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Sandra

* 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.

SANDRA

I'm in my late 50s now. I married a man who gave me a lot but, behind closed doors, it was like I lived with the devil. Ric was a "street angel." In public, he was a charming man and very well liked. He was European, and I accepted his culture – or what I thought was his culture – but it turns out that he was just greedy, disrespectful, rude and nasty. He put me down all the time. Even in a crowd of people he'd make snide remarks. We were never a partnership and that was pretty sad to me. I had done Family Studies at college, so I could see I wasn't in the textbook family unit that I thought I was going to have. And that was hard for me to come to terms with. I just thought I was trapped, and I couldn't get out of it.

I came from Housing Commission. Housing Commission in those days was very different then to what it is today. In those days it was because you couldn't afford to buy a house; everyone went to work, came home. Within my own household my Mum was an unhappy lady because she had fallen pregnant with me, and I don't think she ever wanted that.

She was a trapped wife; I don't think she ever wanted to be married. So I vowed that I would never marry a local boy. I even applied for a job in the countryside, but my employer sent me back to a job in my local area.

"This guy's a good guy, you should go for him."

That was when I met Ric. I got sick – it was the flu season – and when I walked into the doctor's surgery, there was Ric – he had been in the year above me at school and he was a very well-known person round the school. So, I said hello to him and he pursued me by ringing up my place of employment. Ric was one of the only "ethnics" in the area; it was very Anglo-Saxon in those days. But he stood out and he stood up for himself. He was quite successful.

How you and I view things is personal and unique and can change over time.

Follow My Lead

My Mother used to laugh at me because I was in my late 20s and never had a serious boyfriend and so I was going to be "left on the shelf". She kept on saying "This guy's a good guy, you should go for him." And you know he had a car, wore suits and he was a smooth talker – not a romantic talker – just a smooth, and impressive talker. So I did bite; I was tired of it being made out that I was going to be "left on the shelf."

I went out with him and in the same week, I went out with another guy. My mother was so disgusted that I went out with another guy in the same week that I got kicked out of home because I was a "slut". It was "how dare you – you've gone out with

these two men in one week." I just went out with them for dinner. One had just had a divorce and I was

"How dare you ... slut"

consoling him as a friend and I went out with Ric, with him and his mate, but that made me a "slut".

Ric rescued me. I told him that I was getting kicked out of home and I didn't have anywhere to live, and he said to me "I want you to have all your stuff out on the veranda. I'll organise something for you." So he did. He was my knight in shining armour. I went to his mother's house and stayed there for a couple of weeks before I moved in to a room of my own at a friend's place.

We started going out together. He used to tell me that he got me out of the gutter and I should be grateful for what I've got because he took me out of the gutter. He was still seeing his ex-girlfriend at the time. He said it was just friendly, but I wasn't happy with the fact he was still seeing her. But it was always in the back of my head, "Am I going to get anyone else? Will I be left on the shelf?"

"You're crazy like your mother."

He never wanted to marry me, he never asked me to marry him. We were out with a bunch of friends one day and one of my friend's said to Ric "say after me: Sandra, will you marry me?" and he went, "Sandra, will you marry me?" and I really wish she hadn't done that because I don't think Ric would have married me otherwise. I don't think he really wanted to be with me. He made me his trophy wife; I was thin, long legs, so I was a "trophy wife".

Ric would make out that I couldn't do without him and I never thought I could either. He used to tell me I'm useless, I'm crazy, "you're crazy like your mother." My mother was a bit crazy; she was a pretty unhappy lady. She'd tell us that she hated us all the time, which was devastating.

All the decision making was his. He bought all my clothes, all my underwear. I had some beautiful underwear which was so uncomfortable – you know, wrong sizes and I used to get told, "go and lose weight." The underwear was just to parade around in – nothing else - there was no nice interaction.

For a while I thought "oh, he's spending more money on me than I would probably spend on myself." I grew up in a pretty poor household. I was appreciative that someone was wanting to buy something for me, even though it was ill-fitting, and yes, perhaps I'd better lose weight. He'd come home with a new lounge – and I'd say, "Why couldn't we choose it together?" And he said, "You've got no taste." I bought an outfit once, it was a beautiful denim outfit, and he forbade me from wearing it; told me I wasn't to wear it, he hated it and I was never to wear it in front of him. He said I've got "no taste".

