

* 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.

SARAH-JANE

I don't think I could have survived any of the things that I've been through without Christ. He has saved me in so many ways. My story starts in the US. When I was a child, I remember feeling suicidal a lot of the time. I was considered the 'black sheep' of the family, and I was not really wanted. I was the oldest child and even though I was still a child, I had to look after my younger sister and older brother. My mother basically put me in charge of my siblings when I was five years old. Unless my mother had to look good in front of other people. In those situations, she would put on a performance and temporarily act like our mum. But most days she would just sleep in her room. I remember feeling exhausted from minding the kids all day and I asked my mother, "can I just have some time to myself now"? She was so angry about that.

My mother basically put me in charge of my siblings when I was five years old.

When my parents divorced, I was put in front of a Judge, and I had to choose on the spot whether to go live with my mother or my father. In truth, my mother and my father were both unfit parents. If I had been completely honest with the Judge I would have said "neither parent". But I was afraid that my siblings and I would wind up in a foster home. So, I chose to stay with my dad because I thought he was at least financially more stable than my mum and also because I argued less with him. It was hard

because at that time, I didn't know whether my dad loved me or not because he was always absent. He worked nightshifts. The only way I could connect with him was in the garden or going fishing, that sort of stuff. But I've since learnt that it wasn't that he didn't want to connect with me, it was just that he didn't know how to. He really did not know how to be a dad. It wasn't because he didn't care.

While living with dad, I also had to take care of all my younger siblings. I felt like I was their mum in every way, and I felt like I was my dad's wife in every way too except for one. My dad never touched me inappropriately. My dad had a temper, and he would yell at me. I remember him yelling at me about 11 o'clock at night after I had taken care of all the kids and got them to sleep and stuff. He yelled at me because I was struggling with my homework which I had to start late at night. I didn't know back then I had dyslexia and ADHD which would have made it even more challenging to finish homework. My dad yelled at me when I couldn't do it.

In my senior year of high school my dad said to me, "I'm sorry I can't pay for your school tuition anymore". So, that meant I couldn't do track and field anymore. I couldn't do softball either. So, I had to get a job and start working in order to pay for my education. I ended up working at my own school in the administrative office just to finish paying off my tuition fees so that I could graduate from high school. I had to manage finishing school along with working and taking care of the kids and all the housework. It was very upsetting and disappointing. How did I handle that? I wound up, with the first guy who showed any interest in me. That turned out to be Marcus who was my first abusive husband.

I married very young. I moved in and lived with Marcus and his parents. The attitude in that house was that if he didn't want to work, he didn't have to work. But, of course, there were different rules for me. I was required to work. His mother, Kathryn, basically ran everything. Her question to me was always, "don't you want Marcus to be happy?" She expected me to support Marcus and her and his dad. So, I basically went from the frying pan right into the fire. Marcus was really into the army, but he couldn't actually serve in the army. If you saw him, you would see that he really didn't have the health for it. But he was obsessed with making little army figurines and he even had a fake hand grenade. One time I was driving, and we got stuck in a traffic jam at a very busy intersection. I could see that Marcus was getting very agitated. He got out of the car, and he held up the fake hand grenade to scare people. I remember thinking, "what is wrong with you, why would you do that?"

Before I left Marcus, he sexually abused me. He urinated inside me. I wanted to forgive him. I wanted everything to work out and so the next day I approached him. He was at the dining room table, working with a knife on one of his army figurines. I was leaning against the corner of the table trying to talk to him, I can't remember what I said exactly. He got up, took the knife and held it against my throat. I don't remember the sequence clearly, but I thought that was it. I thought I was a goner. My thoughts were, "Help Lord, please help me". Luckily, for some reason he dropped the knife and let me go.

