

* 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.

Nicole

My story is multi-layered where many agencies and organisations had the power to intervene and didn't. Multiple systems failed me and my daughters. It's been three years since I saw my oldest daughter and I only have a few hours a week with my youngest daughter. Despite significant and independent evidence that my ex-husband has alienated my girls from me. Each agency just fobbed my case off to the next agency. Even when agencies had the ability to intervene, they chose not to.

I was able to articulate what was going wrong and advocate for what I needed and for what should be happening, but it didn't change anything. At one point, my psychologist said to me, referring to the Family Law Court, "the problem you have is that they see you as a successful business woman and they don't see you as a victim". I find that very hard to accept as just because I was able to identify the issues, name it, come up with a proposal to move forward, and be objective about it doesn't mean that I am not a victim. Victims come in all shapes and sizes and are from all demographics. I really want to help bust the persona of what a victim is. Just because I'm not meek, mild and "too traumatised to form a sentence" doesn't mean I'm not a victim.

Cliff, my ex-husband, was into all kinds of gambling, online, sports gambling, poker machines, casinos everything. On our honeymoon he bought me a ticket to a football game and then he pissed off to the casino. So, I spent our honeymoon at a footie game and then later, in the hotel room, on my own. When we got back from our honeymoon, straight away we opened a joint bank account. We merged everything. Then we bought a property together. It all happened very quickly, and this was the first time in my life that I had completely lost visibility of the details of my finances. I was distracted too. I used to do all the housework. I was working fulltime. I was studying fulltime while being pregnant. Cliff told me "I'll take care of the finances". Initially, that was a relief for me because I had so many responsibilities. I wasn't aware of how bad Cliff's gambling was. Cliff would give me cash allowances each week. But in the beginning the allowances didn't feel abusive. I also think there was an element of self-protection here. There was an element here of, "I saw what I needed to see".

The first time I found out that Cliff had gambled everything away when we couldn't afford to make the monthly mortgage payment. Everything was gone. He had to confess to me that we had no money and that we couldn't pay the bank. This was when I really got an indication of just how out of control Cliff's gambling was. I was in over my head. Shortly after that time, Frieda, our first child was born. A few years later, we had Chelsea, our youngest daughter.

"The problem you have is that they see you as a successful business woman and they don't see you as a victim"

“I don’t gamble anymore”, and “I am sober from gambling”.

Cliff’s gambling was a major issue throughout our entire relationship. Even down to holidays. Cliff always insisted that we stay near a casino. He would leave me and the kids so that he could go off gambling. Cliff refused to get help for his gambling. He called a phone line once, and in front of me he explained to the telephone counsellor, “you know, my dad has just been diagnosed with cancer, and I lost a bit of control and because of that I went to the club”. I wanted to believe his excuses. After that one phone call, he never tried anything else to help himself stop gambling. Every time I tried to talk to Cliff about money, Cliff would respond with abuse. He would either start throwing a shitload of numbers and complex calculations at me trying to justify the accounts. I said things to him like, “it doesn’t add up to me, we’re making really good money here, where is it all going? If our mortgage payment is this, and our income is this...why are we so behind? I couldn’t balance our accounts. Cliff insisted that I just didn’t understand the financial policy he was using. I said to Cliff, “I don’t care what the calculation is, just tell me the first number and the last number”. I said, “I want to do a budget”. Before meeting Cliff, I used to manage my own money, I did all of the finances. So, I created tables and budgets. I made a table and I said to Cliff, “it’s just not adding up”. Even my dad once said to Cliff “this doesn’t sound right. It doesn’t make sense, mate. Where did all the money go?” Cliff refused to speak to my dad after he said this to him. Of course, later on, I found out that the missing dollar figures in the equation were from Cliff’s gambling. The whole time Cliff said things to me like, “I don’t gamble anymore”, and “I am sober from gambling”. But he was lying to me. But I did notice signs of his gambling. For example, he would be okay to do something with me in the morning, but if the football started at two o’clock in the afternoon, we had to be home by that exact time. If a game started at 11am, then we had to be home by 11am. He was into sports betting. But that wasn’t all he was doing. He used to say to me, “I hate poker machines”. But one night, shortly after saying this to me, he called me at midnight and said “hey, I’m at the Club, I’ve just won \$30,000 on a poker machine”. I replied, “weren’t you supposed to be playing pool? What are you doing down at the Club?”. Cliff replied “oh, I wasn’t quite ready to come home yet”. In that moment I realised that what he had been doing the whole time was gambling across multiple venues.

