

## YESSANIA ALVAREZ

My name is Yessenia Alvarez. I have lived in Lancaster for a good 10 years. I was a victim of domestic violence for 13 years with my ex-husband, with whom I had my first kids. I was 16 years old when I first met him. He was 10 years older than me. I think I was looking for a dad figure at the time.

I come from a broken family. I had barely got out of junior high and [my ex-husband] was my getaway, basically. I didn't have my family around. I was by myself. My mom left my dad when I was seven years old. I got in the system, and I started in a foster home when I was 12 years old. I started going to juvenile hall when I was 12 years old. I've been in the system since then. I basically never had a childhood. My dad was in prison.

*I was in survival mode.'*

My whole life I [grew up] in domestic violence. I didn't really understand. But as I grew older, I understood why [my mom] didn't leave [sooner]. She didn't have a job. She was relying on my dad financially. He was the one providing for her. My mom thought that was love.

My mom was a single mom trying to provide for us, so she was never home. My comfort was my friends in the streets. I looked for love in the streets. I got into a gang and drugs. I was in survival mode, basically trying to survive my life. I was drunk and high. [My mom] was afraid of me because at that time, I was really rebellious. I had a lot of anger, so she was scared of me. She tried to move away to Miami, and I caused her a lot of pain. She said that she just wanted me to be okay. She wanted to make my life better. She felt that putting me in juvenile hall was going to save my life. They arrested me for assault and battery. I got put on house arrest. I got out. I went to a placement home. I [went] AWOL (Absent Without Official Leave). So, I came back out. They put me in [a detention center for minors] in East LA. Then my mom signed me off. I was really upset at my mom at the time because I wanted her to spend Christmas [with me]. We hadn't spent Christmas together in a long time. Juvie was hard because every weekend I would see family come to see their kids. I was always sitting in a window trying to see where my mom was, but she never showed up.

*I was looking for a father figure.'*

I met [my ex-husband] through social media. At first, we were out partying, getting to know each other. He had already got out of prison. He lied about his age. He said he was 21 or 22 at the time. He lied

about a lot of stuff. He lied about having another family with kids. I got in a relationship with him not knowing what I was getting myself into.

I was abused when I was four years old by my dad and it hurt me a lot. [My dad] took my childhood from me. He would touch me, and my mom didn't believe this. She was in denial. She kept staying with him for years. I think the reason why I found [my ex-husband] was because I was looking for a father figure and he was older. I told myself, *maybe if I'm with an older person, he's not going to hurt me. He's going to love me unconditionally.* But no. It didn't end up like that.

At first, it was a honeymoon stage where he was lovely. We were always doing things together. He was sweet. He would take me out to eat and stuff. But then the second year in the relationship, that's when I noticed things started changing a little bit. He was controlling. He was more aggressive. He would talk to me in different tones. He wouldn't let me talk to my mom and he would keep me away from all my friends. He would take my phone. He basically kept me in the house. I was getting off work at 9 p.m. He would make me take the bus to his house and stay there all day because he was like, “No, you're out there partying,” when I was just relaxing. He would say, “You can't talk to this friend. You can't talk to your sister. No, we're going to be here. We're going to do that.” When I was 17-and-a-half, we moved in together.

That's when I started getting things in the mail of his ex-wife. He didn't tell me. His family didn't tell me that he had older kids. A child support paper came to the house. That's when things changed. It had his date of birth and everything. I confronted him about it. He was really upset, and he left. I remember he came back at 2 a.m. It was chaos. He was pushing me around. I was trying to get my stuff to leave, and he didn't let me. He trapped me. The next day I thought, *well, maybe he didn't mean it. Things are going to change. Give him time.* He was sorry. He brought me roses. I forgave him so many times. But as time passed, he kept hurting me.

*'I was a punching bag.'*

[My ex-husband] would leave me in the streets. I was homeless. He would strangle me. He would raise a pistol with me. He would do everything you could name. It came to a point of sexual abuse when I didn't want to have a [physical] relationship with him. Financially, he was the one providing for me. He wouldn't let me work. I lost everything for him, including friends. I couldn't reach out to my family. They believed him more than me. I had my son at 25. The next day [at the hospital], he slapped me in the hospital because my son did the bathroom on him. He's like, “Hurry up and change him!” I was a first-time mom. I didn't know better.

I remember us going back home and he strangled me. He zip-tied me and left me in the closet. The next day, he beat me up again. Every day after that, when I was sleeping, he would start choking me.

Months pass. We went to go live with his family because we got kicked out of where we were staying because of everything. The landlord wouldn't do anything. They wouldn't call the police. We got kicked out. I remember getting my stuff and I was like, *that's it. I'm tired. I have to move on.* I was trying to leave, and he strangled me. He did everything. That's when I had to put the cops on him.

I felt like I was his target. I was a punching bag. I felt like I was not going to survive this. My baby was three months old and that's when [the authorities] got involved. They almost took my baby away. It was hard. I had marks all over my neck, so they took [my ex-husband]. He was in jail for two or three months and they let him out. He was looking for me. He promised me that he was going to change, sweet-talking me and all this stuff. I ended up having another baby with him. We were not supposed to be together. But he looked for me. I was afraid. He was a manipulator. I was scared. I didn't have anybody. When I left him, I was homeless. I was staying in my car with my kid. It was cold. It was hard. We moved back to the same place where we were living with his family. That didn't work out. He said that he was going to change. He said that we were going to go to counseling, and that never happened.