I left him not long after that and I moved back home with mother, and my younger sister Abigail and brother who was also still living at home. I would have been about 22 years old. Around that time my mother had a boyfriend, Tim. He was disgusting. He would eat whatever he wanted. He would smoke all the time. Tim smoked like a chimney in front of my mum, and I believe that's why she got cancer. He would drink all the time. He had debts. Every time I walked into the home, Tim would verbally abuse me in front of everyone and the things he said about my mother were the worst of all.

It was like she knew what Tim was doing but she didn't seem care. My mother just did whatever Tim wanted.

While Tim claimed to love my mother, he was cheating on her with another girlfriend and also with his ex-wife. Sometimes he would come up behind me and he would hold my boobs. If I walked past him, he would pull me towards him to force me to sit on his lap and while I was sitting uncomfortably on his knees, he would reach around and grab my breasts. He did this openly and frequently in front of my mother. I remember once she was sitting on the other side, drinking a cup coffee and eating some toast, while he was grabbing my chest. It was like she knew what Tim was doing but she seem didn't care. My mother just did whatever Tim wanted.

Tim started showing me pornographic images. My ex-husband had previously introduced me to pornographic images, so it wasn't completely new to me. At first Tim showed me pornographic photographs and then he started showing me pornographic videos. Tim made my mother and I watch a pornographic video together. I think Tim wanted a threesome with my mother and me. I'm awfully glad that my mother said "no" because I think that I would've gone along with it. I basically thought I had no choice. Because I was living under his roof, although it was technically my mum's roof, I thought I had to go along with whatever he was doing, and I thought that I had no real agency.

Tim was so disappointed when I refused him. I felt really proud that I disappointed him. I kept telling him, "You are my mother's fiancé, you are not my boyfriend". I was actually in love with Tim's son. Unfortunately, Tim knew that I liked his son, and he tried to coerce me by saying things to me like,

“oh, but I’m just like my son”. I knew what he was doing was wrong. I also knew that my mother would blame me if he had raped me. I knew she would say that I seduced him. I really believe that if my mother walked in and saw Tim raping me, she would have actually killed me.

I fought Tim off every day. He actually had to drug me in order to rape me because I just would not allow him to touch me. I just refused to accept his disgusting advances. Tim waited until my mother had left the house. I remember standing up to him again. I wouldn’t give him any satisfaction at all,

He raped me...I thought about telling people, but who was going to believe me? Tim was a former cop, former veteran, and a church going man.

but he had drugged me, so I was feeling out of it. I have some memories of finding myself in my mum’s bed. I knew I was in my mum’s bed, and I couldn’t really do anything. But I still resisted him the whole time. I could see that Tim was going to start, so I just passed out. I had the clarity of mind to pass out. I think that was the Lord helping me. I remember waking up on the bed, I was naked. He had raped me. But because I didn’t give him the satisfaction of being conscious while he raped me, he never touched me again after that. I thought about telling people, but who was going to believe me? Tim was a former cop, veteran, and a church going man.

I think, what helped me to survive ironically was being the carer of my siblings. Especially, for my younger sister, Abigail. I had become a believer in Christ, and I was like Abigail’s godmother. So, when Abigail told me that Tim was being inappropriate with her as well and that he was doing this whenever she came around to visit our me, our mum and brother, I became like big a mumma bear. I suddenly started fighting back more overtly. Abigail never told me any details and I don’t know what Tim did to her. But that was it. So, even though she never realised it, Abigail saved me.

I was working and earning my own money. Looking back, I can see that Tim was financially abusing me and controlling me, trying to force me to stay at home as much as possible. My mother was also financially abusing me and asked me to give her half of my wage each week. This is on top of all the bills I was paying. My mother kept saying to me, “you need to help us after all I’ve done for you”. The last time I remember standing up to Tim was a week before he died. I remember asking Tim if I could have a bit of extra time to pay the rent because I wanted to go to go out with friends and I needed some extra money to do this. Going out would have made me feel good about myself. I could have gone behind his back about it, but I chose to ask him directly, because I thought it was the honest thing to do. So, I asked Tim and he got angry at me, in fact, he was furious. A few days later Tim died from a sudden, massive stroke. My mother and my brother both blamed me for his death because they believed I was responsible for making him angry and somehow this caused his stroke. They did not like that I stood up to Tim. I know now that I was not at fault. I was not responsible for him getting angry or for him dying, but I can still feel it in my body.

