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**Angela**

\* THIS NARRATIVE INCLUDES DESCRIPTIONS OF DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE AND ABUSE. \*

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.

The Insight Exchange team have inserted content from the [Follow My Lead](#) resource as headings to help orientate the reader and to build understanding of the lived experience of violence. The following insights are from a person with lived experience of domestic and family violence.

## ANGELA

I'd say most of my childhood was domestic violence, it's just that it wasn't recognised as that at the time; that was the 1950s. There wasn't a break in the abuse in my life from when I was very young.

I was born in Albury in the country. Dad was an ambitious small business owner, and we moved a lot as he was always looking for his next opportunity. So I had lots of schools in my childhood. My father would bury himself in work. He ended up with a business in Sydney's Eastern suburbs; it was all about him bettering himself, it was all about him. He was very self-serving.

My mother and father didn't really have a happy marriage. Our family were strict Catholics, the man was the head of the household, that was how I grew up. My mother didn't question my father until I think I was about 12, when my mother started standing up to him. My parents stayed together, but it was a warzone.

Before we left Albury, I spent a lot of time with my grandmother and she'd bring me to her mother and her sister. From me being a baby, my grandmother brought me with her all the time, just me. I was the oldest grandchild, so I guess she spoilt me. They just loved me. And I was a good child. I had to be quiet all the time and I always was. They saw the goodness in me. But I think my mother was jealous. My father and my mother would say, "it's your grandmother's fault, she spoiled you." Being spoilt meant I was a bad person. I didn't like that. So my grandmother got the blame because she "spoiled" me.

**"It's your grandmother's fault, she spoiled you."**

My father physically abused me from the age of nine, nearly ten, until thirteen when I was sent away. It was all the time. Being the oldest, I always had my own room. He'd lock the door and beat me, but my mother never banged on the door or broke it down or anything.

My bedroom was up on the first floor and it overlooked the police station, and I still have nightmares about screaming "help, help, help" to that police station. And one time, I would have probably been about 11, I put my fists through the window, screaming "help, help, help," but the police never helped me. I still remember the sergeant's name. I guess he's long gone, but the police never interfered or did anything. It just wasn't like that in those days.

**The police never helped me.**

My father was the head of the household, so he could do what he pleased. He started to sexually abuse me from when I was a toddler in the bath; ways that I wasn't sure of then, but I know now it was real. I remember when I was seven or eight, I'd jam the door shut when I was in the bath to stop him from coming in. To protect myself.

I believed everything was my fault because I was never protected. My mother never stopped the abuse that happened or even came to me the next day to ask me how I felt. It was like it was just a silent abuse that was never acknowledged.

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## I identify with and belong to many communities and networks. *Follow My Lead*

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Before I even started school, I was compliant, I was a goody-goody. We lived around the corner from the church and the school. My mother would get me to take my younger brother to Mass - we couldn't say 'church'. We were daily communicants. We were sent off to Mass every morning before we started school. I think my mother did it to get rid of us. I think I was born to look after my siblings for my parents. By the time I was nine and a half, there were five younger ones, so I had a very busy childhood looking after them.

If you said one word wrong, you had to confess. But if you're going every day, there was no time to commit sins. Every day you'd have to make up sins because you hadn't done anything wrong and you had to go to confession and tell the priest you'd sinned. So, I used to make up sins because I didn't have any sins to say. I just had to go along with it and be the good Catholic girl. I was brought up to be compliant, to do as I was told.

I strived to be the best when I was young, and at school I used to be first, second or third in most classes every term but I was always first in Religion. Getting my award in Religion every term made my mother very proud. Nobody could beat me at being a Catholic when I was at school, nobody could beat me.

I was compliant until I rebelled.

By the time I was close to 13, I couldn't be that compliant, good little Catholic schoolgirl anymore. It was too painful. I had to change. I had to change my personality, my persona, I had to change everything to survive. I had to be a different person because the pain was too bad.

### **I had to be a different person because the pain was too bad.**

The depression started as a response to my father's abuse, and I started to care less. I was still compliant; I was still a good girl, but the violence and the depression were the crux of my starting to care less. I started rebelling.

In the country in those days, the doctor, the pharmacist, the headmaster, the nuns, the priest and the businessmen were meant to be more elite and did not mix with a lot of other people. We weren't allowed to play with non-Catholics, in those days, we called them 'publics' - I couldn't have non-Catholic friends. I'd have friends and if we walked past Dad's business, I couldn't walk in with all my friends, I always had to be aware of my father seeing me. I guess I was a little bit of a rebel and I had friends that weren't approved of.

I wouldn't do as I was told. I just couldn't be that good girl anymore. I still had to trudge up the hill as always with my siblings to school. But I couldn't continue being the good girl. I would have died. So, I had to have another personality; where I didn't care.

I thought that I had schizophrenia, just like different personalities, because I'd read the book, *Sybil*. I didn't understand it then. To me, it was the good girl/bad girl kind of thing. But I didn't fully understand schizophrenia then and my brother didn't have it then. I just knew I had to do something.

I'd get down on my hands and knees and put my hands together like a Catholic, "please, please, please send me to the Parramatta Girls' Home", because that was the only girls' home I knew of when I was a kid in the country. I would beg them to send me to Parramatta Girls' Home. But they didn't because they wouldn't have done that because of the shame it would have brought on the family. Things were kept behind closed doors in those days.

**“No child should have to live like that.”**

I got to the stage where they couldn't control me. My mother spoke to a nun about the abuse I suffered. She didn't speak to me about it, but she told me this nun said to her "no child should have to live like that," so my mother sent me to live with my grandparents in the suburbs of Sydney.