“I was also thinking, where am I going to live? How am I going to get through this pregnancy?”

The first time Cliff assaulted me was when I was six months pregnant with Chelsea. We were at a function for my work. As we were leaving and walking over to the car, Cliff beat me up on the street. Cliff took the car keys off me and locked all the car doors and drove off. I was overwhelmed and ashamed by what Cliff had just done to me. The only thing I had on me, was my purse, my mobile phone and driver’s licence. I got onto a train and started to head into the city to find a hotel. On the way over, I was trying to process everything, I hadn’t even thought about how I was going to pay for the hotel. I knew my marriage was over. I was also thinking, where am I going to live? How am I going to get through this pregnancy? I don’t have any close friends or family in town who I could stay with. I also had no idea how much money was in my bank account. At that point I couldn’t even get \$50 out of an ATM machine. I didn’t even know who we banked with. So, I was thinking “how am I going to afford what’s going to happen? I have a young child and I’m about to have a baby. How is this all going to work?” As I was thinking and planning, Cliff called me, and he convinced me to get off the train and jump into a cab and come home. It was all too overwhelming. During that call Cliff made it clear that he was never going to leave the house. So where was I going to go? I headed back to the family home where Cliff was waiting for me, he paid the cab fare and told me we would never talk about

this again. After that, things, more or less, went back to usual, but from that point on I started quietly planning how to leave Cliff.

The financial counsellor said to me, “how did this happen to a smart woman like you?”

Financial abuse was such a barrier to leaving Cliff. It is one thing to know that you're being slowly boiled alive, it's another to actually work out how to get out of the pot. I don't have a rich family. My parents live interstate in public housing. I was the first person in my family to go to uni. Cliff and I also had a mortgage and investment properties. I didn't know how to untangle any of this. When I first spoke to a local domestic violence service, I was still living in the house with Cliff. I was really worried about money, and I didn't know how I could afford to leave Cliff. The domestic violence

worker put me through to a financial support charity. I called the charity and the financial counsellor said to me, “how did this happen to a smart woman like you?” I didn't know what to say so I hung up. I felt judged and ashamed. How had this happened to me? I didn't have an answer then, I still don't, other than to say it happened to me because it can happen to anyone. After that phone call, I thought that I just had to deal with this on my own. It really impacted on my ability to ask for help again.

When Cliff says to the kids, “I never punched your mother”, it's a true statement, he never punched me. He slapped me, he kicked me, he pushed me, he put me in chokeholds, he coerced me into sex and broke household items. He did that stuff, but he never once punched me. I never had a black eye from Cliff ever. Cliff would verbally assault me constantly. It was a rare day that he didn't do it. During those times I would think, “just shut up Nicole and don't say anything, just let him get it out, and it'll be done with”. That was my safety strategy, don't fight back, don't argue, just let him scream it out.

I can remember one afternoon the girls were in the lounge room and Chelsea was sitting in the armchair and Frieda was standing over her. Frieda was just screaming at Chelsea I can't even remember what the argument was about now. I remember looking Frieda and Chelsea and realising, “that was Cliff and I”. That was me, sitting on the couch with Cliff standing over me screaming at me. It was really hard to watch Frieda who is the eldest, standing over her little sister screaming at her. Chelsea had her face down just waiting for Frieda to stop screaming. In that moment all I could see was that's what they've been roleplaying us. That's what they've seen. They have seen that dad screams and mum just sits there and takes it until it's over.