“You need to help us after all I’ve done for you”.

I moved out of my mum’s place after Tim died and moved into an apartment with Abigail. I didn’t have very much money because I had given so much to my mother and Tim, also I had credit card and a bad credit card debt. So, I was going to work and working hard to pay off this debt. I was going to church and life was slowly getting better. I wanted to meet somebody. So, I went on one of those Christian dating apps. I met this guy, Brendan, who had similar beliefs to me and everything else. I was on one side of the country and he was living on the opposite side. So, in the beginning we were

“I could fall in love with someone who thinks like you”.

sending each other messages. I liked him. I thought he was my best friend and I felt like I could tell him anything. I told Brendan all about my past and all the abuse I had survived as a child and as a young woman. One day Brendan sent me a message out of the blue saying, “I could fall in love with someone who thinks like you”. It shocked me because we had only exchanged a few messages over a couple of weeks. I look back at this and I can see now that he was grooming me. But at the time, I had never really had a guy relate to me like that before.

I knew that Brendan had adult kids from a previous marriage. I knew he had been separated from his previous wife for about ten years. So, I thought it could work out. I wanted to meet him face to face and so I travelled to meet him. I learned that Brendan was only on a tourist visa and that he actually lived in South Australia. As soon as I met Brendan, he proposed to me, “I love you. Will you marry me? Will you move to South Australia with me?” We both said that we loved each other, and we wanted to get married. Six months later I found myself moving my life to be with Brendan in Adelaide, South Australia. My sister Abigail kept asking me “are you sure? Are you really sure?” and I said “Yes, I love this man. Yes, I want to do it”. See the thing about my husband-to-be at that time that really convinced me was that he was extremely proactive. He got all the paperwork, visa information together and he was arranging our marriage.

After I sold my car and all my other possessions, I only had \$4,000 cash in total. It really wasn't very much. The original plan was that Brendan was going to help me pay for my ticket to Australia. Brendan said, “I'll take the money out of my super and I'll help you to fly over”. When the time came, he said, “I can't get the money out of the super. There's some hitch”. Brendan said that his adult daughter Stacey, my future stepdaughter would pay for the plane ticket. So, I flew over to Australia, thinking that his daughter had paid for my flight.

It was the first time I had left the States. I can tell you when I was getting off the plane in Australia, I was thinking to myself, “okay, am I going to stay, am I going to go? Is this just going to be a visit or is this going to be it?” So, I had no idea. Brendan was waiting for me at the Adelaide airport. When I came through the airport gate, he walked up to me and kissed me. So, I was just like “well, I guess, I'm staying”. It was just that simple. Although it was also really scary, I would be starting a whole new life in a new country. Brendan kept promising me, “I'll help you. I'll help you”. I didn't find out until years later that Brendan had taken money out of my account to pay back his daughter for the plane ticket without telling me. I had no idea at the time. I also found out that Brendan had used the rest of my money to pay for our honeymoon, our wedding rings and a camera, again without asking or telling me about it. Another thing I learned about Brendan after we were married was that he was an alcoholic. I could always smell alcohol on his breath.