My mother only moved me because a nun told her. My mother was so Catholic, to the day she died, that she did what the nun told her. The priests and nuns were way up on pedestals, and whatever they said was like what God said.

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*I am a unique person with unique experiences. Follow My Lead*

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I was always told I was 'a bad person'. I feel like my oldest brother, Chris, and I were sort of like sacrificial lambs in a way. Chris has lived in psychiatric hospitals for most of his life. I know why that is. I know. I remember. He was abused as a pre-schooler. My younger siblings don't remember what happened to him like I do. He started a fire when he was in pre-school; and burned this paddock down – it was the paddock of a good Catholic neighbour. So my mother locked him in the bathroom, waiting for my father to come home. I can remember that day coming home from school and I heard his screams before I came around the corner. I used to think; "did my father do to my brother what he used to do to me from when I was nine to thirteen? Did my father do that to him before he even started school?"

With my brother there was a lot of violence; that's why the younger ones hate him. My brother would yell and scream at my father and he was violent to my mother. And my youngest brother, he used to have to pull him off my mother. My siblings don't care about him, they despise him, but they didn't understand the abuse that he experienced when he was young.

I'm the only one who remembers.

Keith and I were also close – we were the three eldest, Chris, Keith and I - it was the three of us. Keith took the same drugs as Chris, but he didn't end up with chronic schizophrenia or anything. I believe that the physical abuse by my father of Chris, meant he was predisposed to schizophrenia.

My two younger sisters were treated differently by my parents. My youngest brother that was in the middle of the two young sisters, he learnt to ask for nothing, whereas my sisters were spoiled and were bought everything.

I hate people judging people that have no insight into what's going on or why the person does what they do. My siblings judge my brother for his mental illness.

I'm the only one that remembers the abuse, but they're not interested in that. I make sure he's looked after. He loves me and I love him and stuff the others. I stick up for him.

**I've been on a mission ...  
so I can die with my heart  
as light as a feather.**

Keith passed away nearly four years ago, he was my champion in the family and the one that saw the goodness in me. He also shared the burden of my sick brother with me. Keith was a teacher of History and English. One of the most important things that I took from him was something that

he told me from the ancient Egyptians: They all wanted to die with their heart as light as a feather.

I've been on a mission to try and do that, so I can die with my heart as light as a feather, without hate in my heart.

When he died, it brought me and my youngest brother together briefly. He came and stayed with me for four days and he told me the story about what happened after I left when I was 13. And how my parents, changed my history and made out that I was this bad person. I always thought they would have done that and they did. I said to my brother, "I was going to be a nun at 12, how could I have

been a bad person?"

But it was like a secret that nobody around me believed. Every time my father abused me I'd just be there screaming, screaming, screaming, and my mother was sitting outside the door sympathising with him because I was there screaming. What was I supposed to think? So, I was a bad person.

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Where I am changes the risks I face and the responses I can expect to receive.

*Follow My Lead*

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As soon as I left to live with my grandparents, Chris and Keith were shipped off to boarding school. So, they got rid of three of us at the same time and we were brought up in Catholic schools. The three of us were really close. My parents got rid of half their family in one go. I think my parents wanted to get rid of us.

When I was sent to live with my grandparents, I could do as I pleased. No one really told me what to do. My mother and my grandmother allowed me to smoke cigarettes at 13. Nobody really brought me up.

It got me away from my father but sent me to a different kind of abuse. Not to do with my grandparents - but I suffered a lot of sexual abuse trying to get myself to the train station to go to school, to a Catholic girl's school. I'd be picked up and raped at least once a week by up to 14 men and then they would dump me off at the front school gate. There wasn't that many ways that I could try and leave my grandparent's house to get to the train station, and no matter how I tried, they'd always find me, those men.

The nuns never once asked me why I might turn up at school in the afternoon. I used to suffer a lot with eczema when I was a child, and the eczema on my legs was raw and weeping. I would have to walk into school,

with the sperm of 14 men running down my raw, weeping eczema. It's disgusting. I was only a child; I didn't know what to do. I just had to put up with everything. And I wasn't questioned by the nuns because I was an oddity to them in that era because I lived with my grandparents.

**The nuns never once asked me why I might turn up at school in the afternoon.**

Girls would ask, "are your parents divorced?" And I'd say, "no." I was an oddity as a Catholic schoolgirl that wasn't living with my parents. I would just turn up at school. The men would dump me off out the front gate when they were finished with me, and nobody protected me, the nuns didn't ask me, "where have you been? What happened?" In Catholicism in those days, there was no divorce and I didn't fit what a Catholic schoolgirl should be. Because I was a Catholic, I believed the sexualised abuse was my fault.

After the abuse, I'd get home from school and I would overdose on my grandmother's Mogadon tablets. My grandmother always had Mogadon tablets and stuff. I remember I took eight the first time. I didn't know if eight was going to kill me or not, so from the age of 13, I started to overdose on my grandmother's Mogadon after half a day or whatever of being raped by so many men. And they were men, they weren't boys.

Sometimes at night or on the weekends, those men would be outside, or parked down the road, and they'd be throwing rocks on my grandparent's roof. I couldn't tell my grandmother. They lived in a nice suburb. My grandparents were elderly. In the end, I was forced to go out and be raped all over again because my grandparents were scared. They'd ask, "why are people throwing rocks on our roof", and things like that? So, I'd have to go out to stop the rocks being thrown on the roof. I had to put myself in danger to protect my grandparents. I had to. I protected people a lot, but I always

thought it was my fault, always.

