

STEVEN MONTES

My name is Steven Montes. I was born in East Los Angeles, but I grew up in the city of Pomona.

'They still don't know the severity of the stuff that I went through.'

My experience growing up here in Pomona was not a good one. My mom drank a lot. My stepdad drank a lot. I don't know who my father was. I always say I'm a product of a rape. Growing up I was told that I was a mistake, that I shouldn't have been born. I was told when I was 21 years old that somebody abused my mother, and she ended up being pregnant. My mom was a teenager at the time. Her brother tried several times to end her pregnancy with abuse. I'm the product of that.

My stepdad abused me physically. I had cigarettes burned out on my face. I got hit with a bottle. I was locked in the garage. I was locked in the trunk. There was a time that I was sitting down at the kitchen table, and I made some cereal. I had asked my stepdad if I can get a spoon. He put the handle on a flame on the stove. He handed me the spoon. I grabbed it by the handle, and I burned my hand. I cried and cried and cried. My brothers and my sisters from my stepdad were babies so they didn't know. My brother tells me that after I left home, my stepdad started taking a lot of abuse out on him, physical abuse. But they still don't know the severity of the stuff that I went through.

'I was afraid that nobody was going to believe me.'

I was six years old, and I was raped by my stepdad's nephew. I was afraid to say anything. I was afraid that nobody was going to believe me. I was afraid what people would think. That same nephew put a tube of toothpaste in my rectum and squeezed it out. I was burning, burning, burning. I was really scared. Not so much scared of him, just scared that nobody was going to believe me. I had the [idea] in my head that [sexual abuse] won't happen to men; it only happens to women. But it happens to a lot of us.

I was treated different from my entire family. We were going to go to an Easter picnic with the family and I was all excited. We were at my grandma's house. My uncle, my mom's sister's husband, was going to take everybody in the car to go to a picnic. When I was running to the car, he said, "Not you. I want to have a nice time. I don't want things f---d up." Everybody went and I went back in the house with my grandma. I asked my grandma, "Why? How come I couldn't go?" She said, "Maybe if you behave, people will start letting you go places." I was acting out because of what I was going through, but nobody knew. My mom's brother would come to the house drunk. He would beat up my mom and he would beat me up. He would tell her, "I told you that kid's a mistake. He shouldn't [have] been born. I want to make

sure that I take care of that mistake.” It wasn't just my stepdad. It wasn't just his nephew. It was my uncles too.

I felt the love that I didn't get at home.'

I used to leave the house really young, in my diaper as a kid. I would go to the park because I felt safer there. There were these gangsters in the park. They would take care of me. As drunk and as high as they were, they used to come and one of them will push me [on the swing]. I remember clearly that one day my mom came looking for me and one of them said, “Hey, we got him. He’s cool.” Mom left. As time went by, I became one of them. I felt the love that I didn't get at home. I found a family there with them. I got jumped into the gang at a very young age. I became a drug addict at a very young age. I started doing heroin at 13 years old. At 14 years old, I was snorting it, eating it, swallowing it.

I was in and out of the juvenile system – juvenile halls, camp, back and forth, back and forth. I think I was 11 when I went to juvenile hall. I felt safe in juvie. That's a trip when you feel safe being locked up. I was placed on house arrest one time. Knowing I was going to be at the house all the time – I couldn't deal with it. I actually had my mom take me back to juvenile hall. She said, “Why would you want to go back to jail?” “I’m going home,” I said. “I’m better out there.” But I never spoke about why I wanted to be away, why I was doing what I was doing.

I never imagined my life would be the way it is today.'

For a long time, I blamed my childhood for the life that I've lived. I became a very angry person. I became a very violent person. It wasn't until I started doing some journaling, some writing, some working on myself, that I started figuring out a lot of things. Although growing up [I had] a lot of violence perpetrated on me, at the end of the day, we have choices. I chose to get into a gang. I chose to do drugs. I chose to commit crimes. I chose to be a violent person. I chose to abuse women, not physically but emotionally, spiritually. I broke their spirits. I broke their hearts. I didn't realize how [many] people I was hurting. Even when I was in prison, I was using and still abusing women. I got married in prison to a girl only because she was willing to bring me drugs during family visits. I never imagined my life would be the way it is today.

