

The insight component of [Insight Exchange](#) shares a person's **lived experience** of violence and abuse, highlighting a person's responses and resistance to violence and where 'social responses' were helpful, unhelpful or harmful. This reveals the roles that individuals, organisations and communities play in people's experience of violence.

BRIANNA

Perpetrator 1

The first relationship I had with an abusive partner commenced when I was 22. I hadn't had any prior experience with family violence in my life, so when behaviours started to appear that I wasn't feeling comfortable with, I didn't really have a language to respond to that or any real strategies.

The behaviours started pretty quickly within this relationship. It was very much a whirlwind romance and within a couple of months of being together, he started making jokes at my expense, calling me derogatory names in front of my friends and his friends. I felt really uncomfortable and not happy

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about it. And I think I probably laughed awkwardly but didn't feel good inside. I don't think my friends were particularly comfortable either, but I suspect they didn't feel like they could challenge the boyfriend of their

friend. When I looked around the table when the 'put-downs' happened I could see the male friends of that perpetrator, seeming not to have so much of an issue and they were laughing along.

When I met this perpetrator, I was living in a share house with my two best female friends who I'd grown up with. I'd just returned from travelling around Europe. I was at university and I was really at a point where I was feeling happy and confident and hopeful about life's opportunities ahead. He was a man of the same age as me, who also came from a country town near to the farm where I grew up. We didn't know each other growing up, it was just randomly we discovered that as we got to know each other. He didn't present any initial warning sign to me that would set off red flags. He was very representative of many of the young country guys that I'd grown up with so, I felt comfortable around him. He was with a group of mates who'd also come from the same country town. So I guess slipping into this relationship, he presented that facade of charm and he kept presenting that to me.

But things started happening behind my back where he was starting to put things into place to control and isolate me. He was saying to my two female friends all these really nasty things about me to destabilise the friendship between me and them. He was making up stuff that I was saying about them, which I wasn't. Really undermining the friendship. And it got to a point where, I guess from his behaviours towards me and the stuff he was saying falsely that I had been saying about them, it created a situation where they were so uncomfortable living there that they moved out of the house with what seemed like flimsy excuses. Years later, when I tried to reconnect with these friends, I found out what he'd been saying, but at the time, I couldn't understand why it was happening because we had never had any issues. To this day, I haven't been able to reconcile those friendships, which has been a huge loss because they were people that I loved dearly.

“Well, how are you going to afford the rent?”

Once they were out of the picture, he actually moved himself into the property that I lived in, where my name was on the lease. He was already spending six nights out of seven staying there with me. And then when my friends left, it was like, “well, how are you going to afford the rent?” It was his

decision more so than mine. He then moved his two younger brothers in and it definitely was his decision more than mine to have his brothers there. And so the house became very male dominated and it was never intended to be that sort of space. It was meant to be this share house of women; really feminine. And it became the exact opposite. His younger brothers completely idolised him and there was quite a big age gap between them and him, and they didn't challenge any of his abusive behaviours.

Probably if I'd felt like I could stand up to him more at the time, I wouldn't have wanted to live with him, to have that dynamic, but he was already being physically violent towards me. That had commenced during the time that my female friends were still there. The first physical incident, after the first few months of isolating and verbally emotionally abusive behaviours, was when I was walking with him to his workplace. We went down this alleyway which was a shortcut. And we had an argument about something really inconsequential. I've no recollection of what it was about, it was that trivial. And he didn't agree with what I was saying. And he pulled out his work knife that he had because he worked in a shop at the markets - like a Stanley knife. And he chased me down the road with it. And like I said, I've never experienced any form of violence in my life. And even though I'd been feeling uncomfortable about all the verbal jokes and all those things at my expense, at that point in my life, I wouldn't have called those things abuse, although I would now.

But for me, that was a red flag. He didn't actually do anything with the knife, but he could see how scared I was. I think he had a moment of reality check when he did catch up to me. I was hysterical at that point and I was hysterical for quite a few hours afterwards. I let my female friends know what he'd done. I told him, "you have to leave." And he was very apologetic. "I don't know what came over me. I'll never do this again." And I was, by this stage, quite smitten in the relationship. And I said, "look, this is really horrible. Please don't ever do that again and I'll give you another chance."

I think that for my friends that was a bit of a tipping point to see what he was like, and along with what he was doing behind my back, I think precipitated them feeling like it was all too much; thinking they had to get out of it. I really wish they hadn't abandoned me. I understand why they did. I understand we were all in our early 20s. It was very confronting, and they were getting fed a side of the information that I didn't even know was happening. But I would have hoped, as friends having known me all my life, it would have been nice if they'd questioned that propaganda a bit more.

Unfortunately, not only did he not stop that behaviour, it escalated exponentially, particularly when the brothers moved in. He would have me on the ground, kicking me and they wouldn't intervene. They were between 17 to 19 and they just went quiet. I'd be crying, telling him to stop. He'd have me up against the wall, choking me to the point of me going unconscious. They didn't intervene at all. They didn't say anything to him about "you need to stop that. This isn't okay." They never comforted me afterwards. There was no challenge.

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One time, I'd just come home from visiting my family at the farm and been given some plums off one of the fruit trees. My perpetrator's Mum was coming down to stay a day or two afterwards. And I thought, wouldn't it be nice to make up some plum pies and cook some other things up? So I was starting this cooking session and was preparing to stew up the plums. And I had a pot of hot water to get ready to put them in. And all of a sudden, perpetrator, in this moment decides, "you know what? I need to use that pot and I'm going to be cooking my cooking. I want to cook this thing right now." And I was like, "hang on a second. It won't take me long. I just need to stew these up to make some fruit pies that we can have when your Mum's here." But no, he needed to have that pot right there in that second.

