3:00 pm

out. Sometimes victims of trauma or violence think that there's no hope. But there is hope, if they take a step out and allow somebody to come along their side to support them and have a safe space to heal.

There are families that are pimping out individuals, families who set up their own children. I've never gotten a verbal response from my mom. She was never around all my life. But in my heart, *how does she allow, at four or five years old, to have men have their way with me in a room?* I want to break the cycle. My kids don't have to live like that. I'm breaking the cycle. That's what I want to do, be a voice. That's the thing that I want to bring awareness to. I want to be a voice to bring awareness.

I look back and have gratitude that my mess has turned into a message. My pain has turned into a purpose. I never imagined that people would believe in me because I didn't believe in myself for so long. Now people entrust me to lift them up. I found hope too.