## I had to put myself in danger to protect my grandparents.

could she do? She was only 13, but she knew. She lived just around the corner from me, so we saw each other every day. She knew about the men. She's the only one.

She's still my friend now. We were friends from when I came to Sydney at 13. It's nice to have somebody go through your life that remembers you from that age. My life has been really a continuum of abuse without many breaks. I was sent to my grandparents to be safe, but I wasn't, and there wasn't anyone to protect me and I couldn't tell my grandparents what was going on. The nuns didn't protect me.

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I anticipate and respond to threats and risks wherever I go, with whoever I meet and whatever I do. *Follow My Lead*

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I'd been in Sydney for nearly two years, when my parents moved to Sydney and my brothers came back from boarding school and were sent to a local high school, which was a public school. That's when my family fell apart.

My parents had started to give up on the tight Catholic thing a bit. My father started having other women. I can understand that part of his shame. And with my mother, I can understand him having other women also. My mother had a stupid mouth and never knew when to shut it. He stopped being a practising Catholic because he was having women in his life.

My father was a drinker. After work, he'd always go the club; always. I guess we didn't know in those days that he was an alcoholic, because he functioned. He had 40 or 50 people working under him when he was in Sydney. He was the boss and he functioned. But then, he'd go to the club after work and come home after drinking, and they'd start arguing. I stayed with my grandparents most times. I could suit myself. I wasn't told what to do or anything, I just suited myself. I preferred to stay with my grandparents because I loved my grandmother and my grandmother loved me. The real love I had was from that generation of the family. They saw the goodness in me.

I left school around the time I turned 15. I left school just to stop the abuse; I had to. I had to protect myself from those men. My mother came, and I left school maybe on the Friday, my choice, and then she had a job for me on the Monday. So, I worked in the city for maybe six months.

I got pregnant when I was 15. I was raped by three men at the same time that I got pregnant. My children's father, my first husband, was also on the scene then, he was involved from when I was 13. He was five years older than me. But I guess, with him, it was like, maybe somebody loved me. Maybe. I don't know.

I didn't know whether I was pregnant to my children's father or the men that raped me. There was a court

case over that. The three men were charged with 'carnal knowledge', and so was my children's father. In the end, the three men that raped me got off, but my children's father was still charged with 'carnal knowledge', and I have a feeling he just married me to get off the charge. He was gutless; any man that beats women and children is gutless.

## I have a feeling he just married me to get off the charge.

My parents sent me off to an unmarried mother's home. My father did not want to see me pregnant so I was shipped off early.

I became the compliant girl again; I went back to being 'the good girl'. I used to feed all the babies at the hospital; the nurses loved me, and I used to feed all the unmarried mothers' babies who were isolated there; put somewhere else. That was the 60s, we were bad people then. We were something to be hidden away. We were wanton women, I guess; unmarried mothers. Even our babies were kept separate to other babies.

When my daughter was born, I was too young to keep her. I did as I was told and she was put up for adoption. You had 30 days in those days to get your child back. When my daughter was born, I was not supposed to see the baby because she was being put up for adoption. But I'd be there feeding all the babies, and I wasn't supposed to see her, but I did. When she was born, I knew she belonged to him, I knew he was her father, I could tell that straightaway.

## The only way I could get my daughter back, was to go with him.

Because I was too young, I couldn't adopt my daughter on my own, and my parents didn't support me. I hadn't had anything to do with my children's father for the whole pregnancy. And then he started harassing me again. So, the only way I could get my daughter back, was to go with him because he was 21 and he was old enough. So, I went with him and I just packed up and left with my school case and a few clothes and my clown doll. I didn't contact my parents or my grandparents for about six weeks. I went with him and got my daughter. It was the only way I could get my daughter back.

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I may be threatened, intimidated or coerced into doing things against my will.

*Follow My Lead*

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When I contacted them again, my mother and grandmother were like, "you can't live in sin, Catholics can't live in sin." So it was organised for me to be married. My parents wiped their hands of me again and I became compliant again. They organised for me to get married in a Catholic church. I didn't ask to get married; I was just doing as I was told. I was 16.

On the day of the wedding I remember my father walking me down the aisle to get married. And the way he spoke to me... he just gave me the biggest sermon of the shame I brought on the family and what a bad person I was and how embarrassing I was. It was horrible. He is doing this as I'm walking down the aisle. He's speaking to me privately, so, only I could hear. It was a big church and there weren't many people there. They were all in the front and we were up the back.

**He gave me the biggest sermon of the shame I brought on the family and what a bad person I was.**

And all I wanted to do was just turn around and run away from that church. I just wanted to run away, but what kept me going was the food afterwards. My grandmother and aunt had gone to all the trouble of preparing the food. And I thought, "oh, I'm going to ruin all of that". That's how young and naïve I was. I kept going down the aisle getting this sermon from my father, thinking about my grandmother and all the trouble they had gone to, to prepare the food for after I got married. That's why I kept walking down the aisle. If I had turned around and run away, they would have thought worse of me.

I was somebody walking to their fate like that's just the way it was. I didn't really have a choice. I couldn't turn around and run away although I wanted to. They gave me away to a narcissistic,

violent, cruel psychopath.

He had started abusing me from when I was 13. I always thought it was my fault. I can be up front and honest now, whereas once upon a time, I couldn't talk like that. I moved in with him when we got married and eleven months later, I had a second daughter. I was ill after my second daughter and my Catholic doctor didn't prescribe the pill. There was no talk about contraception or anything in Catholic schools. Nuns didn't talk about things like that.