The turning point for me was this program called Prison Letters for Our Struggling Youth. I started writing to this one kid anonymously. He was sharing with me that his dad left him at a very young age. But at the time, I was using, and I was strung out. I stopped writing. I couldn't continue to lie to these kids and say that I was clean and that this has changed my life. The lady from the organization reached out to me

months later and said, “Why did you stop my program?” “I’m using.” “You need to write a letter to that kid, and you need to tell that kid why you haven’t written back.” I wrote and I told him the truth. About a month later, I got a letter from him again. He didn’t know my name, but it was given specifically to me. He said, “I appreciate that you did write me back, that you did tell me the truth. But you’re like my father all over again. You abandoned me.” I think that was the start of it.

When I got out of prison, a friend of a friend was asking about me. I called her up on the phone. She goes, “Dude, you don’t know how much I’ve been asking for you everywhere. My son is not a gang member and he’s not a bad kid. I got him back out of foster care and he’s out of control. He has so much anger.” I started working with this kid. We’re talking, talking, talking, and the trauma started coming up. Same thing [that happened to me] happened to that kid. I had to stop working with him. I had to deal with my demons. I just dropped out. Didn’t tell him why. I reached out to the mother and said I’m still working on myself. She said, “Man, please call my son. He’s asking for you. He’s asking for his Pops.”

He called me Pops. He likes music, he likes to rap. I met this Grammy-nominated producer at a park, walking my dog. Shared my story and I told him I have a kid that I work with that I would like him to come out to the studio and he invited me. He invited the kid. We had a date set. I got sick, I was in the hospital. I called my friend and I said, “Bro, make sure you pick him up and take him to the music studio.” He said, “Got it, got it. I’m on it. He’s looking forward to it.” A couple hours later, I had some treatments, and I was kind of out of it. When I woke up, [the kid] was sitting at my bed. I knew I had to start talking about [my trauma]. For him. For myself. For other people in the community.

I attempted to take my life.’

I speak a lot about my physical abuse, but I haven’t shared about my sexual abuse. That’s not supposed to happen to someone that looks like me, that’s been a gangster. [Someone] that had a reputation in prison, that was feared by a lot of people. That doesn’t happen to us. But it does. There’s so many of us that look like me and they’re not willing to share their stories because of their reputation. I only shared [my sexual abuse with] one person. In 2014, when I was in prison, I got tired of doing time. I got tired of shooting dope. I knew I was probably going to die in prison. I didn’t want to die an old man in prison, so I attempted to take my life. I swallowed a bunch of pills. I did a lot of heroin. I overdosed. Two weeks later, I had come through. That day that I was going to get released from the hospital, I had a stroke. Because I tried to overdose; they sent me to a psych hospital in Stockton. I had to stay there for 15 months because I had to learn how to walk, talk, everything all over again.

When I came back to the prison, they put me in a mental health program, and I met this clinician, and we started talking. I shared [my sexual abuse] with her. She was the first person and the only person I

shared that with. She no longer works for the prison system. She works in mental health stuff and she's my best friend out here on the streets. By chance, I was in downtown LA a year after I got out [on parole] and I see this lady [that] looked familiar. When she gets near me, she said, "Montes?" I said, "No. I left Montes at the [prison] gate. I'm Steven today." We start talking. We exchanged numbers. She's my best friend. I am so grateful for the lady because if it wasn't for her, I don't think I'd be where I am today. She was the first one that believed in me, that said that I have a lot to bring to the table.

'To become a better man, I had to talk about it.'

When I got out of prison, I didn't want to come home the same person I was when I went in. But I started thinking, *where is home? What am I going to call home?* My brothers are grown already; they all moved out. My mom sold the house; they live in Vegas. So, I went to a treatment program.

In the treatment program, I had to write a letter to my six-year-old-self. I had to tell my six-year-old-self, *it's okay to go outside and be a kid. It's not your fault. It's okay to go outside and not fear that anybody's going to do anything to you because your perpetrator is no longer here. It's okay to go outside, grow up, and become the man I am today.* I wrote a letter from my six-year-old-self back to me. My six-year-old-self told me, *Thank you. Thank you for caring and thank you for loving me and thank you for not forgetting me.* It's like a big weight came off my shoulders. We all carry a trash can. We stuff our junk, our trash in there. We stuff the stuff that we go through in life in there. That trash can only gets fuller and fuller because we don't talk about it. In order for me to become a better man, I had to talk about it.

'I had no clue what life was going to look like.'

Before I came home [from prison], I didn't want to come home. I had that mindset of *there's nothing out there for me. I've been in and out of the system my entire life. This is going to be my life. They feed me, they clothe me, I have a place to sleep. I work in the yard. I don't need nothing. I'm okay.* I wasn't okay. I was scared. *What's out there?* Everything had changed so much. My cousin did 40 years. I remember when we were in prison, I used to always tell my cousin, "What if we got a second chance, bro? What would we do with it? What would we do differently?"