Some months later, I was getting ready for work and the girls were getting ready to go away on a Youth camp. That was the morning Cliff chose to explode. He decided that he had waited long enough for me to “change my mind”. He started yelling at me while we were in the kitchen; “You can't shut me out anymore. You are my wife and everything in this house is mine”. He punched a hole in the wall after saying “this is my wall. You are my wife”. Then he looked at me and said, “You have to stop what you are doing now”. I tried to get away from Cliff. I was planning to go and get my bag and find the girls. I was thinking “I just need to get out”. Cliff chased me into the bedroom. He grabbed me and put me in a chokehold up against the wall. I could see Frieda standing outside the bedroom door. Cliff noticed Frieda. He walked over and slammed the bedroom door shut and he put a chair under the door handle. I knew Frieda could hear everything. Cliff verbally abused me some more before leaving me in the bedroom and then I heard the front door slam, so I knew he had left the house. I found Frieda in her bedroom, hugging her knees crying. I comforted her. Frieda and

Chelsea were dressed, they had packed their bags, and they were ready for their camp. So, I grabbed my work bag, the girls and we left. I bought breakfast from a local café, some lunch items from the supermarket and dropped my girls off to the Youth camp coordinators. I told the Youth service manager what had happened. I asked her to keep an eye on my girls and especially Frieda. Knowing the girls were safe on their ten-day camp, I took this as my opportunity to leave Cliff. I never tried to get into a refuge or any formal service support. I sought a solution on my own and couch surfed until I got my rental. I felt very much all alone.

I got a rental house pretty quickly after leaving Cliff thanks to help from my family who paid the bond. But I had no furniture or household goods and after being turned away from community organisations I didn't feel comfortable asking for goods. So pretty much everything I have in my house came from local giveaway groups I found through social media. Nothing in my house matched and it was all second hand. But a few friends told me that my apartment felt really cosy. Nothing was fancy, everything was dodgy. But at the end of the day, I created a home that was safe and had character. I don't think Cliff thought I would be as inventive, innovative and capable at rebuilding. I think Cliff thought, "well, if I don't give her anything and if I do all this stuff to her financially, she won't survive, and she will have to come back to me". Cliff called me and said to me "you know, people go through all of this and then they get back together". I was like, "no, we're never getting back together. We are over. This is done". Then he goes, "after my mother, you're the most important woman in my life, I love you". I said, "this is not love, Cliff".

When Chelsea and Frieda returned from their youth camp, Cliff took Frieda and Chelsea lived with me. The main way I had contact with Frieda was through online gaming and chat groups. But Frieda suddenly stopped being online. Cliff's attempt to isolate Frieda went beyond stopping her from being online. Cliff also told Frieda that my brother Adam, was an un-convicted paedophile. Cliff told her that she was not safe around him. Prior to separating from Cliff, Adam and his wife Lorraine were the only couple that we ever trusted to babysit our girls. Cliff told the girls that aunty Lorraine was a bad person because she stays with uncle Adam who is a really bad man. Cliff's words really impacted the girls and their relationships with Adam and Lorraine. Frieda was really confused and did not know what to believe. Lorraine was the first person to meet my girls when they were born. I couldn't ask for a better sister-in-law, best friend and aunty to my children. Through all of this, Adam and Lorraine haven't seen the girls since Cliff took them. But you know what? Lorraine has never forgotten my girls' birthdays; she's never forgotten their Christmas presents. She still sends them easter eggs. It's one of thing that hurts me a lot. Cliff literally vilified anyone that he perceived as being on my side.

“If you don't come back, I'm going to destroy you”.