My children's father seemed to believe that I was something like a sex toy. I was just something that he could rape or do whatever, when he chose, and he did. And then I had my son. So, while I was 16, 17, 18, I had three children.

Then, I had my third daughter when I was 22. He beat me regularly when I was pregnant with my second, third and fourth children. I became pregnant three times in the one year after my fourth daughter was born, and I had three terminations. He just wanted to keep me with I don't know how

## Secretly, I knew that I wasn't doing anything wrong.

many children. He just wanted to keep me there, lock me up and throw away the key.

anything wrong. He would come home, and he'd open the fridge up and if he felt like it, he would smash everything all over the walls and the ceiling. Everything. I can remember my oldest daughter staying up all night with me cleaning the walls. But secretly inside, I always knew the abuse was wrong.

Secretly, I knew that I wasn't doing

And I still had a grandmother that lived. But my grandmother passed away when I was 22. So, up until I was 22, I still had somebody that loved me and believed in me and knew that I was a good person.

Sometimes I'd fight back. One time, I got in the car because he was going to bash me. So, he got on the bonnet of the car, and I started driving; I wasn't getting out of the car, he would have killed me, and he was on the bonnet, and I drove a fair way with him on the bonnet and I enjoyed the fear on

## What I enjoyed was taking back control from him.

his face. He was scared, he was scared. But he would have killed me. I enjoyed it. That was probably the only time I ever got him back. I saw the fear in his face. He was right in front of me and I'm driving the car and he's on the

bonnet. I could have killed him in that moment, but what I enjoyed was taking back control from him. I saw the fear on his face. I created the fear in his face. I ended up stopping for him to get off the bonnet, then I took off.

My mother brought us up not to be racist, so none of us are racist, but I learned that after I was abused that the only thing I could say to hurt him was to call him a 'wog'. That was my only weapon to hurt him after he'd abused me, after he'd raped me. Physically, he used to bash me terribly and I would scream for hours, I would call him a 'wog'. It was the only thing I could say; that was my answer to his abuse. My father

always hated him, and my father was racist. That's where the word 'wog' came from, that's how my father would always refer to him.

## He kept money from me ... That was part of him controlling me.

I think one thing that stopped me from leaving was not having any money. I had no money and he kept money from me. That was one of the big things; not having any money. That was part of him controlling me and keeping me there. And if you've got nowhere to go, nobody to take you in.

I had a lot of black eyes with him. Both my father and my children's father would bash me mainly around the head. With my father, nobody would know; I'd go to school with big lumps all over my head and hair pulled out and things like that, but with my children's father, there was lots of black eyes.

## I wouldn't feel the pain as much if I kept screaming.

screaming, I'd be up 'there' somewhere. With the screaming, it kept me away from a lot from the physical pain. I worked that out as a kid, I don't know why.

He used to rape me all the time. When he did that I'd start screaming. Whenever he abused me, I just started screaming. Always. Because I wouldn't feel the pain as much if I kept

When I would start screaming my three older children would always come running in and that would stop him, usually. Not the youngest one though, we all protected her. But, one night he went to anally rape me and so I started screaming and my kids came running in, so naturally, he stopped. The next night, he starts to do it again, so I started screaming. And he said, "the kids can come in and see what I'm doing, they can come in, I'm not going to stop." So, I stopped screaming. That night, I had to hold the sliding door while he anally raped me with three screaming kids banging on the door. I had to hold the sliding door so they couldn't get in because he was going to let them see what he was doing to me.

I had to change. I had to become somebody different. I would have died. I couldn't do it any longer.

I left my husband when I was 27. I was a bit of a rebel to leave him as a Catholic. In that period from marrying him at 16 until I was 27, I had been 'compliant'.

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I am experienced in anticipating the patterns and tactics that the person abusing me uses against me. *Follow My Lead*

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When I had tried to escape before I would have to put four sleeping babies into the car, I would have to carry them all separately, into the car, to escape during the night, never knowing where I was going to go because I had nobody to take me in. And I would get into the car and start the ignition and he would come out with some part of the engine in his hand. He'd always take a part out of the car so I could never escape.

**He'd always take a part out of the car so I could never escape.**

Then, one weekend, he was going for a fishing weekend, he'd never done that before. So, he left early on a Saturday morning. And I had the removalists organised for Saturday afternoon. It was all I could do. So, whatever I took, that was it, and I could never go back and take anything else. But I escaped that Saturday afternoon with the kids.

My mother was in real estate. She wasn't against me leaving she just accepted it and she helped me rent a house in her area for the kids and me. I had to escape, my kids weren't safe, and I was overdosing all the time. I had to get out otherwise I'd die.

My friend from when I was 13 saw my ex-husband and was still talking to him a few times after I left, and she told me what he was saying about me to all the neighbours and anybody that would listen. He was just out to make himself look like he was the good guy and I was the bad guy.

I'm a better person than him. I've always known in my heart that I was a good person. All those years of being abused and nobody intervening, and it was still hard to think that I was a good person even though I know I was. And I was a good big sister; I looked after my siblings all the time and my children. So, I always knew that I had a good heart, and my grandmother and great-aunts and my

great-grandmother, they all knew that I had a good heart.

I remember a time in my parents' house in Sydney, I was doing dishes with my two brothers. We were probably in our early 20s or something like that. I was washing up, drying up, and we all turned around and father is approaching me across the kitchen, and he was absolutely damning. He was going to hurt me, my father, he was looking evil at me, not at my brothers, and he was slowly coming towards me. And my two brothers, who were taller than me then, they both stood in front of me and my father backed away and left. That's probably the last time my father came at me with violence. My two brothers stood in front of me.