I'd rather just a kiss and a cuddle and him to say, "I'm sorry," but I'd never get that.

I used to get the flowers. It was nice at first and then I realised it was just guilt. And I'm thinking "yeah, you called me every name under the sun last night and now you're bringing flowers home." I'd rather just a kiss and a cuddle and him to say, "I'm sorry," but I'd never get that, I'd get a gift. He was a gift-giver to cover up his own conscience.

When I met him he had a block of land with his former girlfriend and so he bought her out and then he put my name on the land title and so we built a house together when we first married. I thought that was nice of him. I felt indebted to him for doing that.

But I knew things were getting worse when he put his hands around my throat and pushed me through a door, I realised "this is not right." I had said something critical about his mother. And I quickly learnt you don't say criticise his family. He's very family-orientated and that's good, but he's got them around his little finger as well.

As soon as I had my son, he told me to leave my job. “Stay at home, look after the kids - I will earn the money.” That wasn’t what I wanted. When I was pregnant with Daniel, I went for a promotion which involved a two-day interview process and the night before the interview, Ric insisted that I

I asked for housekeeping money and he gave me \$5 and said, “don’t spend it all at once.”

hem his trousers instead of preparing for this job. He said, “you’re pregnant, you’re going to leave anyway.” And just after the baby was born, he said, “you’re going to resign.” I knew then that you don’t challenge him if you want to stay out of trouble. So when I finished my six weeks maternity leave, I walked in with my resignation papers.

When I resigned, he told me to cash in my super. We were buying all these houses. He got me to cancel my super and I got paid out \$15,000 and he put that in the driveway of the house that we were building. I am spewing about that. I can’t believe he made me cash it in to pay for the driveway and then he buys himself another prestige car the next week. That’s what he’s like.

I asked for housekeeping money and he gave me \$5 and said, “don’t spend it all at once.” And I knew there was no way that I could live on \$5, especially when I always had to look good, had to have the right haircut, had to have the makeup. He used to say, “Go and put shit on your face”; make-up. That’s how he used to talk to me, “Go put some shit on your face.” So I thought, I’m going to go back to my employer and get a casual job. So that’s what I did. I knew that I would have to work for my own sanity. I actually started back at work to know that I was normal and that when I came to work I was respected, and I was treated like normal and there was normality about me.

Ric wasn’t happy about that; was not happy at all. But how it all worked out was there was a lady at work who said “I want you to come and work for me because I’m going on leave. All I need you to do is work 12 days for me.” Two days a week for six weeks. So I convinced my mother-in-law, who was very multicultural – and all about “the family” – to look after Daniel. And I went and worked these 12 days and my mother-in-law enjoyed it because she saw the grandchild, her grand-son. So, she gave me permission to work two days a week and that made a difference with Ric.

He’d bag me every day for working and he’d check my housework. “Did you do any housework today?” And I’d worked all day; “Did you do any housework today? The place looks like a shambles.” The place is no different than it was when we walked out that morning, because we were tidy people, but he would question my cleaning when he walked in the door.

I respond to and resist the violence, discrimination and oppression in my own way despite danger and unpredictability. *Follow My Lead*

It was five years before our next child. I was so unhappy in our marriage and he was never home because he was always overseas, working. And finally, he told me there was something wrong with me because we hadn’t had another child. My first son wanted a sibling and Ric said I had to go and have a gynaecological check because there was something wrong with me. So, I proved him wrong and fell pregnant and brought another son into the world.

I used to get upset when he’d call me names. He’s got a foul mouth; a filthy mouth. I’m no prima donna, you know I can say it too, but it was just every second word is the “f word”. I used to fight for a while there, I was fighting and calling him every name under the sun. He’d just chew me up and spit me back out, so I soon learnt it wasn’t worth it. I wanted to become myself again, not the ugly person he was turning me into because I wanted to defend myself. I decided to just go with the flow.

I'd go into "self-mode" I'd just shrink within myself and all my emotions. Even now, when he yells at me, I go into shut-down mode.

Ric was a businessman; well known in the local European community. He bought out the company he was working for early in our marriage and put my name on the contract as director. I remember signing some papers right at the beginning, but I wasn't allowed to be involved in anything to do with the company. But the business was successful and we made a comfortable living. We had a nice house – a big house. And we owned an office building for that business and we ended up with several investment properties; all worth about \$600k each.