Cliff also worked on the girls, particularly Frieda. He told them that I was a liar that, and he said, "your mum's left me for another man". Which I didn't. Cliff told them, "Your mum's making up all these lies because she just wants money from me. She is trying to take you girls away, so I never get to see you". Once Cliff realised that he had lost control over me, it was like he spiralled. Cliff

told me via text messages, "if you don't come back, I'm going to destroy you". I feel like that's exactly what he's tried to do. To be honest, he has nearly succeeded at times.

After we separated Cliff's family propped him up, gave him lots of money. Cliff has now got a \$2.6 million property and I'm left with a shitty two-bedroom shoebox. I went into my marriage with 68% of the property pool, because I had inherited a couple of properties. Coming out of my divorce I've ended up taking 38% of the asset pool and this was all because I wasn't able to prove the wastage from Cliff's gambling. Cliff claimed that it was his mum who had given him all this extra money as a

gift. But I said, “hang on, I came into the marriage with everything”. The courts said it didn’t really matter because we were together for 20 years and that’s how I’ve ended up with basically nothing. My lawyers worked out eventually that there was about \$80,000 Cliff had taken out of our accounts in the last 12 months we were together. Cliff maxed out all the credit cards in my name. There was no evidence of any of this money coming back in. This money wasn’t spent on living expenses, because I could see all the petrol and shopping expenses etcetera on the transaction record. But at the same time, it was hard to prove that Cliff had gambled the money because he was careful not to take money out at the clubs he visited. Cliff took money out of ATMs and then he spent the cash gambling at clubs. I had friends say to me, “oh yeah, we saw Cliff down at the club, he was on the sports betting machine, or he was on the poker machine”. But this wasn’t enough proof for Court. My lawyers told me that “if you want to prove wastage, you are going to have to get a forensic accountant and you are going to have to subpoena all the individual clubs for their CCTV footage to see when he was there and how much he was gambling”. The advice I received was that this investigation would cost me over \$75,000 to prove \$80,000 worth of wastage, so there was basically no benefit for me. The emphasis was on me to prove that Cliff was a gambler. All he had to say was, “no, I was not a gambler”.

The banks were very quick to say to me, “yes, we understand this is financial abuse, you tick all the boxes, absolutely, we believe you, and we will enter you into these hardship agreements”. So that was good, but what I didn’t know was that little bit of credit rating that I had just got trashed. I was still paying for our mortgage. The bank actually did bring that interest rate down in recognition that I was a victim of financial abuse, but they wouldn’t waive the 1.25% risk penalty. I couldn’t afford to get mortgage insurance to negotiate this. I get so angry with the major bank ads saying they understand economic abuse. The one positive was that my bank did actually say to me was, “you don’t have to make repayments on your credit card for six months”. But at the end of the six-month term, they sold the credit card to another bank and that bank charged me a shitload of extra money. They treated me like I had defaulted. This bank didn’t care that I was a victim of financial abuse, and they were absolutely ferocious in pursuing repayments. They put me under extreme stress.

“Yes, we understand this is financial abuse, you tick all the boxes, absolutely”.

A colleague at work recommended that I speak with a charity service who had a specialist financial abuse team. I trusted my colleague, so I called them. I remember how nervous I was when I rang the first time. I kept saying to the worker, “I still feel like I'm being controlled”. The worker said, “you're in control of this, you're in the driver's seat, and you're just filling your car up with expert navigators”. Then she said, “look, we've got this, there is a pathway through”. This worker was really the first person who helped me. She negotiated debt agreements for me with the credit card companies and sorted out the school fees so I could pay a reduced rate. She got me onto hardship provisions for my utility bills and she even got some of the debts wiped for me. In the process, she helped make me aware of what was available to me, what options and programs I could access.

As the months went by, Cliff kept trying to find new ways to get at me. Cliff has spent half a million dollars in legal fees fighting me about one thing or another in the Family Court. When I applied for child support he refused to pay. He disputed the care arrangements, and he disputed my income. It was exhausting. My youngest, Chelsea, used to tell me that “dad will never pay you child support”. The only way she could have known that was if Cliff told her. But the moment Cliff took the girls off me, he was on the phone to child support saying, “oh, she's got zero care. I've got 100% care”.