**My two brothers ... stood in front of me and my father backed away and left.**

They always knew my nature. The younger ones didn't. The younger ones grew up being told I was a bad person. I always believed that my parents changed my history to make themselves look better. So, my grandmother got the blame.

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Although my despair is one form of resistance to the violence, I may be seen as 'clinically depressed' or as having another disorder. *Follow My Lead*

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I've overdosed and had my stomach pumped so many times. Only two friends know that. I started when I was 13. The only reason I knew that it was possible to overdose was because I wasn't allowed to mention Marilyn Monroe's name because I was a Catholic, and to a Catholic, she was a total slut, but, because I was a reader, I knew that she died by overdosing on tablets, so that's how I knew to take tablets. And my grandmother had tablets, but my grandmother didn't know what I was doing.

After I left my ex-husband I overdosed twice and ended up in hospital, they were the two worst overdoses. They told me that I'd died. I was getting more serious with my overdosing.

I had saved up to 80-odd pills – I'd counted them. The GPs in those days would give you a prescription for Valium and stuff, but I wouldn't take them, I stockpiled. It was really planned. After that second time where they told me I'd died, I really knew that I needed help otherwise I was going to die. And that scared me then, that second one really scared me. That's when I really knew that I needed help, and that's when I found my psychiatrist, and I've still got him: The same man for 30 years.

**My therapist has never told me what to do. He guides me...**

I was a few days off my 38<sup>th</sup> birthday when I met him and that's when I started to think that it wasn't all my fault. My therapist has never told me what to do. He guides me, he's kind of brought me up in these 30 years. My psychiatrist told me that nobody brought me up when I was a child. He's brought intelligence out in me. He's educated me, he's done so much for me, this man.

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"The decisions I make and if/how I take steps is influenced by my context, situation and the coercive control I am experiencing." *Follow My Lead*

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I don't feel like my life was ever really stable. At the time I left my ex-husband, I'd already been seeing a man that I ended up marrying; I moved out with just my children. Not long after, he moved in.

The second man I married, he wasn't abusive like my father and my children's father, but he was a drinker and he smoked a lot of marijuana. He didn't punch me or anything, but he threw me through a glass table once and I had 19 stitches. He threw a sledgehammer at me. I went up to the police

station and reported it. The policeman said to me, “that’s assault with a deadly weapon”. I reported it. There were a few other things and I made sure they were on file, if ever I needed to use them, even though I didn’t have him charged.

But, everything around me was usually smashed. He never punched me; he never did that; he hurt me in other ways. So, even though I’m not being physically abused, I’m still stuck with the memories, kind of thing. It’s still abuse. I left him but we stayed in touch.

After I separated, I went out with two men in that time I wasn’t with him, and one of them was a police prosecutor. It was weird; he ended up telling me that I was too demure for him. I hang on to that now and again. It’s so nice, after the way I’d been treated in my life for this police prosecutor to tell me that I was too demure. I liked that. It’s better than being called a slut of something, isn’t it? To be told I’m ‘too demure’. It was nice; it was like an honour for this man to tell me I was too demure. I guess he saw that I had a good heart too, but my heart was too good for him, so it was nice.

**It was like an honour for this man to tell me I was ‘too demure’.**

My daughter survived nine and three-quarter years with a brain tumour and had two operations. I always knew she was going to die in the end. My other daughter, the oldest one, she got breast cancer. So, I’ve done 99 days of radiotherapy with both of them, I’ve done so much chemotherapy. I was there every day. I spent my nights reading about Buddhism and writing it down, so I’d remember it. That was most of my nights I was just trying to find something to help me. Because I didn’t believe in anything Catholic then.

I walked every step of the way with them; took them to all their appointments. I was so busy for so many years. But I wasn’t playing the dutiful daughter, I was just being a good mother to my children. I walked every step of the way with them and I’m proud of that. The doctor at the hospital said to me just before she died, she said, “What you’ve done for your two daughters, you’re a hero.” The doctors believed that I was a hero. It was so nice to get that acknowledgement.

I always secretly knew I was a good person, always.

**“What you’ve done for your two daughters, you’re a hero.”**

My oldest daughter that got breast cancer, she’s still alive, but she didn’t speak to me for going on three years. She believed that everything was my fault and her father was a good guy, but I can’t tell my kids the truth about their father.

It’s hard to forgive a lot of things, especially when one daughter doesn’t speak to me because she thinks I’m ‘the bad guy’. But I can’t tell them what happened. I can’t tell my kids. And in a lot of ways, they don’t need to know. It was bad enough for them anyhow, how they grew up.

My daughter lives in her father’s house, the house that I left, that used to be my house. My son Jack, and I, we don’t think it’s very good for her mind to be in a place like that. My son and I wouldn’t spend a night there. To my son and I it’s the House of Horrors.

Just last week, he said to me, “Mum, why did you used to sleep with me sometimes?”, when I was living with their father. And I said, “well, after being abused, you don’t get into bed with the abuser. You had the widest bed in those days, so, I’d climb into bed with you.” He said, “yes, Mum, but every morning I’d wake up and see your mangled face.”

**“Yes, Mum, but every morning I’d wake up and see your mangled face.”**

He told me that last week, and he is now in his late 40s. And he asked me, "how old was I, Mum, when I said what I was going to do to Dad when I grew up?" And I said, oh, you would have been about seven because he was only about that when I left his father. And he was going to attack his father do defend me when he grew up.

