

Community Legal Aid

A non-profit law firm serving the legal needs of low-income individuals and families in central northeast Ohio



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Confronting domestic abuse and the lifeline I needed

by guest author, Athena Gough, Board Member for Community Legal Aid

My story is not unique. I am the mother of two beautiful daughters. I go to work. I enjoy traveling. I write poetry and enjoy photography. My life is pretty normal now. But it wasn't always.

I'm also a survivor of domestic violence. This is my story of finding hope and help.

When I first met my ex-husband, he seemed cool, free-spirited, funny, and artistic. He was charming around everyone and was often the life of the party. He seemed more in tune with his emotions than other men I had encountered at that point in my life. And I found myself drawn to him.

We met during my freshman year of college and became good friends. Eventually our friendship would take a romantic turn. And that's when things about him really started to change.

Once we entered a romantic relationship, his behavior was often confusing and erratic. One moment he would be infinitely complimentary, the next, highly critical and unhappy with me. He would disappear for days without responding to any communication and then return like nothing had happened. It kept me worried and off-balance, emotionally. But I still didn't sense any red flags.

The first time I really noticed something was off about my new relationship was during a time I had the flu. I'd been sick for days, and one morning, my ex called me up asking if he could come over. I declined because I felt awful, and I didn't want him to get sick. I thought he would understand, but instead, he got very angry once he realized I wouldn't be persuaded to let him come by my house. He came clean and told me he was trying to get some money because he was broke and needed to sell me some incense he had. I told him I didn't have any money, which was the truth. He yelled at me and told me I had wasted his time and hung up on me. Initially, I found myself trying to make sense of what I'd done wrong. But then a feeling of anger came over me. I couldn't understand why he was so mad, and I seriously contemplated not talking to him again.

He was the one that eventually made the first move to resume communication. He called and

apologized for how he'd acted, but he also justified his behavior, citing his money problems. So I convinced myself that things weren't really so bad. After all, he had apologized and had taken some responsibility. Lots of people struggle with their anger, I told myself over and over again, until I grew used to his mood swings.

As our relationship developed, I felt him trying to separate me from the people I knew and loved. He would always tell me my family and friends were stifling me and not allowing me to be myself. He was good at picking up on threads of possible conflict between people and magnifying it to his benefit. If he could put a wedge in a relationship, he could put himself in the middle as support. But I never let him fully cut me off from those in my life, which helped me avoid becoming isolated as time went on.

He was blindingly mean with his words. They hurt worse than any hitting, punching, choking, slapping, or anything else he ever did to me physically. Once he knew what hurt you emotionally, he was calculating in how he attacked you to maximize the damage. It was like adding acid to the edge of a sword — wholly unnecessary and designed to cripple you twice over. I grew calluses over some of the places he attacked verbally and emotionally, but that just drove him to find new ways to unearth my pain. He seemed to enjoy breaking me down with his words, and when he couldn't, he got his hands involved.

Three years into our relationship, things got physically violent. By that time, I had been through so much emotional abuse, that I felt a strange sense of relief. I could finally stop feeling crazy, merely thinking he hated me, and I could see the truth of his "love" for me coming out in his violence. The physical abuse was honest. No more could he hide behind his manipulative words, insisting he meant no harm. And I could stop lying to myself about what was happening. It was not just some "anger management" problem. I was in an abusive relationship, which was the hardest thing in the world to admit to myself.

Marriage seemed like an illogical decision, given my acceptance of the relationship as an abusive one, but when I got pregnant with my oldest daughter four years into the relationship, he said he needed his child to have his last name. He still insisted that he loved me and that all couples go through ups and downs, but a child shouldn't be raised in a "broken home." So on the day my daughter was born, while in labor in my hospital bed, he summoned the hospital priest, and we got married.

In order to survive abuse, you become emotionally numb. It's like living in a shell of yourself. I stopped socializing as much. I developed a fear of leaving my house. Since my own home was unsafe, it felt impossible to feel safe anywhere in the world. I was always waiting for the next wrong move I would make that would ignite his anger or his contempt. I lost confidence in myself and my ability to manage my life. Even my children seemed timid and afraid all the time.