And so I'm pushing back a bit because I'd already started everything up and I was standing by the stove, and he's yelling at me and he just grabbed the pot, and he just dropped the whole pot of boiling water, so all the boiling water goes up my leg. And his brothers walk in. I was in a lot of pain because it burnt my leg and I think I probably screamed and then I'm crying. And they just take a look and walk back out again.

At which point I basically admit defeat: That's it. He can have the pot. I'm going upstairs. So I just went upstairs and got into my bed and cried. My perpetrator stayed down in the kitchen. And there was no apology. He didn't feel the need to show any remorse for that. He just got on with things and he had his space. I had my space.

I now know that he and his brothers witnessed that sort of dynamic between their own mother and father. And so I think that for them, it was normalised behaviour. It certainly wasn't for me. I was feeling very alone. I was feeling very scared.

At this point, what was going on in the broader context of my life was, my Dad had just had a marriage breakup. And he was quite focused on dealing with the fallout of his marriage and custody issues. My Mum and Dad had split when I was around 11, so this was actually his split from my stepmother. So Dad was calling on me for support. At the same time, my Mum had just received a

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diagnosis of bipolar. She'd been retrenched from her job as a result of the illness and she was starting to have the first of what's been now over 18 years' worth of regular involuntary admissions into psychiatric wards. I became, and have been, the main support person for her. So she was

really drawing on me for support during that period. And to top off the family stuff, my older brother who suffers from several serious, chronic health conditions, had surgery relating to an earlier accident and the hospital stuffed up the surgery meaning he needed to have further surgery to resolve what they'd done wrong the first time. He ended up needing six months in hospital to recover.

So I've got my Dad who's focused on his marriage breakdown and child custody issues, I've got my Mum who's really unwell and I've got my brother who's really unwell. And these people were my support network that I normally would have called on to talk to about what I was going through, but at the time, I didn't feel like I could add to their burdens.

In fact, I was getting calls from my Mum during that period saying, "I'm just feeling so devastated about what's happened, losing my job, everything, that I just feel I need to end my life." And I

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literally would be sitting there and getting these phone calls going, thinking - and I couldn't say it to her - but thinking, "Mum, you can't do this because I need you as my Mum and I'm feeling this way myself and I'm in this situation that I need to tell you about, but I can't add to your burden." It took me

years before I could open up about stuff because they were coming to me for support. I also had a lot of fear to protect them because during all of this, I was getting burnt, having my bones broken, being punched, kicked, and choked. And I did try to leave that perpetrator several times. But what would generally happen when I'd start packing to leave, I'd be putting things into boxes. And he'd come up and he'd have a knife at my throat and be like, "if you leave me, I will kill you and bury you in the backyard and then I will go after your family." And by this point in the relationship, I'd lost all my self-esteem and care for my own value, but I did care about my family. And what made me stay

was the actual fear of what he could do to my loved ones. I developed quite severe depression and anxiety and I attempted suicide on a number of occasions during that period.

I went to a GP clinic several times when my partner hurt me. It was the type of clinic where you get a different doctor every time, and it seemed like most of their doctors were men, and I was quite explicit about saying, "this injury has been caused by my partner," and the consistent response I got was the GP would focus on the

injury, not that I'd just disclosed that it was my partner that had caused it. Or that I was going through the stuff which led me to be feeling so down, or that all these bruises were caused by

this violence. They didn't even acknowledge what I'd just said. They would just look at "how can I treat the injury." No acknowledgment and no referrals to any service.

I was at a point of my life where I didn't know there were family violence social services. If I had been given a phone number, just once, to say here's this place that can help you through what you're going, I would have called it. But I never got any of that.

My world shrunk. I was in the middle of the city at a period of my life that I had been a real social butterfly with a big friendship network. And in this relationship, he got very jealous any time I'd go out with people that were not with him. And bit by bit, the invitations to go out to things dropped off, to a point where I wasn't even invited to go out with him. He was in a band and initially, I would go out to the gigs with the band because at least it was with him and he knew where I was. But he got to a point where he was like, "I don't want you coming out anymore." And then he would turn that against me going, "you're so boring. You never do anything. You're just here reading books and watching TV." For someone who'd travelled the world by myself, spoke a different language, had lots of friends; was seen as a party animal back in the day - he'd taken that light out of me.

So I was already feeling isolated from what had been a broad network of friends in my life to then have services, not identify the need for support when I'd been so explicit about what was happening to me, I guess, it fed into the messaging he was giving me that no one will believe me. "No one cares; you're worthless." And by this stage, his regular talking to me is, "you're a fat, useless c***. You're a bitch. You're a whore." All those things. And I got to a point where, even though I knew those things weren't true, I started to internalise those messages.

I knew there was a gun in the house.

be more through the job he had in the markets. I had seen him smoke a bong and to be honest, that was fairly normal party behaviour, so it didn't really concern me. But once he moved in with his brothers, that's when I became aware of his deeper involvement in drugs. He became linked with an underground drug network, that would be getting him to hold large quantities of drugs in our house and passing on unregistered firearms for him to hold on to. So, he was associating with some dangerous types and he was their dogsbody person that they'd get to do different things. And he took that on board because he saw himself as being entitled to mete out that vigilante style of justice.

The character he was as a person, I likened to a bit of a 'Good Will Hunting' type character. He was incredibly intelligent. He was studying chemistry, he would read law books just for fun, he had all these amazing talents, but there was the dark side to him there that really drew him to this other world. He had been gang raped in a park a few years earlier and so he had a lot of anger; not that I

The GP would focus on the injury, not that I'd just disclosed that it was my partner that had caused it.

A year into the relationship, it was my birthday and his birthday present to me was holding me hostage at gunpoint.