I had no clue what life was going to look like. I'd never had a job in my life. I always slept at your house, ate your food, took your money, used you, and then once you couldn't provide for me no more, I went to the next house. That's how I lived my life before I went to prison. This time I wasn't going to sleep on nobody's couch. This time I wasn't going to ask nobody for money. I worked for Goodwill to make some hours, as part of LA Rise. I became a nightman at Amity Foundation. After a year doing that, I

became a case manager [at Amity]. I was working with the guys coming home from prison. The same people that I was locked up with, I was their counselor. I was their advocate. After I left Amity, I went back to Goodwill, and I became a Career Service Specialist. I was working with youth development and working with adults coming home from prison. A year after, I was named the face of Goodwill for re-entry. That was an honor for me.

I knew I needed a lot of help [when I got out] because I went to a movie theater, and I ran out of there. I was sweaty because I couldn't figure out who was behind me. It was dark. I still have issues with going to restaurants. I need to sit close to the door. I need to be on the outside. I can't be in the middle of booth. There's a lot of things that I'm still dealing with. It's hard. I still struggle being intimate with my wife because for so long I slept alone on a bed curled up in a fetal position.

I fought back.'

I've gone through so much. [Recently,] I had a massive stroke. I was on life support. They didn't think I was going to make it. My family was fighting. I couldn't see. I couldn't talk. But I could hear them fighting. Like, "My brother doesn't want to be on machine." My wife was like, "I'm the wife. I have the last decision. He's a fighter. He's going to fight his way out of this." A bit later, I woke up. They told me that I'd never walk again. I fought because I know my kids need me. The community needs me. I fought back. I'm walking today. They said I couldn't do it, that's why I f---ing did it.

We resort to violence because that's our way of running. We resort to drugs because that's our way of coping. But we don't realize how much harm we're causing because the same harm was done to us. I thought that if I share my story today, maybe somebody that looks like me, that's been through the same thing that I've been, has tattoos, did all kinds of stuff, can relate.

I always say that I got clean in San Pedro, but my recovery started in East LA. An old timer told me, "Your recovery hasn't even started yet bro. You're just learning with intent to recover." I really took that to heart. I started working. I started doing things. I started being of service. I started helping others in the program and I knew that that was what I wanted to do.

We all have a sad story. It could be your excuse or your motivation. For me, my sad story was my foundation. I take some of the kids that I work with, that I know are going through some trauma, to the house I grew up in, right here in Pomona. We stand in front of that house, and I start telling them a story. "This was the house where I went through all the physical abuse. That's the garage that I was locked in 2-3 days at a time. This is the driveway where my stepdad used to lock me up in the car. This is the driveway where my stepdad ran over my leg and broke it. This is where I was physically abused, sexually abused." I'm taking my co-workers over there because I want my co-workers to know who they're working with. I'm

older than all my co-workers. My co-workers are all young. But they have all been through something. I show them what violence intervention is. I tell them what street outreach is, what it looks like, what this job looks like, what we're supposed to be doing, what we should be doing.

'There's so much hope for us.'

There's a big need for youth housing. We need more help with DV (domestic violence) classes for perpetrators, youth perpetrators. A lot of these kids think love is beating their girlfriends, degrading their girlfriends, because that's what they saw. There's a need for more youth treatment facilities. A lot of these kids are 12 [years old] and 13 [years old] and they're strung out on pills. A need for LGBTQ friendly youth services for the kids that deal with substance abuse. For these kids coming home that were sentenced to prison at 14 years old and are coming out [at] 30 years of age, 20 years of age. In at 14, you're coming home with the mindset of [a teen] still. They never grew up. They need the right mentors in their life. They need the right advice. They need those "I love yous" and care and acknowledgment.

In this field of violence intervention, we deal a lot with system-impacted youth, foster youth, unhoused youth. It was a lot of people coming home from prison. A lot of these kids are headed in the wrong path. I always say, "Life's about choices. You have three yards to choose from. You can walk the prison yard. You can walk your front yard. Or you can walk the graveyard. It is your choice." I hope that someone really gravitates to my message, really gravitates to the words that I say to them. Because there's so much hope for us. There's so much promise. I always tell the guys that I work with, the guys that have been to prison, "We're not supposed to be here. We got that second chance to come out. The kids need our help. The communities need our help. Get your stories out there. You never know who you're going to impact."

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