Whenever there was a sleepover, I'd encourage them to go so they could see what normal families were like.

the boys' needed. Ric paid the school fees and he always used to buy all their clothes as well. But if the boys wanted to go to McDonalds or presents for a party, I would buy that. I used to live on \$25 a fortnight because my boys were doing sport and I was paying for that because I wanted my boys to mix with others. Whenever there was a sleepover, I'd encourage them to go so they could see what "normal" families were like. We used to have Christmas and the presents around the tree would be amazing. Ric would buy all the Christmas presents - I wasn't allowed to buy the Christmas presents. And the boys said to me one day, "you never buy us Christmas presents". I used to buy little things with what I could afford, but Ric would buy these amazing presents that said 'from Mum and Dad' but always in his handwriting and he makes it clear they're from him. The boys said to me "you don't even buy us Christmas presents".

At one stage everything was in Ric's name - our house, the investment properties; he bought a boat - and then all of a sudden, he changed everything to both our names which was interesting, and I always knew there must have been a reason why. I couldn't work out why everything went in both our names whereas before it was just in his. His name was on everything; my car, all the cars (he had four luxury cars). If I asked about the finances, he'd just say "it's all under control." I mean I got a nice flash car for Christmas – it wasn't in the same league as his cars, but it was nice. It was owned by the company; some of our things were in the business name. He makes everything so convoluted and so confusing and it does my head in. It's only in the last couple of years I've started opening mail up and getting my head around how much money "we" owe.

I found out from his accountant that he was drawing two wages; one for himself and one for me. Two cheques every pay. I never saw that money. Ever. And Ric would do my tax returns – he didn't do them himself he'd have an accountant do them. And every year I'd get a big tax cheque and I just thought "oh ok. I got it all back." I wasn't allowed to see anything. Wasn't allowed to question anything. And then he'd yell at me and tell me that I had his money with the tax cheque and I could never work out why. I rang the tax guys and said, "is it my money?" and they said "yes, it's yours." And it didn't dawn on me until we did separate, and my tax return was \$550, what he was doing. I rang up the accountant and said, "What's going on?" I said, "I used to get thousands every year, now I'm getting \$550." And he said, "I had to put one of your houses in because you're drawing rent." I said, "but I've never got a cent of rent." He said, "well that's your problem."

"That's your problem."

He would never want to do a joint account. "You're useless, you've got no idea how to pay bills. I'll run the finances." I was never allowed to open a bill, even if it was to "Mr & Mrs" - no. It's only been the last couple of years I've been opening mail. And so I just lived on my money.

The boys did sport when they were growing up and I paid for the boys' sport and anything that

All these years Ric was using me to make his tax look good. He made me stay at home all those years, so he could hide his income and split it with me, without my knowledge. I was used.

The person using violence violates my rights, restricts my choices, and limits my capacity to act and put into force my own decisions. *Follow My Lead*

About seven years ago, we bought a new house – a nice big beautiful house. This is when the kids are in their late teens, early 20s. And the day we're moving to the new house, we're in a little van driving all our furniture backwards and forwards like crazy people. And my son behaved like my husband; demanding to have dinner on the table. "When's dinner? I'm going to training and my dinner's not ready!" And Ric had a go at me about not having dinner on the table for Daniel. He said "you've got to realise you have duties here. He can't train on an empty stomach. You said you were going to do this." I was carting goods all day between the two houses. Ric said, "You should have dinner on the table when we want dinner on the table!" Because that's what his Mum used to do for him. He waited 'til Daniel had gone and then he smacked me. I tried to leave the house, but he restrained me. He grabbed me by the arms and I had bruises all over my arms. In the end he convinced me to go to bed. He actually cuddled me all night. That was the first time he ever did that, ever, in our whole 20-plus years of marriage – because he's not a cuddler.

When I woke up the next morning and got out of the shower I looked in the mirror and had a huge black eye. I just kept going and went to work. Because he made me cry all the time I always had puffy eyes, so I always went to work with puffy eyes. People would say "what's wrong with your eyes?" and I'd say, "can't sleep," I used to just make up excuses all the time.

And then I walked into work with my sunnies on and my colleague goes, "what's with the sunnies?" and I took my sunglasses off and my colleague started crying and went and got our boss. The boss walks in and says "Sandra?", so I showed him. "What are you going to do?" he says. And I said, "I can't do this anymore." He says, "Go to the police." So, I went to the police with a friend of mine, Debbie. Little did I realise because I was bruised that's an assault charge and he got arrested.