I knew there was a gun in the house. It turns out he was a drug dealer, particularly marijuana, but then it progressed to

excuse what he did to me. But a lot of his anger came from not having been given any support around that assault. So he had this real need to feel like he was in charge and that he was the stronger person. And so being part of the drug world suited this persona he'd created for himself.

It was something I didn't agree with. He was placing himself, his brothers and me at risk and it was something I would challenge him on. I would say, "look, you've got people calling our house to do drug deals." This was in the days of landlines.

"Do you seriously think if the police come in here, they're going to believe that your brothers and me are not involved with this?"

I was so scared. And he would just shut me

up and say, look, "you have to shut your fat mouth. This is happening. There's nothing you can do about it." I was always worried that I might get arrested for something that I was being forced to be a part of; something that I was not participating in.

"You have to shut your fat mouth. This is happening."

And so on this day, all I wanted to do for my birthday was go out and see a movie and he didn't want that. He refused to let me out of the house. He barricaded me in. I went to the door and he stood there and wouldn't let me out. Then he starts physically assaulting me. It was a two-storey terrace house and my room in the house was upstairs. So, I ran upstairs and barricaded myself in there.

"I really don't want my family to find me dead in a house, shot by the person who is meant to love me."

There was an old fireplace in the room and if I had my feet out from the door, I could push my feet up against it and wedge myself between the fireplace wall and the actual door. And

the force of him kicking against the door; I'm lucky that it didn't break. But it was my back that was copping all the brunt of him not being able to push the door open. And he's kicking at the door and I could hear the sound of the gun being cocked. And then he said, "I've got the gun here if you don't come out." And I happened to have the phone in the room with me. It was one of those cordless landline phones. And I thought, "shit, I've got to call the police." Even at the point where you're not feeling much self-worth, the desire to survive and the need to preserve yourself kicks in. And in my mind, I was like, "I really don't want my family to find me dead in a house, shot by the person who is meant to love me."

That was the first time that I had rung police. And I told them, "look, I'm being held hostage at gunpoint here. I just want to get out of the house. Please, help." It seemed like a ridiculously long amount of time before the police arrived although it probably wasn't that long. When they did arrive, I heard my perpetrator answer the door.

He was an absolute master manipulator. And he laid the charm on. He did the whole playing the boys' club sort of thing. I could hear from the way they were walking the house, they weren't really moving out of that hallway downstairs to actually investigate and look for anything. And I didn't hear them bring up anything about "where's this gun?" And they come upstairs and they take me out and they're like, "well, what do you want to do?" And at this point, I was like, "I just want to get out of here." They didn't do anything in terms of him at that point. They take me, and they're like, "well, where do you want to go?" I'm like, "well, I've got family in the country." So they dumped me at the Intercity/Country train station. No referrals for any support. No arrest. He was making me fear for my life. They didn't even look for the gun. They didn't take a statement.

"Well, what do you want to do?"

Then what happened when I got to that station is that I know the house is in my name, and most of the furniture and possessions in there are mine. And I'm thinking "if I don't go back, he's going to

have an absolute orgy of destruction. I know those things aren't the be all and end all, but I'm going to be the one who has to bear the cost of all this. And how do I explain that to people like my family who've supported me to get into this place? Well, I can't let that happen. My family, with all the things they're dealing with, they don't need this right now. So I just got on a suburban train and went straight back to the suburb where we lived together and went back in the house and got beaten and knocked out on the night of my birthday.

He used that night as part of his ongoing psychological abuse because he'd had nothing that held him accountable for his behaviours. I was the one removed, not him. So from then on when he'd be doing things to me in terms of physical abuse, and he'd say, "well, you're just going to ring the police, but what are they going to do? They're not going to do anything. They didn't do anything that other time, so what will they do now? They're not going to believe you." And to be honest, I didn't call the police again for the remaining two and a half years of being in that relationship. It actually took me another two years post-relationship before I did contact them again. I made several attempts to leave before I finally did get away.

“You’re just going to ring the police. What are they going to do? They're not going to do anything.”

We ended up moving out of that particular terrace house into a two-bedroom unit in an apartment block. That was humiliating to me because the walls were very thin so people around us could have heard what was going on. On our very first night in that place, he put me through one of the plaster walls. So after one night of being there, one of the first things he had to do was organise someone to do the plastering on the wall. And that dynamic didn't get any better. In fact, it was doubly humiliating because shortly after moving in there, the apartment above us got bought by a couple who were in the same year of school as me. They were two people from the ultra-popular, super rich group - because I went to a private school - and they're the perfect people. And so they've moved in upstairs and bought this place, and here's me renting with this violent dickhead. It was humiliating. It was at the two-bedroom unit, where he broke my finger. And I did break up with him after that. He didn't technically ever come back to live with me again, but we did reconcile.

I had a very deliberate thought process in finding my next place to live. I was like, I'm going to have to move a bit farther out, but I want to find somewhere I can afford all by myself so that I don't have to actually live with anyone else, unless I want to. But I'm going to get a two-bedroom place just in case I'm in a situation where I do need to have someone share. The ultimate endpoint for me yet again was about his disrespect towards my family. My older brother was in hospital again because of

“I’m so sick of you being disrespectful to the people that I love.”

an accident and living with severe illnesses. And at that point that he was in hospital quite ill, I was saying to the perpetrator, "I'm going out to visit my brother. Are you going to come down with me?" And this is a point where my family are starting to get a bit more of an idea of how shitty he's treating me. And his attitude at that point was, "no, I'm not

coming down to the hospital. I've been there before to see your brother. I don't need to go again. That's not my idea of a fun time." And I'm thinking, "my God, if any of your family members were in hospital right now and I said that to you, I would cop an absolute hiding." But at that point, because he'd been going from "I want to be with you. I don't want to be with you." And just playing such emotional psychological warfare with me, that was for me, the final moment. I just said, "do you know what? Do you want to be with me? No. That's fine by me." Because I didn't want to put up with another moment of it. "I'm so sick of you being disrespectful to the people that I love. I'm not

going to put up with this anymore.” And that’s when I thought, I can end this for good. And that’s when I said, “let me just bring your stuff.” And he was like that’s fine for him too.