Brendan was renting a small unit near the Adelaide city centre. I moved in. I knew that his ex-wife lived in the Adelaide hills about 30 minutes' drive away, it was basically a hop, skip and a jump. Not very far. I thought the best thing for him and his kids, was to be friends with his ex-wife. Which I know you would not normally do, but this is what I believed. Brendan remained very close to his ex-wife too. Brendan was always emailing and his ex-wife. I didn't actually feel comfortable with that much contact, because I thought, “hey I'm your wife, not her”. I remember looking through photos of us at a family gathering. There was a picture of Brendan and his ex-wife sitting together and to me, they looked a lot like husband and wife, more so than Brendan and I did. In one photograph Brendan was standing behind me and he put his fingers up as “bunny ears” above my head – like he was making fun of me, it was very disrespectful and humiliating. So, it was as though Brendan was still married to his ex. He also made me sleep in the same bed and mattress that he had with his ex-

wife. He would not get a different bed the whole time I was married to him. I didn't want to sleep in their bed. I hated it. I wanted him to change it, but he refused to. Just like he refused to put me on the lease as a legal tenant. He refused to. The whole time I was so scared to leave him because I had no rental record in Australia.

At one point early on, I remember going to his ex-wife and telling her that Brendan was an alcoholic and talking about his drinking. She listened and I remember her saying to Brendan, "if you drink, Brendan, you're not going to be able to see your family". I was surprised that she confronted Brendan about his drinking, and that's why I really thought that she would be in my corner later on when I told her that Brendan was abusing me. I knew he abused her as well and she was with him for decades. But she was of the era where you swept abuse under the rug.

I remember him getting really angry when I opened another bank account.

My husband knew that I had been economically abused by my mother and stepfather, he had made that connection. But at the time, I didn't know that economic abuse was a form of domestic violence. I also didn't really realise to what extent Brendan was financially abusing me. My husband financially abused me behind my back in many ways. He was hiding money from me. Brendan controlled the finances and straight

away while Brendan spent as much as he wanted, he only ever allowed me \$120 to spend every fortnight and he monitored my transactions. We had a joint account and Brendan made me put my Centrelink and any work pay checks into our joint account. I remember him getting really angry with me when he found out that I had opened another bank account. Even though I was afraid, I still kept that bank account open. He didn't tell me he had multiple credit cards or that he was with different banks, and stuff like that. Brendan also made me pay for a used car he bought. The car was okay, but the loan was \$3,000, which was actually a lot of money for me. It took me forever to pay that off. Brendan also never told me that he paid his ex-wife \$30,000 and that he took all that money from me over the years we were together. He never submitted tax returns. It's only now that I have access to all his records, I can see all his theft through the bank account transactions.

About eight years into our marriage, Brendan hit me. He hit me on Christmas eve. I am a Christian and of course Christmas is a very important time for me. I believe Brendan chose to hit me at this specific time because he wanted Christmas to become very traumatic for me. It worked because ever since, Christmas has been an awful time for me.

It was Christmas Eve and I had been watching the carols on television as I do every year. Brendan walked into the lounge room, and he said something to me, I can't remember his words exactly because I was focused on the TV.

He came up behind me and he puts his hands on my shoulder, and I said to him "shush, shush, I am trying to watch the speeches about Christ". Brendan moved around me and sat down in on the chair to the right of me. He sat there for a moment staring at me. Then without warning he hit me hard as he could, he punched me right in the lower abdomen. This really hurt because I had surgery only a year prior. He knew I was still recovering from that operation, that my tummy was still tender. I was thinking "who do I call, where do I go on Christmas Eve?" I thought there probably wouldn't be

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anyone at the police station and I wondered would there be any women's shelters open at this time? I didn't know what to do. So, I stayed with him, thinking, "well, maybe this is it". I told him I would leave him. The next day, he was pretending things were fine. Brendan said that he had forgotten everything. He tried to get me to say what had happened in writing. I knew he hadn't forgotten about it. I believe it was all premeditated that way.

“Sarah-Jane, you punched Brendan, so of course, you deserved to be punched. If you punch someone, someone's going to punch you back”.