Straight away he rang my sons and they went and bailed him out. I didn't even know this was happening because I had no idea how the process worked.

I'll be looking to see if you give more weight to what the person abusing me says than what I say. *Follow My Lead*

I got a call from another friend, "Sands, they're really worried about you – Ric and your sons." And I say "really?" And he says "You've got to meet them. Are you ok?" And I said "yeah, I'm fine." And they wanted to meet back at the house; the empty house we've just vacated.

So I went. Debbie came with me. When I got there, she just stayed at the doorway because she didn't want to be involved and I didn't want her to be involved. And there are two of our friends; a couple - one was a doctor and the other a lawyer. And the doctor, she took me aside and said, "you've got to go and seek counselling." Because Ric had convinced them that I was crazy. I said, "yep, I probably do need counselling." I always wanted to go to counselling with Ric so we could sort out our marriage, but he was never interested. Ric then says, "If you withdraw the charge, I will go to counselling." And my sons are begging me, "Please Mum, please. Look what you're doing to the family. You're destroying the family. Why are you destroying the family?" Our solicitor friend actually took me down to my son's house and made me write out, print and sign a letter of retraction. And I went down and I signed the paperwork. Reluctantly. Absolutely reluctantly. But I just wanted to keep my family together.

My son took me down the police station and I handed that letter over and you know what? I found out later, police are wiser than I thought. They were aware this often happens afterward; that you want to retract the statement that you made. So it went to court anyway and he got charged with assault and he also had the protection order against him.

“Look what you’re doing to the family. You’re destroying the family.”

I thought he’d change his behaviour, I guess. I always hoped he would become a better person. And he promised me that he would go to counselling. I went to counselling for the first session, and I brought home all the paperwork for him and he just said “I’m not going to counselling. What do you think I am?”

I know you want to help but if you oversimplify my world so that you feel you can understand, you lose sight of my challenges and my capacities.

Follow My Lead

I lost my job over it because my boss and my colleague didn’t want to be involved any more with me and Ric’s violence. They expected me to walk out on my family given what had happened and I couldn’t, so I lost my job. By then I’d be working there for more than 20 years. First they tried to get rid of me by cutting my wages. And I still accepted the money. I was earning less wages doing the same job and Ric knew that and wouldn’t give me one cent extra; so I survived on \$120 a week it was. Then one day the boss walks in with a brand-new hard drive and says, “here you go, give me your hard drive; it’s our intellectual property and I want your hard drive.” I said, “I’ve got 20 years of work on there - you can have anything that’s on there.” He said “no, I want your hard drive.” But because I refused to hand over the whole hard drive, I lost my job. I gave them the hard drive as I walked out. I was devastated. I was curled up in a foetal position for weeks.

I lost most of the friends we had [from the European community we were a part of]. They supported Ric. They made out I was the mad one. They’ve even said this to my face, “I don’t understand what you’re doing.” That’s fine, I’ve had to learn to live with that. But it hurts. It hurts.

I’ve got some really strong friends who have rallied around me. Even a couple who have rung me and said “I’ve been looking at Facebook and noticed you’re never in any photos. What’s going on?”

My counsellor said I was like a prisoner who’s been in jail and doesn’t want to leave that jail for the unknown; the big wide world. And I couldn’t. I never wanted to break up this marriage. But she said, “you need to get a solicitor.” So I went to a

“If you’re not prepared to divorce him right now ... and leave, I can’t help you.”

solicitor and the first thing she said to me was, “divorce him.” I said “No, no, no – I just want to know my rights.” She said “you should divorce him. You should divorce him right now. If you’re not prepared to divorce him right now and separate and leave, I can’t help you.” I was like “Ok. I know you’re around.”

The abuse I have experienced in the past might be similar or different to the current or future threats I face. *Follow My Lead*

After I had the black eye, I was diagnosed with a tumour; a benign tumour. I think Ric was hoping I would die - I was hoping I’d die too. I really was; a way out of my misery. I was operated on and they removed the tumour - it was the size of a table tennis ball. Consequently, I woke up and I couldn’t

walk; all my right side was affected. I was worried I'd be paralysed and have to deal with Ric, but my movement started coming back, slowly.