But the moment he lost that control, a week later that’s when the stalking started. And he’d turn up at my work. He’d turn up at the dog park. There’d be all the hang up calls and the text messages. And just everything that just persisted for years.

Two years post-relationship when the stalking and harassment was particularly bad - he'd been texting and ringing all day – and I had this special night planned to take my cousin out for her birthday. And it was just when I'd started to trust again and was seeing a new guy and my ex is bombarding me with all this shit all day. So I rang my older brother and just told him a few of the things. And I said, “Can you just call him for me? Just tell him to stop because I’ve had enough. Just tell him to let it go.” So my brother did and then he rang back and said, “do you realise he's just moved around the corner from your house?” I'm like, “no, I didn't know that.” But that explained why my clothes were getting cut up on my clothesline, why I was getting messages of, “your lights are off. Where are you?” All this stuff.

So this was the day that I'd had leading up to going out for what was meant to be a special night. I went out. I was also going to catch up with the new person that I was seeing. And at some point in the night, my cousin and I got separated because she went off with some of her friends. And that left

I just want to go home, but I can't go home. If I go home, he's going to bash me up.

me in a position where I normally would have gone, “it’s time to call it quits,” get the taxi and go home. But on this particular night, because he’d continued throughout the night sending all these vile messages and ringing my phone and leaving voicemails, I remember sitting at the bus

stop, and just going, I just want to go home, but I can't go home. If I go home, he's going to bash me up. He'll be there on my doorstep. He's so wound up, I can't go home.

So the new person I was seeing was working in a bar in the city, so I'd popped in there. He was closing up the bar, so he couldn't really stay and chat. And there were some of his regulars there, who I thought were his friends, but turns out they weren't. But he'd told them to get me into a taxi so I was safe home. So when these guys who'd been at the bar came around the corner and saw me sitting at the bus stop, they were like, “can we help you into a taxi?” I'm like, “you know what? I'm just not ready to go. I'm still dealing with this guy who's just harassing me.” In fact, the phone rings again and I pass it to one of the guys and they're telling him to leave me alone. They're like, “do you want to come? We're going to another place. Do you want to come with us?” I'm like, do you know what? Yes, get some fresh air or walk, probably it'll give me a bit more time to think about what to do next.

And these three guys were travellers. And I have been a backpacker; done a lot of traveling. I didn't, in any way at that moment, feel like they're any different to any other backpackers I've hung out with in my travels. I didn't feel a risk. As it turned out, the bar where we walked to was closed. So we're heading back to their place. “You can come and hang out there for a bit till you decide what you want to do.” And I said, “that's great.” Got there and from my recollection, I had one sip out of the beer they offered me, just being polite because I didn't really want to drink anymore. I just wanted to get back into a state of mind where I could deal with what was going to face me at home. Next thing I know, I'm coming to and it's completely dark in the room. And one of the guys was raping me.

I couldn't even deal with what had just happened; I was so angry at the perpetrator because I'm like, I should never have been in that situation. I didn't even want to go back to that place. All I wanted to do is go home, get in a taxi and go home, yet I didn't feel like I could do that. And so I thought, you know what? This is now time, the first time in five years, to actually go to the police again. So I went and said, "look, I'm dealing with this person who put me through all this violence and abuse and he's still continuing to stalk and harass me. I need an intervention order." And I was told, "just go down to the Magistrates' Court and speak to the family violence registrar." Yet again, I didn't get a statement taken, and there were no offers of support. And to be honest, having just been raped and just on that day, also found out that my brother had gone into hospital for a head injury, I was just like, you know what? I don't have the emotional energy in this moment to do that.

"Just go down to the Magistrates' Court and speak to the family violence registrar."

It was a few days later, I got the first bit of support. I hadn't disclosed to anyone what had happened. But I had been accepted into a volunteer phone line training programme for a specialist women's service. I was also in the recruitment process to become a police officer. I'd gone through all the steps over a year and I was just at the point about going into the police academy and I thought it would strengthen my application to do some voluntary stuff.

So it was the fourth or fifth week of the volunteer training program and I was really enjoying it. And that week, we were getting training on sexual assault. This is three days after the rape. I thought, I don't even know how to talk about it yet. But I'm just going to go. I'm going to shut up. I'm not going to say anything. I'm just going to go and absorb. And then that backfired on me because of the way the training was conducted that day. So the facilitators got us to stand up in a line saying, "if you got a call about sexual assault today, stand at this end if you'd be okay with it, and if you wouldn't be okay with getting a call about sexual assault today, stand at the other end." And of course, I stood at the end where I wouldn't. And yet, again, I'm thinking I'll be all right. But then they start coming along the line and asking, "why?" And that was the point where I disclosed. To be honest, I really don't think that was a training method I would ever do to someone.

But when I reflect on it to have my disclosure be with a group of supportive women, I actually feel really, really lucky that's where it came out and the support I got. And that was the first time I was ever referred on for counselling and other supports. I'd had years of dealing with all this shit and never once been given any support.

I decided I had to report the rape because I'm thinking, I want to be a police officer, how can I tell other people to report this if I wouldn't do it myself? Not that I wanted to, to be honest. And as it turned out, the person who'd raped me had fled the country the next day. But I reported it. And the detective on my case, the way he treated me was abominable. He went through my statement in a room where people were just walking past, didn't take me into a private room. As soon as I mentioned that alcohol had been involved in that night, I could see his whole demeanour just changed. He lost interest.