I contacted Brendan's ex-wife. I thought that she would be in my corner when I told her that Brendan was abusing me. I knew that he abused her as well. She was with him for over 20 years. So, I confided in her, but she said to me, "Sarah-Jane, you punched Brendan, so of course, you deserved to be punched. If you punch someone, someone's going to punch you back". I never assaulted Brendan, but this is how I found out that Brendan had told his ex-wife was that I had punched him. I was trying to be gentle with her. I don't think she wouldn't have believed me anyway. She didn't want to hear it. It was shocking to me because she told her family and kids about Brendan's violence against her. But she

wasn't ostracised by her family or her kids, because she told the truth. She, rightfully, kicked Brendan out of the home and married another man. They are a Christian family. I mean, not that Christians are perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but no one deserves to be abused and no one deserves to be disbelieved and ostracised for telling the truth. I was really angry with her.

The next year again on Christmas eve, Brendan killed my pet rabbit. I never actually saw him do it. He said he took the rabbit to the vet. I didn't believe him, so I called the vet to find out. The vet I spoke to said that they had not seen my husband or the rabbit. Brendan told his ex-wife that my pet rabbit had died before he told me. Brendan had dug a hole in the back yard. It looked like he buried my rabbit in a hurry. There was nothing loving or tender in the way the earth was piled over the rabbit.

It was about this time that Brendan colluded with another person to get me fired from my first real, regular paid job. I was working and studying at a college in Adelaide. A college student called Stuart became my friend. Stuart would frequently tell me that we were best friends and how much he loved and cared about me. I would tell him how much he was like a brother to me. I adopted this guy and he seemed to accept and love me. Stuart was having trouble in class, so I invited him around to my place for dinner. I introduced Stuart to Brendan thinking Brendan might be able to help him with his studies. So, Stuart came over and he started regularly spending time at our place. I remember one time when he was over, and Stuart said he wanted to go outside and have a smoke with my husband. They didn't want me in on the conversation. So, I saw them outside the window talking. I didn't know what they were saying. It looked like it was a very intense conversation. I was trying to be respectful by not trying to overhear anything. This was the point that Stuart began acting in collusion with Brendan. I didn't realise that Brendan had been stalking me at work and that he wanted me to lose my job. Brendan also knew how to work the systems so it wouldn't come back on him, the system would come back at me.

Brendan was stalking me via Stuart who he would get information from about my everyday movements at work. I don't know exactly what Stuart was getting out of this, perhaps he stalked me for 'fun'. Stuart stayed 'friends' with me throughout this time, and I say that in quotation marks, until he privately complained about me to other students, who in turn publicly complained about me to my employer. I think Brendan coached Stuart on what to say to other students. Because of the student complaints, I was stepped down from my job. I believe my husband wanted me to lose my job and so he had recruited Stuart and he spoke to my managers at the college. The people at the college knew that Brendan was abusing me. I had told people that I wanted to leave my husband was because he was abusive to me. But all it took was one bad word from someone against me, whether true or not, and I went from people being kind towards me to suddenly to them not wanting to do anything to support me. The college staff and students made me the problem. At no time was the fact that I was a victim of domestic violence taken into consideration. The college staff wouldn't listen to me. I think, universities and colleges need to have better policies and ways of supporting victims of domestic violence.

After I had lost my job, Stuart suggested that I should go back home to the States and be with my family because I needed them. Why was I listening to this guy? I did have alarm bells going off. But I doubted my thoughts, I remember thinking "am I just being too hard on him? Am I being wrong? It's not often I have someone say that they are my best friend". I really trusted Stuart, so I followed his advice and spent almost all of my money going to the States, when I really couldn't afford it. Although, ironically, at least I got to see my parents one more time before they both died. I think Brendan wanted me to either kill myself or move back to the States with my tail between my legs. I also introduced Stuart to my sister and brother. I didn't realise that Stuart would call up Abigail and tell her a lot of lies and misinformation about me which she passed onto my brother. Stuart told Abigail that "Sarah-Jane goes into the college cafeteria, and she sits down and cries until somebody buys her a meal". Stuart made me sound like a horrible selfish person. I also never asked anyone at the college to buy me lunch. The college even had a free food service – so even if I needed food, I could have got it. Now Abigail and my brother don't speak to me. Every morning, it grates me when I wake up and I realise that my siblings don't want anything to do with me.