He was so horrible to me then. He brought me out of hospital early because it was my son's birthday. We were putting on a big party for him at our house. The deal is from the hospital that you need to have someone with you and he brought me home and he went straight out. So I laid in bed recovering from this serious surgery without any help at all. My sons wouldn't come over and help me. Thankfully, I did have a couple of friends come over. Then I had an allergic reaction to one of the medications I was on and Ric yelled and screamed at me and told me I was a burden to everyone because I wasn't recovering. I had to be on a special diet and he was no help. I'd be dragging my leg, and he'd just walk off and leave me. So, I just endured it. We were already on the rocks because of the protection order I'd taken out against him.

At the birthday, he started the speeches without me because I couldn't get there quick enough. He didn't invite me to the front where you cut the cake. I dragged myself along using chairs, plastic chairs as a walker.

I think the writing was on the wall then; it was always on the wall. But I just really didn't think I was able to run things on my own. Because he always handled all the finances. I didn't even know how much things cost.

My relationship status with the person abusing me creates different levels of risk... *Follow My Lead*

I've had the banks start chasing me for money. After we separated, Ric came to me with some paperwork and he says, "I want you to sign this." I said, "Put it over there and I'll read it later". Before it was like, "Yes dear, where do I sign?" and nine times out of 10 he would never let me flick through the pages - even though I always like to read what I'm signing. But this time I said, "when I'm ready, I'll have a look at it," and I grabbed it and put it in my diary. I didn't want to sign for any loans anyway. And when I looked at it was for close to \$2 million. And I said "\$2 million! Where did that come from?" He said "it's a renewal. How do you think we got all these houses and how do you think we got the money for the office building?" And I said, "we bought that building for less than a million, how can it now be close to \$2m?" And he said, "Just sign it." So, I went to my solicitor and said, "do I sign it?" and she said, "no way - don't you dare sign it."

Then the bank guy's ringing me and I said, "Where did you get my number from?" and he said, "you are on the documentation as one of the owners of this company." And I said "yes". And he said, "and you're a director and you need to sign this loan."

And I said "I won't be signing anything until I know where this loan comes from. I know nothing about the finances of the company. And he says "Oh. Ok. I'll send you a letter." He sent

“Are you aware of what you've done to me?”

me this one-pager, "Hi, we're here to help you," blah blah blah. "My superior is going to help you with this." Whatever. And he rings me up about a week and a half later and he says, "Well when are we having this meeting with you and your solicitor?" And I said, "I'm not going to organise my solicitor," which will cost me money, "until I see the paperwork about why I've got a loan this size that needs to be renewed." "Oh, OK," he says. "You want the paperwork first? Before we have this meeting." I say "of course". So, he sends it to me and when I open it up, it's not my signature. And the date of the signature is after we'd separated. So I rang my solicitor and said "What do I do?" and she said "I could escalate it but the easiest way to escalate it is you write back and say it's not your signature and you want to know who was in the office when they signed, which office, which branch

and who was the witness to that signature.” I’ve done that, written all that, and they haven’t said a word. I have a second lawyer working with the banks now because of fraudulent signatures. He’s put me in a lot of debt by the sounds of it that I didn’t even know that I was in.

I asked Ric to sign over my mobile phone to me, my personal mobile, because it was in the business name, and he said, “You want me to sign something for you, but you won’t sign for me?” I said, “I’m not signing a \$2 million loan.” All he had to do was sign a release for my mobile phone and he was saying, “Are you aware of what you’ve done to me?”

I do have a little car that I own now. When the boys moved out, a friend of mine advised me to start saving, so that’s what I did. And I bought my own car. It’s a \$25,000 Mazda but it’s mine. I walked into the marriage with a car and I’ve never owned a car in my name since - in nearly 30 years.

The person committing the abuse may ... manipulate others against me and undermine my parenting. *Follow My Lead*

My sons are both working for Ric now – for his businesses. They say I’m the mad mother because I won’t sign for loans. “You’re destroying our father and our place of work.”

My sons won’t come near me. At my youngest one’s engagement party no-one would talk to me. My family wasn’t invited. Ric would always say he hated my family because they kicked me out of home. He made sure I always remembered that.

“You’re destroying our father and our place of work.”

It hurts because I spent all those years trying to insulate the boys from all the shit that their father went on with. Apart from the two days a week I worked, I spent every minute with them. It hurts. It really hurts.

It’s not over. I often wonder when it will be over.

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
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- 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.

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