I thought he'd escaped the domestic violence. But nobody escapes it. I don't think it ever fully leaves you if you're a victim. It was just sad that he said that, "I'd wake up, Mum, and I'd have to see your mangled face." In a way it's important to me that he remembers, it's not good for him, but there's someone to acknowledge it; who remembers that my face was mangled. It's like, "wow, I'm not on my own." I don't talk about it. I might talk about it to my psychiatrist, but I don't talk about it with my kids. But my kids remember.

When he was older, he had two punch-ups with his father. His father lives out in WA, and I don't say his name. I told my brother about it and he was like, "oh, that's terrible, that's sad. That's sad," meaning my son having a punch-up with his father. And I thought, "you have no insight. No idea. You didn't live with me all those years."

Jack's father remarried and whenever my son's been at his father's house, he has said to him, "Dad, you should be on the Sex Offenders' Register for life." So, his father runs around closing doors so, his wife can't hear any of what my son's saying to him. My son told him these things. It's nice when somebody defends you now and again, even if it's your son.

We talk quite regularly although we don't live near each other. He always comes to me at Christmas. He is a drinker and has other health issues. Talking to my son sometimes, I've learned, is not a good thing. Earlier this year, he called and he was really upset and wanted to know, was he born out of rape? So, I told him, "no." I said I was 19, you weren't born out of rape or anything like that. I just can't tell my kids.

## I can't say anything to my kids; I have to be really careful.

Being a drinker and having his health conditions doesn't mix. I don't want to be an enabler of my son with his drinking. He ended up in intensive care

earlier this year. When he's drunk, those things can come up. So, I can't say anything to my kids; I have to be really careful, especially with my son.

I'm very fortunate that I have a son that has a good heart.

My other daughter lives not far north. She has no contact with him at all. She hadn't even turned five when I left and now and again, she would go up to see him for holidays and she told me she'd spend days sitting outside the TAB in the car, things like that. So, she found out that for herself what it was like. She learnt for herself.

And she doesn't remember, she was only four. I don't think what happened is going to be in her head. She's gone on to live a good life and found a good man and has three really nice children and a nice home and lots of animals and whatever, she's having a good life. I'm proud of her.

She's not pulled back, like it's pulled my son and my older daughter back in their lives. I listen, but I don't enter into it. I don't say anything against her father to my daughter, I just listen. I just think the important thing is to listen. She's told me she doesn't need to know. The youngest one doesn't want to know about what happened.

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My relationship status with the person abusing me creates different levels of risk, threat and consequence for my dignity and wellbeing. *Follow My Lead*

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I hated my father all my life. I used to refer to my father behind his back as 'the old bastard'. That's

how I spent my life referring to him. 'The old bastard'. That used to upset one of my daughters. But I wasn't going to change. When I was young, I used to say that I would live in the gutter before I would live with that family again. But then I'd still be the dutiful daughter. In the last four years of his life, he was in a nursing home and I went at five o'clock every night and fed him. I think it was probably just being dutiful to begin with, it was what I had to do for different people in my life that weren't well.

So, for four years I would go there every evening at five o'clock and feed him, because there wasn't enough staff to feed the people at the nursing home. I didn't realise till after he died that that was compassion.

I've spent a lot of my years caring for people. My mother for the last 10 years of her life, I helped her live her life. I'd go to her home, go down and feed her. I would drive her everywhere. I'd take her to mass all the time. I did all those things. My two daughters with cancer treatment. I don't know where I got the energy from, running around in circles. I was younger then.

I didn't set out to have compassion. I didn't understand that at the time. And I didn't learn that lesson till after my father had passed away. Compassion for Buddhists is very freeing. You could forgive people. Out of that, I forgave my father, totally. I didn't have to do that. My father didn't really acknowledge what he did to me, he had dementia. But he gave me lots of little insights. I don't have anything against my father for what he did to me. In some ways he became a gentle old man in the nursing home. That gentle old man he was in the last four years of his life, if he hadn't been an alcoholic, he could have been a gentle man all his life. Which is sad. Really sad.

I don't refer to him as 'the old bastard' anymore.

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## I resist and respond to the violence, discrimination and oppression I experience. I do this in visible and invisible ways... *Follow My Lead*

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The year before my mother passed away, the local Catholic church had a service to celebrate its anniversary: All the senior figures of the Church were there. And one in particular - I won't acknowledge his supposed title - I will not do that for that man. He had to climb up ladders on every arch inside the church and light candles and there's quite a lot of arches in there.

And so, where my mother and I were sitting, was against an arch. And he had to squeeze up past us, my mother and I had to move our knees for him to get to the arch and climb up the ladder. And I'm sitting right next to the arch and he climbed up to light the candle. As he's climbing down the ladder he was scared and he's looking down and naturally I'm right there against the ladder and as he's climbing down, we eyeballed each other.

I'll never forget when I saw the fear in the man's eyes. He was scared of climbing those ladders. He would have known that I saw his fear

At that time all the stuff about the Catholic Church and historic child sex abuse hadn't come out. We didn't know about it then. He was very senior in the Catholic Church at that time. But he was just a

**I wasn't going to lower my eyes to him. For me to lower my eyes would have been respectful, but I didn't.**

mere mortal man. He's nothing. He's not on the pedestal that they've put him on. I saw fear in his eyes. We really eyeballed each other. He eyeballed me. It was more than a couple of seconds. I didn't take my eyes away. I wasn't going to lower my eyes to him. For me to lower my eyes would have been respectful, but I didn't. He had to take

his eyes off me. I was not going to; I was being defiant. I wasn't going to lower my eyes to him and be

respectful. You're just a man. Why should I lower my eyes to you?