A week later, I was called into a senior manager's office in the recruitment department of the Police Force. The detective on my case, because I had told him I was in the police recruiting process, he took it upon himself, without my consent, to go and tell the head of recruiting. And so this senior manager says "I have to make sure I put the best candidates forward and I don't know what to do in your situation." And I was thinking, "that's hardly my issue. Go out, find out what you need to do, come back." He was like, "it's not

"It's not like you've just had your bins knocked over now, is it?"

like you've just had your bins knocked over now, is it?" And I was already in a state of shock and to have that said and being made to feel like I was the criminal in the situation, it just made things so much worse. But it also lit a fire in me because I'm just like, "my God, I can't believe this is what I just heard." So I took that back to my counsellor and she said, "let's find out what happens next." But we decided if they don't allow me in based on me being a victim of rape, then I'm challenging this to equal opportunities and discrimination commission and so forth. It took them six months to actually decide that I wouldn't be a liability and that I could proceed. But by that stage, I'd actually found another role in government and I had bit of time to reflect on that.

But it lit the fire of wanting to change systems and processes, so when I saw an advertisement calling for a group of women to be trained to speak about their lived experience of family violence, to challenge the victim blaming myths, I thought, "this is what I need." Because at that stage, I was feeling very let down by systems and services, by the police.

I'd also gone through the magistrate's court to try and get an intervention order, and it was one of the worst days in my life.

It had got to the stage where his friends, the perpetrator's friends, were saying "you need to get an intervention order against him." And that, for me, was so validating, because knowing the associates in the underworld he was involved

with, when they're telling me I need one, meant something.

Because that was part of my issue for a long time was not only fear

of him, but I felt fear for the people surrounding him and the stuff that they did. It gave me the confidence that I'm only having to look out for him, maybe not having to look out for his associates who are also dangerous.

"You need to get an intervention order against him."

So on this day I'd gone out to the Magistrates Court with no support. It was the third time of the interim order being extended. I hadn't been advised by the police that he'd actually been served with the intervention order. He was actively trying to evade being served because at that point in time, he was on a good behaviour bond for fraud. And if he'd had an intervention order granted against him, it would have meant he'd go to jail. So he had very vested interest to not have that. On the first two times of going to court around the interim order and then having the extension, I'd taken my older brother and my best friend as witnesses and support people. And at this stage, I hadn't been told that there were applicant workers that existed in the courts to provide me with support through the process.

I hadn't been told any of this. I'd just been told by the police, "go out to the courts, speak to the family violence registrar, they'll guide you through it." It's like entering a different world that speaks another language. And I'm not an unintelligent person, but it's a very intimidating and scary environment. And so after two times of doing it with my friends and family member, I was like, "it's just going to be another extension. He hasn't been served. He's not going to be there. Don't take another day off work for me. I'll just deal with it." And the first two times, I'd actually got sympathetic magistrates. The third time was different.

The first I know that my ex is going to be there, is me driving around to the car park and seeing him standing at the front of the courts, smoking a cigarette with an ex-housemate of mine, who had condoned the abuse. In fact, he had watched my ex smashing my head on the kitchen table and

I had to run the gauntlet and walk past them just looking at me.

done nothing. So I knew this guy was going to be no support to me. I had to run the gauntlet and walk past them just looking at me. So I'm just in pieces by the

point I'm at the registrar's desk and I'm crying and I'm shaking. And I'm saying I didn't know he'd

been served. I wasn't expecting him to be here today. I don't have any of my support people. And he's like, "do you wish to speak to the applicant support worker?" And I'm like, "what's that?" And he's like, "I'll get them." And he just motioned to me to sit down. So I sat down right in front of him. About five minutes later, he pointed at a woman. And given that was our conversation just prior to that, I went up to the woman. I said, "are you the applicant support worker?" And she said, "yes." She wasn't, as I was to find out. It was actually his lawyer. And I disclosed things to her in that moment that I wouldn't have if I'd known that she was. And she was like, "do you want to get an undertaking?" I'm like, "no, this needs to be an order." And she's like, "do you have legal support?" She goes, "you know he's got a lawyer." And I said, "well, if he does, then I definitely need to." And I said, "and I really need support people here. I don't have anyone, so what I'd be seeking today is to get this adjourned so I can get this all sorted out." I'm saying all this thinking she's the applicant support worker and I didn't even know he'd been served. Then I see she's sitting next to him outside the court and I ring my Dad who's over two hours away in the country and knowing he has experience with family legal stuff, I said, "is it normal for the applicant support worker to be assisting both parties?" And he's like, "well, it seems a bit unusual, but it could happen." But he goes, "You're in court today? Let me get in the car. Try and get this adjourned to later until I get there." And then our case got called.

The magistrate was just an absolute bastard. I was on the stand and he's saying, "this is going to proceed." And I'm saying, "look, this needs to be adjourned because I don't have any support or family members here. I don't have any legal representation. I want legal representation. And also this woman here who is his legal representation," because now I knew that because we've all been introduced, "she has misrepresented herself to me as the applicant support worker and I do not feel this is appropriate." I can't believe I had the presence of mind in that moment of stress to say that, but I did. And he goes, "we're proceeding today. You've had more than enough time to prepare for this." I said, "can you at least wait for my Dad to get here? He's driving from the country right now." He said, "okay, we'll put it to the afternoon. But if he's not here by then, it's going ahead." So, in the lunch break, I'm ringing every person I know who knows about this situation saying, "please come." But no-one could get out of their commitments and I still haven't been seen by the applicant support worker.

"You've had more than enough time to prepare for this."