Cliff has weaponised the Family Law court against me, and my girls, and the system has enabled him. A few days before our first interim hearing at Family Court. An independent children's lawyer was appointed. She lived in Melbourne. We were all in Adelaide, so she had never met my children face to face. She only had one phone call with the children. The independent children's lawyer was unaware of the facts of our matter, she just decided to recommend the status quo without putting any thought into the best interests of the children, which she was supposed to be advocating for. So, without looking at any of the facts, the independent children's lawyer gave an initial recommendation at the first interim hearing of no contact with the mother and for a single expert report to be conducted.

“Look, she’s dysregulated, she’s got all these issues, and she’s physically violent”.

At Court, Cliff turned up with four solicitors and a senior council barrister. It was like Cliff bought an automatic machine gun to a fist fight. It was not a fair fight. I was a self-represented litigant because I had no money, thanks to Cliff's gambling and economic abuse. I got a legal aid grant under section 102NA (banning order from cross examination when there is a history of family violence) for representation. At trial I was there with my Legal Aid barrister who only went to the Bar a few months before the trial. My barrister did well but was completely outclassed. At this point, I wasn't saying that Cliff was

physically abusive to the children. I was only saying Cliff was perpetrating parental alienation as a form of family violence and psychological abuse. In this hearing Cliff said about me, “look, she’s dysregulated, she’s got all these issues, and she’s physically violent”. Cliff had accused me of physically abusing my children and said that a protection order against me was in place. The court didn't have the Child Protection notes. Child Protection did investigate me, but they had closed the file after concluding the allegations were false. But Child Protection didn't submit their information to the court, until the day after the hearing. In court Cliff's barrister asked me if I had ever yelled at Cliff. I admitted that I had. The response from his barrister “so you've committed family violence”. I tried to say it was not *like that*, but I don't know if my point got through. Cliff's barrister tried to portray to the court that I can't handle my kids. He said to me, “if the court were to give you back your children, how would you manage it? You couldn't manage it before. How would you manage it now?” So, Cliff's whole case was that he is this wonderfully nurturing protective father and I am this dysregulated, dysfunctional, unprotective mother.

I also really had the sense that the judge was just rushing through the hearing. At one point the judge said she was going on leave after our hearing and announced, “right, I'm going to hand my decision down at five o'clock so I can catch my flight”. The judge didn't seem to really fully understand the situation. It seemed like the judge was grappling with “whether or not this was a case of parental alienation, like the mum is saying? Or whether the mum actually a risk to the children?”

In the end the judge agreed with the independent children's lawyer who wanted a single expert report and so the judge said “we will just make interim orders for the next three months while you get the single expert report done. I need to be conservative. I acknowledge that there is a family violence order protecting the mother from the father that has already been breached and a counter family violence order against the mother, due to an allegation of harm of the against the children. I will revisit this when I come back from leave”. The interim orders were for Cliff to have sole parental responsibility and for me to have unsupervised fortnightly visits with my girls. These interim orders that we were given were designed to last for just three months. But it ended up dragging on for years.

We had been living with these orders for a few weeks and I was driving to Cliff's place to drop the girls off. My youngest daughter, Chelsea, realised she had left her phone back at my place. Her mobile phone was the only way she could contact me while she was at her dad's, so she was petrified to not have it. When we arrived, Cliff was standing in the driveway absolutely losing his nut at me because he believed I was late in dropping off the children. Cliff started filming me once the car was parked. I was still sitting inside the car. Cliff starts yelling at me for being late. I said, "look, we said 4pm, it's now 4:15pm". But he insisted that I was late and then he started screaming at me to get off his fucking property and threatening to have me arrested even though technically it was my house too. Cliff started screaming at the girls to get in the house. They quietly got out of the car. But Chelsea started crying and saying she had left her phone at my house. I was pleading with Cliff to let me check Chelsea's bag because she may have left her phone in there. Cliff ignored Chelsea and kept yelling at me "get off my property and leave now. This is my time with my kids". I was standing next to the car going, "what do I do? Do I leave my children? Do I take my children?" Frieda is standing near the house, and she yells to me, "mum, you've got to go, you've just got to go. Dad's really mad and he will call the police".