I was upset when I was pregnant again. It was a forced baby because he raped me. When I found out that it was a girl, I cried because I didn't want my daughter to go through the same thing or see anything I was. I have always told everybody that [my children are] not my regret. They're my hope. They made me keep going in life. I stayed with the pregnancy, and I kept her.

*'I wanted to break the cycle.'*

It was 2016. I was living in my apartment in Lancaster. [My kids] were two and one. And he started taking off on me in front of my son. My son grabbed the bat and hit him at two years old. That's what made me snap out of it. It took me that long to snap out of it. Once I saw my son pick up that bat and heard him scream, "Don't hurt my mommy! Don't hurt my mommy!" He pushed my son. He broke everything. He slammed me in the walls. He broke stuff on me. It was bad. It was chaos. At the time I was doing a program through the welfare office. I was working and he didn't want me to work. He didn't want me to take any type of classes, parenting or anything. He thought I was cheating on him. But I was trying to get help through my journey.

I called the cops, and I got him off of my lease. I got a restraining order. He took my car. He took everything away from me. I had to go back to court and fight for my car. By the time they gave me my car back, it was already messed up. At that time, I had two kids walking in the streets. My oldest son has autism. It was hard taking them to daycare, to school.

I got depressed and I didn't want to live no more. What kept me going was that I didn't want my kids to go through the same lifestyle as me. I wanted to make a difference. I wanted to break the cycle. I

wanted to be a better mom. But in order to do that, I had to learn to love myself. When I started loving myself and knowing my worth, that's when things started changing. I always look at myself in the mirror. I always talk to myself. I was really depressed for years, but my kids gave me strength and they still give me strength.

Now I have four kids. I have a nine-year-old, an eight-year-old, a one-and-a-half-year-old and a seven-month-old baby. The father of my other two kids is a good man. I've known him since I was 13. We were both in the same facility locked up together. We met [again] now that we're older and we linked up. He's not disrespectful. I know my boundaries. I know red flags. Having been in this type of situation on my prior relationship, I already know what to point out. I have a getaway plan. I still get PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder]. Sometimes it's hard being around a lot of men. But through therapy and through the people that have helped me through my journey, it gives me a little bit of strength with how to cope with it.

*'When I started seeking help, doors opened.'*

What I do right now therapy-wise is I garden. I write. I draw. I take long walks. When I need help on something, I'm not scared to reach out. I think before I was scared that [the authorities] were going to take away my kids. I didn't speak for help. I felt like this was the right thing to do for my family, for my kids at the time. Before, I was trapped. I was alone, and I had no way out. I felt like no one's going to believe me. My family didn't believe me. *Who's going to believe me?* I always had closed doors toward me at that time. But when I started seeking help, doors opened.

I got my Section 8 [housing]. I got helped by welfare. I tried to go back to school. I do individual therapy. When my kids have stuff at school, I'm always there supporting them. I'm not working right now. I'm a stay-at-home mom because I have two kids with autism and a disability. My baby's going through a lot of health issues. I'm going through a lot of health issues, but I'm surviving through it.

I had to leave my family, get away from my family, and find myself first. I don't blame [my mom]. I was a kid. I didn't know what she was feeling. She was going through it too. Now that I'm older and I'm a mom, I understand that it's okay. *It was not your fault. You were in survival mode, trying to do whatever you had to do.* We have great communication now. She understands me and she tells me, "I'm really proud of the woman you became." Those small little words, that's what helps me keep going too.

*'I wanted to feel alive again.'*

[When I was being abused,] I would have wanted someone to tell me that I wasn't alone and that everything was going to be okay and to fight. If I would have known how to know my worth at that moment, this would have never happened. Anything is possible. Seek help.

I do see a lot of change in my kids. Before, my two oldest were always in survival mode. They would flinch and be so quiet. Now they're freer. They can breathe. They laugh. They don't wet the bed anymore. They're not scared. I always wanted to keep a safe place for my kids. I feel free. I'm accomplishing a lot of things that I couldn't before.

I have always wanted to open an organization for domestic violence survivors. I always wanted to be someone to speak to mothers to know that they're not alone for having kids with disability or for being a mom and feeling numb. I feel like my testimony could help other women. It was hard to be who I am now. Not even two months ago, I had a mild stroke. But I keep going. I don't give up. I'm still making time to attend my classes, to seek help, to still seek for my healing process. Because I got this. I really want it.

I wanted to feel alive again. I have this thing that I always do when I get emotional, or life brings me a little bit down. Every time I feel overwhelmed, I go to the restroom, and I touch my heart. When I hear my heartbeat, it's like, *I'm still here. I'm still here for a purpose. I'm still here breathing. I have a roof. I have clothes. I have my kids.* And that's what keeps me going. My heart. Just hearing my heart beating still. Because a lot of people don't make it. I could have been one of those people who didn't make it.

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