As soon as I was able to, I went to Legal Aid services in Australia. They said I could get a divorce or get financial settlement. It was very frustrating because I could only talk to them for about an hour and then they told me that I would have to pay for the divorce and financial settlement which was about \$600. So, essentially the lawyers let me know that they could walk me through how to file for divorce, but that I would have to pay the money for it and do all the work myself. But I didn't have the money because my husband had financially abused me. I realised "I am going to have to pay for this too". I told them about Brendan's abuse, and I think they recorded it. They were kind but useless. It was very frustrating because I felt like I was constantly making appointments to get the same answers which were no answers. I needed a lawyer to help me do the financial settlement, who was willing to write stuff for me and go to court with me. Eventually, I found a lawyer who charged me \$150, but I was only receiving \$300 a week from Centrelink. He also told me he couldn't do anything about my case. I was like, "what am I paying you for?" If I got the help that I needed at

“Where do I have the money? Because my husband abused me, I have to now pay for this? I told them about Brendan's abuse, and I think they recorded it. They were kind but useless”.

that time, it would have helped me to be safe and to leave earlier. It took me another year before I could leave Brendan. I never went back.

They said, despite all the documents and transaction records, they don't consider it as evidence because I didn't report it right when it happened.

Brendan died unexpectedly from his alcoholism. Three weeks prior to Brendan dying, he gave his ex-wife a set of the house keys, without any explanation to her. Since Brendan's death, I've been able to piece together the extent of his economic abuse against me. Because, I am his legal widow even though I don't even want to be – I don't want anything to do with him. But as his legal widow, I got access to all his paperwork and accounts. I've since gone through all his papers. One of Brendan's files had the word "burn" written on it. My question to his ex-wife, "why do you think he wanted to burn those papers?" I've been going over and over these papers and I've been able to see the patterns. I think Brendan's

goal was to take all of my money and do it so that no one would ever believe me. I feel very blessed that my ex-husband is dead. I want to speak up publicly now. I did talk to the Police about all his economic and domestic abuse. They said, despite all the documents and transaction records, they don't consider it as evidence because I didn't report it right when it happened. But I didn't report it because I wasn't aware he was economically abusing me at that time.

Now, I am living in a safe community. I'm being well looked after. I'm in a beautiful place I never dreamed I would be. If it wasn't for my Christian program and my Christian family, I don't know what would have happened to me. I'm very grateful for all their support. One of the things I really like about them, is that they say, "if you need to go to a regular group do it. If you need to go to clinical psychologists, do it. If you need to go to, whatever else you need for your healing, you should do it". I feel a lot of hope when I hear that. Between my Lord and saviour Christ and my Christian group, I feel a lot of hope. Although a woman from my program recently told me that I would need to forgive my husband for his abuse. As a Christian, I agree that I need to do that. But to be honest, I haven't forgiven Brendan. If I ever choose to forgive him, it does not mean that what he did to me was okay.

I still struggle in the mornings to get out of my pyjamas which are really just my baggy clothes. Even on a beautiful sunny day. It would be nice to go out for a walk on the beach, but I have zero to very little motivation to do anything like that. I mean, I'll get up and get myself groceries. But I still really, really struggle. Luckily, I have people around me really making sure that I'm okay. So, it's wonderful, but it's still a struggle. I kept thinking of Seven of Nine from Star Trek and her struggle. She went from a traumatic situation from childbirth, she felt like she didn't belong. She was rejected by a lot of her peers and bullied and made fun of and then she ends up commanding her own ship. There are many times now these days where I feel like I am like Seven of Nine too.

"If I ever choose to forgive him, it does not mean that what he did to me was okay".

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.

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