The case is called again. Dad hasn't arrived. I'm in there and I'm just a pile of jelly. I never knew I'd be asked to cross examine my perpetrator. And in that moment, I'm trying to think of all the legal TV shows I've ever seen in my life. To this day, I can't even remember the things I asked. But I'm also very cognisant of the fact that my ex enjoyed reading law books for fun. So the times where he'd

"You've put my life at risk."

been in court previously, he was quite happy that he could use his legal repartee to get off things. And so he just denied, denied,

denied. But the thing about all this too, is that even though this text message, which had a very clear threat to kill, had been shown to a police officer, had been shown to the family violence court registrar and multiple other people. The fact that I couldn't, on that day, produce it on my phone to the magistrate because I'd literally just deleted it off my phone a week earlier. It should have been enough that enough people who are in positions of authority had already seen it, but because I couldn't show it on that day, it was seen as a 'he said, she said,' situation and he wouldn't grant the order. And I said to the magistrate, "you've put my life at risk." And I walked out. I almost collapsed. And the perpetrator was outside with this old housemate of mine, and they're high-fiving and cheering.

Finally, the applicant support worker found me, which is also about the moment my Dad walked in the door. My Dad, with his presence of mind, was absolutely furious at what had happened. He went

around and got names and organised for the recording of the day that will be given to me so that I can make a complaint, if I wanted to, to the legal services ombudsman. Which at the time I wanted to, but the emotional labour at that point was just too much. I just felt that day, for me, made everything so much worse.

And so for me, part of my advocacy journey, is that after going through challenge and barrier and brick wall, one thing after another, and knowing that as someone who is educated, from a caring, supportive family, who knows systems; that if I can come up against all those challenges and find it so hard, I kept thinking how much harder for those who have a disability, or are from a non-English speaking background, and I was pissed off.

The advocacy program has given me an opportunity to be part of changing the narrative and demanding systems and services better respond to the needs of survivors. When the Royal Commission into family violence was announced, I felt very compelled to make a submission and I was called to give evidence. And it was simultaneously one of the hardest, but best things I've done in my life.

Four years later I had to get an intervention order against him again. This time I got it through a specialised family violence magistrate's court. And I had the polar opposite experience of the first time. Same perpetrator, completely opposite experience: I was supported by the police, they spoke on my behalf at the court, they took a statement. When I got to the court, there was an applicant support worker who identified herself with her ID, and then afterwards, I got a follow-up call from a specialist community service to offer me counselling support. By this stage, I was already being supported through psychologists funding that I got through victims' support, so I was able to say to the service, "thank you so much for making this call. I don't actually need your service, but I'm so happy you're doing this. And if I'd got this call many years ago, it would have made all the difference."

This time ... I was supported by the police, they spoke on my behalf at the court, they took a statement.

So to be able to say in the Royal Commission, that you can be trying to achieve the same outcome, but have two diametrically opposed experiences. To say this specialised family violence court model needs to be rolled out because it is always traumatising for someone who's going through this experience. And to talk about, from a healing and recovery angle, that there's a lot of services there for the point of crisis, but to heal and recover is lifelong journey. It doesn't end and you need to be able to access quality services on a non-needs basis for as long as you need it.

And the final thing that I was able to bring up with them was to say, the disparity in my Victims of Crime experience, that when I went to apply for victims of crime compensation as a result of the rape, well, to that point, I've never even been told that family violence is included. It took me to be raped to be told that family violence is something that victims support recognises too. And that changed my thinking because I could start referring to what had happened to me as a crime. But the disparity between what I went through with the rape and the family violence. For the rape I was given \$10,000. And then I was told, you can also apply under family violence, and that provided \$1,000. Now, it's not all about money, but it's the message that it sends. And I said this to the commissioners: a violent offence is a violent offence is a violent offence. And the money is making a judgment call about the impact and severity. And in fact, for me in my circumstance, the more severe thing was the family violence. And it needs to be looked at, this disparity in the message. And for me family violence shouldn't be a lesser category.

Perpetrator 2

I was still being stalked by perpetrator number one, when I entered a relationship with perpetrator number two. By the time I met perpetrator number two I was at a point of real happiness in my life. I felt like I was back on track. I had no debt. I had savings in the bank towards a house deposit. I had three sets of shares. I was working full time for a government department. I was in a really good financial position. And in the six and a half years I was with perpetrator two, my savings were eroded and I had to sell off pretty much all my shares. I'm in massive debt, all to fund him being able to go to festivals, travel, and maintain his addictions of gambling, alcohol, drugs and online shopping.

He was from Ireland and he was an absolute charmer. We met at a pub around New Years and he moved in five days later because he was about to become homeless. He and his mates were getting kicked out of their share house. He was literally going to stay in a park that night, because until they got paid that week, they'd exhausted all their funds partying up over the New Year's weekend. But I was sucked in by all the charm and fun and the Irish banter. So I offered them to stay at my place because I'd been in a similar situation years ago in London as a backpacker and thinking I'd have to sleep in Hyde Park, and I had a nice person offer to let me stay in their apartment. It wasn't ever any intention for it to be a long-term thing staying with me. I'm just like, "you and your mate, one of them, come and crash at my place till you get your pay, then I'll get you into a cheap youth hostel." But we all had so much fun that he never left until he actually walked out years later. And the friend stayed for about three months.

At the beginning, perpetrator two was on a working holiday visa, but that expired within about two months of us being together. Because his visa wasn't valid for his residency status, bills couldn't be in

Because his visa wasn't valid for residency, bills couldn't be in his name.

his name because no company would have accepted it. With the telephone contract, it made no sense for him to be on a prepaid phone because he was continually running out of credit. And I was just like, "why don't we get you onto a post-paid plan like me?" And I signed it up as a second number under my name. And because I was working full time in a

good government job, I had a really good credit rating. I was already living in the house that had the lease in my name. All the utility bills were already in my name. That was basically the normalised dynamic in our relationship. It was all so easy for him to walk in, and everything was all set up. But then at the end, it was so easy for him to walk out.