He had to look away. It was like I went into a war with one of the highest-ranking Catholics in Australia. I didn't lower my eyes. I was defiant. I remember that clearly. It was a really important moment in my life.

I didn't feel sorry for him. He could have fallen and broken his neck and I still would have sat there; I wouldn't have helped him. That sounds pretty callous, but I don't have to kneel for any man. I won that. It was only a matter of seconds, but I won that round.

As soon as my mother died, I never went to church again. I didn't have to take her to church and to all the Catholic ceremonies and stuff; I didn't need to do it anymore. I will never put my hand up and say that I'm a Catholic. I don't need to be a Catholic; it's what you have in your own heart that counts. I believe there's a God, but I will never be a Catholic again because so much of being a Catholic was part of my abuse.

## I need to believe there's an afterlife.

But faith has been important for me. With my second daughter dying, I needed to

believe that there's an afterlife. A lot of people say, "oh no there's not". Well, I needed to believe there is because I want to see my daughter again and I want to see my grandmother. Even my mother and my father who came to see the goodness in me in old age. Yes, I need to believe there's an afterlife. But I don't need to be a Catholic to achieve that belief.

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The quality of the social responses I have received influences 'if' and 'how I engage with social networks and services. *Follow My Lead*

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When all that stuff with the Catholic church was going on, the Royal Commission, I really followed it. I followed it a lot and people deserve justice, and a lot of people were getting justice, but I could not get justice from the Catholic church. I tried. It's how I started off in my efforts to seek justice; I did try speaking to people in the Royal Commission because to me, I was in the care of the Catholic church and the nuns when the abuse happened. I should have been at school. But the Royal Commission was not interested in that because I wasn't abused on Catholic school land or by somebody that was at the school.

Twice, I went to the Children's Court. The lawyer cost something like \$6,000, to go to the Children's Court twice with me, and my ex-husband got off, and I couldn't afford to waste any more money on him. So, he never paid a cent of child support. Not one cent did that man pay, for my children. And he could have made life a little bit easier, but he didn't. So, yes, he never paid a cent to his children, not one cent. It's hard to let my children's father go. With him, it would have to be a civil case, and it's not worth it because he never paid a cent in maintenance for my children because I left him. Not one cent. When my daughter died he offered to pay half the funeral costs. She was his daughter too. The youngest daughter looked at me and said, "did you really believe him?" She's smart. The funeral cost over \$10,000. He never paid.

I found Victims Services. I think I phoned Beyond Blue or a help centre, and they told me maybe Victim Services might be able to help. This woman at Victims Services spoke to me, it must have been three hours, and she's probably the first outside person that I've told all that to. When we spoke, I got up to where I was at the age of 27 and ran out of time. What was I going to do? Talk to her all day? When I'd finished with that, I think she thought that was it, that was the end of the abuse. So, she put in five claims; she couldn't put any more than that in. So, my Victims Services claim ended at the abuse I experienced up until the age of 27. But the abuse I experienced went on for a lot longer. Especially the physical abuse went on a lot longer.

Victim Services wouldn't go any further forward with the claim until I went and got five crimes reported with the police. I procrastinated with the Victims Services process. I had to have my father charged. They asked me, "do you want him arrested?" But my father was dead. They asked me if I had the names for the other men to report them, and I said no. The report was there so Victims Services could carry on, but nobody was charged. There was only one name that I knew. At the time, I thought that the people who were alive would have to be charged, and I didn't want to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder. I was afraid of being identified and that it wouldn't be confidential. So, I procrastinated.

My friend that would come and sit with me and tell me stories while I went to sleep while I overdosed. She's the one that remembered. I didn't remember any names of those men and she said, "how could I ever forget?" And she told me his name, and she said that I told her he was a ringleader.

**"How could I ever forget?"**

I speak to the kids' father every now and again and he knew about those men. He's the one who reminded me about the rocks on the roof. As soon as he said that, I remembered. Those men were abusing me, he was abusing me too, but I'd forgotten about the rocks until he reminded me. So, he knew about the abuse, but as long as he got what he wanted, he didn't care what anybody else was doing.

Finally, I went to the police centre last year. I'm thinking I'm going to be anonymous there and no one is going to know me. I said, "no men, I only want to speak to a policewoman". But when I got there, there were two detectives, a man

and a woman. But straightaway I knew that he was a good guy. They believed me, and I told them my story and they were very sympathetic, empathic. They were just really nice. The conversation was just a one-off. They took me into a

**They believed me, and I told them my story and they were very sympathetic, empathic.**

room and straightaway I accepted the male detective. My psychiatrist is a male, all these years. Men are good guys too, they're not all bad guys. But, a lot of the time when I was young, I saw men as being the bad guys. That was the first time I could hold my head up and tell my story. Before that, my psychiatrist and my friend were the only two people that knew my whole life story.

My psychiatrist remembers when I couldn't even walk down the street. That's how self-conscious I was. I couldn't even walk down the street. But then, again, I'm nearly 68 and I met him just before I turned 37. It's taken a long time to be able to talk about it.

Once I spoke to those two police detectives it became easier, I can talk about it, I've got good friends that know a little bit of my story. Nobody except those two people will know my whole story. But I'm comfortable because I can talk about it now. It helped me because the male detective said to me, "do you want to charge anyone?" And I said no.

From then on, it's been easy to talk about it. I could never talk about it before. At least with Victims Services, it's been acknowledged. My life has been acknowledged through Victims Services up until I was 27. For what my children's father did to me, I received \$10,000. It's not the money. It's like they've put a price on something. It's not their fault, but my ex-husband did a lot more than that to me.