"Mum, you've got to go, you've just got to go. Dad's really mad and he will call the police".

I got back into my car and parked it on the opposite side of the road to stop Cliff from yelling at me. I searched the car looking for Chelsea's phone. Cliff was still yelling at me, and I could hear Frieda begging me to just leave too saying "you've got to go, dad's calling the police now, he's going to have you arrested". I knew that Cliff probably wouldn't physically hurt my kids. I knew that when I left, even though it was incredibly difficult, that Cliff was going to open the door and let those kids into the house.

When I got home, there was Chelsea's phone sitting on the couch. I messaged my older daughter Frieda and said, "hey, I've got your sister's phone". She sent a message back saying, "mummy, you can't come back. Daddy says he's not going to feed us because he can't risk going out to the shops to buy food because you are going to come and you're going to ransack everything and you're going to do all of these horrible things". I texted Frieda, "honey, I'm not going to do any of that". I was really quite upset, and I could tell my children were upset. So, I rung the domestic violence team I had been speaking with and I explained what had happened. They told me, "Right, go down to the police station and report Cliff".

I told my brother, Adam what had happened at drop-off and said that I'd just gotten off the phone to domestic violence team who have told me to go to the police. Adam said, "I'm coming with you to the police station". He lives on the other side of Adelaide, about 45 minutes to an hour away and he jumped in his car and drove to my place. By the time I was reporting what had happened, it was evening.

I approached the police station desk with my Protection Order in hand and I said, "look, I'm really concerned about my daughters' who are 9 and 13 years old. I am worried about their safety and wellbeing. I told the police that Cliff was hurling abuse and that he threatened that he won't feed the kids because he's apparently scared that I'll ransack the house. The female constable at the desk said, "what do you want me to do about this?" I said here's my Protection Order and clearly, he's just breached it. I'm concerned about my youngest daughter because I've got her phone and she has no way of getting in contact with me". Now it's important to note that this was the Friday night at

the start of a long weekend. The police officer's response was "well if you're concerned, ring child protection on Tuesday". I said, the kids will be back in my care by Tuesday. She said again, "well what do you want me to do about this?"

It was really clear that the police were not going to do anything. They didn't even record it as an incident. So, while I am able to say I spoke to this police officer at this date, there's no record. The police officer never recorded it in the system. I didn't know at that time that I needed to ask for a police reference number. Because that was the first time I tried to report a breach. At no point did the police officer even offer, "look, we can pop around and do a welfare check for you". I also didn't know to ask about welfare checks.

My brother said, "I care" and "I care about your kids".

My brother came up behind me and put his hands on my shoulder. He turned me away from the desk saying, "come on, we've got to go. Let's just leave. Just leave it". I remember walking out of the police station, it's got this long sloping lead up to the front of the station, between the car park and the station. I remember walking down

that slope crying and saying that nobody cares. Adam said, "I care". Now my brother's not a very touchy-feely kind of bloke. So that's why it has such a strong memory for me. My brother understood that the police were not going to do anything. I kept saying, "nobody's going to help us, What about my kids?" My brother said, "I care about your kids". He then said, "we will go around to Cliff's, and I will drop off Chelsea's phone, so she has a way of contacting you".