For the whole first year that we were together, he was not on a valid visa status. He was constantly scared of knocks on the door, having to work off the books. Because I was working for a government department, I was worried about breaching the Australian Public Service (APS) Code of Conduct. If it got out to my employers that I'm essentially harbouring an illegal immigrant, it wouldn't have reflected well on me. So after being together, living together for 12 months, we knew we could actually put in for the partner visa because we'd satisfied that 12 months together. But it meant he got put on a bridging visa and technically, he wasn't allowed to work for the first 12 months. So according to the department, I was meant to be supportive financially. He was working off the books as a gardener while I was the one taking financial responsibility.

That was the narrative within our relationship: He wanted to maintain a lifestyle whether we could afford it or not and I was the responsible one. If I

couldn't afford to do something, then he'd be making threats of, "if I can't do this anymore, I'm just going to walk out." And for me, that was like, "shit, I better extend the credit limit." If we'd had a

night out where we'd gone to all these places, most people go, "we've had a fun night. Let's go home." For him, it would be like, he had to be out for the entire weekend. And if I wasn't going to be

"If I can't do this, I'm just going to walk out."

on the journey, then he just fucked off and did his own thing. I knew at the time that if I'd push back and say, "look, our income level is not really meaning we can go and have a degustation menu dinner at a fancy restaurant," then it was, God forbid he should ever get bored, he literally would run off. He'd go off and have his weekend benders but I'd be required to make sure that the household living costs were covered. He'd be getting packages delivered frequently from the online shopping of designer clothes. I knew our income wasn't meeting our lifestyle needs, so I'd be putting the need to keep the household running ahead of my own personal needs. I'd be the one getting holes in my socks and undies and not doing things for me but making sure we could live. He'd still be off partying and I'll be saying, look, "I can't afford to do that. I can't come." He was like, "too bad. I'll see you Monday."

He was six years younger than me and I was absolutely head over heels in love with him for the entire six and a half years of our relationship. But I put a lot of my second perpetrator's behaviours down to the maturity level and the drinking. And I thought when he gets a little bit older, he'll grow out of these behaviours.

When he was drinking, there'd be a point where he'd be on a three-day bender, the switch would get flicked and the funny, nice guy would turn into this absolute monster. There'd be a whole different demeanour: The way he spoke, his accent would change, he'd get a look in his eye. We even had a name for the character that he was when he had switched, because he is Irish, and his accent turned to Scottish. And it was just a whole other persona.

When he'd go off, I'd be really stressed out about what state he's in because there's been times with his drinking where he'd got himself to a point where he'd collapsed by the side of the road or passed out and convulsing in the corner. So I had a real concern for his welfare and wellbeing. Over the years I'd call the alcohol and other drugs helpline, to talk about how I as the partner can respond to how that's impacting on me without being controlling towards him. Because his drinking behaviours were having a horrific impact. But that persona started to become present a lot more when he was sober too. And so any argument about whatever thing we might disagree about, it always then came back to my appearance. It could be about what we wanted to do on the weekend, and I'd be the fat c***. I'd be all these horrible derogatory names that had nothing to do with what we were discussing. He'd be continually demeaning me and talking about how no one likes me. I've got no friends. I'm a shit person, all these things.

I had been quite open about my previous experiences of domestic violence and the fact that I struggled with depression and anxiety and PTSD and supported my Mum with her bipolar. And he took the stuff that I talked about and used that as a playbook for how he then treated me. He knew how sensitive I was about the fact that I'd put on a bit of weight because of the injuries that I had from the physical violence previously, that caused me to not be as active as I wanted to be. And so he'd really play into how I felt about my body image and be saying, "well, I can never marry you until you lose weight," and get down to what would be his goal weight for me, which was losing 20 kilos. He'd be constantly talking about wanting to include someone else into our sex life and putting pressure on me to make that happen, which I didn't want. It made me feel really insecure and inadequate. The psychological abuse of when he

would just prod me, prod me, prod me for a reaction on something. And then when I felt like I was like the animal in the corner being poked

"You're my bipolar bear"

and poked and having an actual stress reaction to how he was provoking me, where I would cry or snap back at him, and he'd then turn that around to say "See, you're just like your mother. You've got bipolar just like her." Which I know I don't, but he'd do it like a joke, but it was very malicious; "You're my bipolar bear," as if it's a term of endearment. But he knew how much I found that disrespectful, not just to myself, but to my Mum.

One night he went out and drank a whole bottle of vodka and came back in the morning, completely out of it and picked a fight with me. He held a knife to my throat, threatened to kill me and I called the police. He was arrested, taken away in the police van, a statement was taken, all of this. An intervention order was put in place where he could live in the house, but he couldn't come into the house if he'd been drinking or taking drugs. And he stayed abstinent for nine months of that second year of our relationship. One of the things that gave me confidence at the beginning to stay is that I'd say to him, "I can't go through this shit again. You know what I've gone through. You need to get some support yourself." So he enrolled in drug and alcohol withdrawal and a men's behaviour change program, things that first perpetrator would have never done because he never saw that he had an issue. But perpetrator two engaged with those programs. And in fact, he'd be coming back talking to me about concepts around anger management. And I'd be like, "he's getting it." And then I'm like, "I can stay in this because he's trying to change."

It was when a bunch of his friends from Ireland came out and were living here as well that put a heap of pressure on him to get back into that lifestyle of him drinking, and then the behaviour

We've put in for a partner visa and I'm asking my friends and family to support that.

started again. But by that stage, I was so in love with him and also we had a visa situation. We'd put in for a partner visa for him and we were deeply in that process and I'm asking my friends and family to support that. So we're living together, we're very financially

embedded in each other's circumstances, and I loved him. For the whole time I was with him, I wanted the shit behaviours to stop, but I really wanted to stay with him. I hoped he would change.