I guess, I have to let those men go, from when I was going to school. I thought, maybe I could put it all in the past and just get on with it. I'm 67 now, and I don't want to keep living with memories and hate in my heart. I was trying to get rid of all of that. Since I went to the police centre those men aren't so prominent in my mind.

I had to think of it the other day, I went and sat outside the house of my grandparents. I just sat there, and I just thought, "I didn't have any options." When I went out the front of the house, I only had two ways to head towards the station and they'd find me. So, it was like, maybe that was a bit freeing. "It wasn't my fault." Those men are not as prominent in my head now. Whereas my children's father is.

It's hard to let my children's father go, and especially seeing as I had one daughter that wasn't speaking to me for three years because she thought her father is great and whatever.

I spoke to him five or six years ago. I will never speak to him again for the rest of my life. I asked him why he abused me. "Why did you rape me and bash me?" And he thought about it, and he said, "because you called me a wog." And I said, "but I only called you that after you abused me."

I guess, it's not good to have hate in your heart but I can't ever see myself fully forgiving my children's father. I can't, because it will never be acknowledged, what he did to me.

A week or so ago my friend rang me and said, "quick, turn the news on," it was about this woman that killed her husband, stabbed her husband. He had attacked her with the iron. And the police kept her in a cell with a fractured eye socket and a dislocated shoulder and something else broken.

There was all this abuse and she ends up stabbing him and look how the police treated her. That poor woman, what they did to her. Honestly! I can understand why women kill their husbands, I can

## When you're stuck in that abuse, you have to just survive.

understand it. When you're stuck in that abuse, you have to just survive. I had four kids that had to survive too, go to school every day and do everything, I had to feed them do everything. And I don't see how any woman that comes from violence could be locked up for murdering her violent partner.

I can't ever believe I'll be freed of the hate for him; my children's father. I don't think it'll ever leave me. That's the limit of my compassion.

I don't know if it's possible for me to die with my heart as light as a feather because I have hate in my heart.

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It's my choice whether I am in a relationship and whether I choose to leave it.

*Follow My Lead*

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My second husband tries to be a good man. When my daughter had the brain tumour, he was really good to her and he was good to me. I was living in this tiny flat and he was living in a two-bedroom house. I was on my own and he welcomed us out there to his place. So, we stayed there because there was a lot of space. There was a back yard and a front yard, whereas I was in a little flat with no balcony. So, he was really good to me then.

It was his way of getting me back; I see that now. I love the space that I live in now, especially when he's not there. He's in Sydney all week and is just there on weekends. I guess, he spoils my serenity in a way because when he's there I have those memories. So, it's like I've freed myself up in so many ways from a lot of the abuse, but I'm still in a similar situation with memories. And even though he tries to be a good person, I can't forget. I've got a scar on my arm from where he threw me through the table, and I can't rest my arm on the hard table when I read; I have to put a cushion under my arm. So, every day basically, the memories are there with the cushion under my arm, I see the scars. I can handle the scars; it's more that it brings back the bad memories.

## I just say, “verbal violence” and he’ll stop.

He knows that I remember every day.

He’s got an anxiety problem, if he gets his anxiety going, it’s like the top of his head blowing off. He might come out, he might

swear a bit angrily, not usually at me; we don’t fight. I just say, “verbal violence” and he’ll stop. He handles whatever I say, but I call him on everything.

He is in Sydney during the week and he goes to my brother every Friday, so he shares that responsibility. I didn’t ask for his support with my brother, he doesn’t have to. He lived part-time with my mother for a number of years. He cared in a lot of ways for my mother, so that’s why he helps care for my brother.

I don’t refer to him as my partner. I don’t want a man in my life. I finished with men a long time ago. He pretty much respects that. He doesn’t harass me; there's none of that.

My boundaries are clear, violence is absolutely not okay. I don’t feel I need to rely on anybody else to continue doing what I want to do, I’m comfortable with being myself.

Maybe it’s part of being older and wiser. Maybe that’s part of it. I have been finding out about ‘agency’, I’ve had my psychiatrist encouraging me for all these years to do some things. He never tells me what to do, but since he’s mentioned the word ‘agency’ I’m hearing the word being used more often. It’s an important word, ‘agency’. I’m not being compliant to anybody; it’s coming from within me.

I don’t have to please anybody anymore. Even just getting my hair done; it’s been six months since I had my hair coloured. Why? Why do I have to get it coloured? Why? I don’t have to please anybody anymore; I can just be myself and sit around and read and sit with nature. I know I’m a strong person. You don’t get to this age without gaining any wisdom, I have gained some wisdom.

### Acknowledgement and thanks

Insight Exchange 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.

### Handle with dignity

You have been reading a carefully assembled excerpts of peoples lived experience of domestic and family violence. These are not simply another ‘story’, ‘sample’ or ‘case study’.

Whilst consent has been obtained to share these accounts we ask that as the custodian of these copies that you uphold the dignity of the people who shared them as you distribute and store them. Tips for handling with dignity:

- Keep the copies in an envelope distinct from paperwork and reports
- Explain the importance and value of these accounts before distributing them
- Collect any copies left behind by delegates/participants after workshops

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### Further resources and support

My Safety Kit is an Insight Exchange resource for any person who at some point may be reflecting on their own relationships and experiences of domestic and family violence. The resource may also have benefits for people who are:

- Supporting friends and family who are (or might be) experiencing domestic and family violence
- Working as a service responder to people experiencing domestic and family violence

[My Safety Kit](#) includes contact details for services across Australian states and territories that may be able to support a person in their next steps. It is available online at [www.insightexchange.net](http://www.insightexchange.net).

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