Then, one summer day, everything changed. It was a typical day, in that my ex husband had woken up angry about something he was certain I'd done, that I could prove I hadn't, but logic and reason seldom made their way into things once he was fired up. By this time, eight years into the marriage, my mom had moved in with us, and as such, she was also subjected to his anger. In rare fashion, I opted to leave the house in the middle of his tirade, because we needed some

groceries. My mother kept him engaged with her so that I could leave. By the time I had returned, he was still yelling, and then he threw a book at her and began threatening us both. I knew that if he was willing to attack her, we had hit a volatile point of no return, and I knew things needed to end immediately.

While my mother distracted him, I grabbed the phone and ran up to the attic to call 911. He followed me and banged on the locked attic door, trying to get in while I was on the phone. He broke the door open right as I finished the call. Shortly after, two police officers arrived, talked to us briefly, and arrested him. They later told me they had listened briefly outside to verify his behavior before knocking, so that he couldn't change his behavior in front of them to manipulate the situation — something he had done before.

Because he was charged with a crime when he was arrested, a temporary protection order was automatically put in place. It wasn't hard to decide to make it more permanent after that.

Getting my first protection order was a bit of a blur. I can barely recall filling out the paperwork at the courthouse, and having to cite incidents of violence during our relationship that led me to need the order. I do remember feeling terrified. I was afraid of angering him in obtaining the order. But I was much more afraid of what could happen if I had no protection order in place after the 30-day temporary order had expired.

I was granted a five-year civil protection order. Unfortunately, he continued to try to contact me. I initially feared reporting him, because I didn't want to provoke his anger, but he grew bolder until I had to. The day he was arrested for violating the protection order, eight months after I'd obtained it, I decided I really needed to finalize the end of things. I looked into filing for divorce.

At the time, I was working, but I didn't have a great job. I was barely making above minimum wage and knew I couldn't afford an attorney. I did some research online, and found Community Legal Aid as a resource to help survivors of domestic violence. I called their hotline and asked for help.

Susan, my attorney, was amazing. Because I had the protection order in place during our divorce hearing, my ex had to stay on one end of the courthouse, and Susan would run back and forth between us to work out the agreement. She treated me not just like a client; I felt like she was a friend. She kept me focused on what I really needed to do, handled all of the documentation, and prepared me for court. She kept me from being afraid.

Something about being able to get the divorce and make the ending of our marriage official gave me a different sense of confidence. I was able to get better jobs and have increased my income in this time. I moved to a better neighborhood. My kids are happier and well-adjusted, and I've started traveling a little more. I've taken up new art forms, and I learned how not to be afraid to take chances on myself. Things have been better than I could ever have imagined.

During my hearing for my protection order renewal, five years after the first order was granted and two years after our divorce was finalized, my ex was very upset. He was so disruptive and unhinged that the judge ended the hearing, and ordered him to leave, escorted by the bailiff. She gave me an additional hour to sit in her courtroom, to make sure he would be long gone. This

judge would be the same one five more years later who would hear my most recent protection order renewal request. And with the help of my Community Legal Aid attorney Jeanne, I was able to obtain another protection order. The judge remembered everything he had done at the last hearing and did not hesitate to grant the new one.

The most important thing I want people to take away from this is that my situation was extremely fortunate. I am alive, when so many others never make it out. I didn't have to flee my home for a battered women's shelter, because my ex was arrested and removed from our home. And I am thriving. One of the greatest hurdles to ending an abusive relationship can be getting help from the right places to end it. That includes intervention from law enforcement, and having access to legal assistance, especially for getting protection orders, supervised visitation orders if there are kids, and obtaining a divorce. I know without legal help, my situation would not have turned out as well as it did. And I strongly believe that everyone deserves access to the same legal help I received.

A few years ago, I joined the board of Community Legal Aid as a way to give back to the organization that helped me get my life back, and to help advocate for others who have stories similar to mine. I want victims to see that there is both hope and help for them, and I want to encourage others to get involved. To readers out there, whether you are in a situation like I was, or if you know someone who is, please don't give up. If my story has moved you, reach out to your local shelter or legal aid organization to find out how you can get involved or get assistance. Share this with your family, friends or coworkers, or spread the word on social media. And above all else, be aware. Take notice of people who may be struggling around you, and let them know there is help, and there is hope.

About the author: Athena Gough is a marketing professional, a mother of two, and a survivor of domestic violence. Her story and the stories of a number of other legal aid clients are profiled in Securing Stability: Legal Aid's Lasting Impact, published in 2019 by the Center for Community Solutions in Cleveland, Ohio. An earlier version of this article first appeared in Nonprofit Quarterly Magazine in August 2019. It has been updated for this reprint.

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