As I said, I was 1,000% in love with this guy. My fear was a different fear with perpetrator two than with perpetrator one, because I'd invested so much in it. By this stage, my family knew about what had happened with person one and were ultra-protective. So for example, when perpetrator two got the intervention order and was arrested, their trust level for him went down significantly. And then when I accepted him back, and the fact that I accepted him back because he was doing drug and alcohol withdrawal and men's behaviour change and being sober at that point, he won them back. But then it also made me feel like, I can't really tell my family because it's going to be a bit of a, "I told you so," situation. And I felt like I had to keep up this image and pretence that everything was okay.

Another complicating factor for me was I was feeling a lot of guilt about potentially being a fraud in my life. I was presenting this image as an advocate and doing these speaking engagements speaking out against family violence, but in my home life, I was going through it again. And I didn't feel like I could speak about it to my supports. And by now, I knew what supports existed around family violence. But I'm like, this is a message I really want to get out, that anyone can be affected by this, even people who have knowledge of this, because that's how insidious family violence is. And there's emotion involved and hope. Hope to change is such a powerful thing. So, they're all these factors that were coming to play, where he was able to manipulate all that insecurity and stuff that I was feeling. For me it was about pleasing him and doing what he wanted to keep him rather than him running out.

He also knew how much I love and respect my family and so some of his forms of abuse, was to try and sabotage those special family moments. For my Gran's 90th birthday, all my family from around Australia and overseas were coming to this very special event and he deliberately drank a bottle of vodka the night before so he'd be so hung over that he wouldn't be in the state to drive. This is several years into the relationship. He's an established partner of mine and everyone was expecting him to be there. I'm turning up and I'm feeling upset. And having to mask that because it's a special occasion and it's like making those excuses for him, "he's got a stomach upset today." And I'm not a

liar. And being forced into feeling like I had to continually make lies to cover up why he wasn't coming to these special things.

In reverse, if his family had been living here in Australia and I'd behaved in the same way, I would have been treated by him like absolute crap. Total double standard. And so I think throughout all of that time, and why the financial situation had got to where it was, because of the need to keep up this facade.

By the time he had permanent residency and could be openly working on the books, our finances were already well established, so we didn't even take me off the phone contract; we put it in his

He'd give me an amount when he got paid, but any shortfall would always be up to me.

name but I was still financially responsible. He even started contributing and acting more responsibly. He would give me money towards bills, but he was very specific about everything had to be in my name. He'd give me an amount each Friday

when he got paid, towards the rent and bills and stuff but any shortfall would always be up to me.

My Dad and Stepdad really wanted to help him even get his own business started and were investigating ways to get him set up with his own tools. They helped pay for him to do his driving lessons so he could get his driving licence to improve his economic situation. My Mum gave him a car.

So my financial situation started high and stable and then went down to being in massive debt with no savings. His went from being homeless to accruing all these skills, a permanent visa status, a driver's licence, and walking out with no debt.

At the end, I was still completely in love with him. And it came as a complete surprise to me when he walked out. He'd been having an affair I had no knowledge about. It was the sixth year of our relationship and we'd actively discussed me finally trying for a child. So I'd gone off the pill. When he walked out, I didn't know I was pregnant. It was only about a month later that I discovered that.

When he walked out on me, we had a joint loan for \$50,000, which had come about as a result of the consolidation of several smaller loans and credit cards that had accrued as a result of his pressure for things that he wanted to have, the lifestyle he demanded. When he had periods out of work, I supported him from my income. During times when I had times out of work because of my health issues, he didn't support me. He never adjusted the way he lived. I had to look elsewhere to support my financial situation either from my family or more credit card debt. He didn't take any responsibility and didn't share the loan.

Both my Dad and I challenged him after he walked out because I wanted to see him face-to-face and say, "you need to give me some contribution towards this debt." And he just wouldn't. And then I wrote him an email saying, "this is the way you have been supported by myself and my family throughout the course of our relationship. You have both a moral and a legal obligation to support me with this." I was even offering him a settlement where he'd be paying only a quarter of the fortnightly repayments, compared to what I would.

He came back on that calling me every name under the sun, saying that I'm a psycho, that he should have listened to everyone talking about what a crazy person I am, that I'd always fuck him over and then I'm as crazy as my mother. And that he can't believe he wasted six and a half years of his life for me. This was the response.

The stress of being left with this massive debt that he refused to make any contributions to, finding out that I was pregnant, and at the time too, my Mum became unwell again with her health and so

did another elderly family member. All the stress of those things actually led to me having a miscarriage.

I will continue advocating in this space. But the fact is, it is exhausting. Every time I go into battle, it takes a chunk out of me.

He's never paid a cent towards the debt and I'm still paying it off. When I explained my situation to the Bank and asked for some recognition, the response that I got from them had a catastrophic impact on me. They sent me a letter which was very victim blaming and full of legalese. They offered to reduce the debt but only if I signed a confidentiality agreement. I refused. It was horrible. The way they responded had me yet again, thinking about ending my life. And yet again, I had to go through the process of challenging the structures of oppression to get a better outcome, not just for me, but for everyone. And I just wonder is there going to come a point where I don't have to fight for every single thing that matters? When is it going to actually come to a point where organisations just get it right the first time?

Acknowledgement and thanks

Domestic Violence Service Management (DVSM) would like to thank the person with lived experience of Domestic and Family Violence who has generously shared their insights for the benefit of others.

We acknowledge that despite our best efforts to assemble with a person a more accurate representation of some of their experiences of violence, we can never fully understand all that their experiences mean to them now or through their life. We understand that no one's life experience can ever be fully represented in language or any other form.

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