We drive around to the house with the phone. We parked across the road from the house. I rang Frieda's phone and I said "I'm here with your uncle Adam and we've got Chelsea's phone". Frieda says, "mum, you've got to go away, you can't do this. Dad's going to have you and uncle Adam arrested. It's a breach of the protection order". I said "Sweetheart, can you just pop out, I'll give you your sister's phone, and then you can pop back in. I'm not even going to cross the road". Frieda repeated, "I can't do that, it'll breach the order, I will get in trouble". I said, "the protection order doesn't apply to you, sweetheart. You can come out and see me, that is completely fine to do". She says, "I can't, dad says you're going to get arrested. I don't want you to get arrested mum, please just go".

In the end Adam took the phone, walked up to the house and he puts it on the front doorstep. As soon as my brother had put the phone down, Cliff opened the front door and started hurling abuse at my brother, saying he's going to mess him up. Adam said to him, which was not the best move, "well come on, mate let's have a go". Cliff's swearing at my brother saying that he is trespassing on his land. Adam responded with a sort of humping motion and goes, "fuck you, mate, my sister gave me permission to be on her land". My brother walked back to the car where I was sitting, and we left. Not long after we left, Chelsea rings me and says, "mum, uncle shouldn't have done that, dad is calling the police to have him arrested for trespassing". I said, "let it go now, honey, let it go. Enjoy your night with dad".

I learned at a later visit that Cliff had actually confiscated Chelsea's phone. I was only able to contact Chelsea via calling Frieda. From this point on, I always took my brother with me for handovers because I was too scared to go and do it on my own. I also insisted that handovers occur at our local library in the carpark, because it was quite clear that handovers were not safe to do at his house.

One time Cliff called the police to do a welfare check on the girls while they were at my place. He made up a story and told the police that I had left them home alone. The police turned up. I told the

police that I have a protection order against Cliff and that he had been convicted of breaching it just a few days prior. These were all the facts that the police knew before they arrived for the welfare check. It was pretty evident to me that Cliff ordered the welfare check to harass me and not because he genuinely thought the girls were in danger. I was home, and everything was calm. The police apologised to me for intruding. Meanwhile the entire time the police were at my home talking to me, Cliff was calling Chelsea on her phone. Our parenting agreement said, “no calls after 7pm” and he was definitely calling after 7pm. Cliff’s phone contact with Chelsea was excessive, I’m talking about from the moment Chelsea woke up she was on the phone with her dad to the moment she went to bed. Chelsea would refuse to come to the dinner table because she was talking to her dad. She would sometimes scoff her food and race away from the table so that she could call him back. There were times when I put the kids to bed, and I could hear Chelsea talking to Cliff.

So, when I showed the police evidence of all the repeated phone calls on Chelsea’s phone, they told me that, “look, Cliff is just really worried about his daughters” and that he is “just a very concerned father communicating with his child”. To me these statements meant that the police thought I was overreacting to Cliff’s relentless phone contact with Chelsea. Cliff never respected the parenting orders boundaries, and he made girls break those boundaries too. Whenever the girls were with him, he did not allow them to contact me and if they did call me, they had to do it secretly. The girls and I had developed an emoji system that they could send me if they needed me. Otherwise, when they were with Cliff, I just accepted that I would not have contact with them. But when the girls were with me in my home, Cliff expected that he could have as much access to them, via the phone and internet as he wanted.

“I felt him staring me down before I saw him”.

I remember that I had given up on trying to pursue breaches of the protection order because it felt very much like the police just didn’t care. Cliff and I live in neighbouring suburbs. There is the same major supermarket chain in both suburbs. He didn’t have to shop at the supermarket in my suburb, he could have shopped at his own local shops or gone to another

neighbouring suburb. There are lots of supermarkets near him. So, on this day I was shopping at my local supermarket in my suburb, and he turned up and started following me around. I felt him staring me down before I saw him. I was in one aisle, then he came up behind me. So, then I moved to the next aisle, he followed me. He never said a word to me, not a word. He just glared. When I was there trying to find the biscuits, there he was just standing behind me. I don’t know how to describe it, but it made me feel really uncomfortable. When I went to go to the third aisle, I saw him at the other end of that aisle. I panicked and literally grabbed what I had, quickly went through the self-service checkout and got out of there. I didn’t finish my shopping. I didn’t report the incident that day. I waited until the next day when the girls went to stay with him because I didn’t want to make the report in front of them. This time the police did come out to talk to me and they took a statement. But then they came back and said, “oh, we’ve spoken to the supermarket, but they’ve only got footage of one of the aisles. The supermarket actually only has footage of every second aisle”. The police could only identify Cliff in one of the aisles. I also showed the police my phone which had evidence of 150 text messages from Cliff in a three-day window that were all harassing and bullying trying to get me to drop the protection order. The police decided that the text messages alone would be enough, to charge him for breaching the protection order. The police advised that they would go round and arrest him. I asked the police to wait until my girls were at school to charge him. But the police rang me a few hours later and said, “so the kids are with him, you say his father lives in the same suburb?” I agreed to that plan for Cliff’s dad to collect the girls. The police also told me “Cliff will be in custody tonight, but he’ll make bail tomorrow”. They also let me know that once Cliff made bail, the girls would have to be returned to him because there were

no grounds to keep them from him. The police recommended that the safest thing to do, was leave the girls with Cliff's dad for the night so that he could collect the children once released. I agreed to that. I wish now that I hadn't agreed to that. I wish that I had insisted that the girls be returned to me.

“Your mum tried to get me sent to jail because I was just trying to innocently do my grocery shopping”.

Cliff turned his arrest into evidence of me victimising him. He wrote about it in court papers, told the family therapist and basically anyone that would listen that now he “can't even go to his local supermarket because he is so scared”. He told the girls “Your mum is trying to get me sent to jail”. After Cliff's arrest, and by the time the girls finally came back to stay with me, they were so angry with me. They told me they hated me and didn't want to see me much less live with me. Chelsea was especially angry and she said that she thought I was

being unfair to her dad. It was the start of her becoming really hostile towards me. In hindsight this was my first clue as to how entrenched Cliff's parental alienation already was.

Before the next interim Family Court hearing we had to get a single expert report. Getting this done cost Cliff and I thousands of dollars each. The single expert concluded there was major parental alienation occurring and stated that “if the children's relationship with the mother isn't restored, it would be catastrophic for the children”. The report also stated that “Cliff had the power to fix the relationship between the mother and the children” but noted that “he probably wouldn't take steps to restore the relationship”. The single expert writer didn't write any recommendations as to how that restoration should occur. She just recommended family therapy for us all and for Cliff to do individual therapy, which he never did.

“If the children's relationship with the mother isn't restored, it would be catastrophic for the children”.

Following the single experts' advice, we did go to see a family therapist and he took an instant dislike to me. Before the second interim hearing the family therapist had met Cliff and I individually twice and the girls once. This family therapist had told me that I had “abandoned” my children and that I was “a bad mother”. He said that it was all my fault that my children were rejecting me. He also said that I should “stop vilifying Cliff”. The family therapist told me to stop focusing on parental alienation and said that I needed to “work on my parenting skills”. I didn't want to continue to see him as I knew he was biased against me. Despite my misgivings, I participated in the family therapy because I love my daughters and I would do anything for them.

I told the family therapist that I believed that my daughters were saying that they don't they feel safe with me because of Cliff's actions. For example, my contact details on Cliff's phone are “psycho bitch”. I know this because Cliff submitted screenshots of text messages from me and put them into his court bundle. My messages appear with the name “psycho bitch” on each of the screen shots. What are the girls supposed to think about me if they see “psycho bitch” on his phone? That's saying to the girls, mum's not a safe or good person, to say the least.

Despite everything Cliff had done to me and continued to do me, I never once withheld the girls from him. But he withheld them from me on several occasions before he took them the final time. He took the girls and refused to return them when the school went into COVID-19 quarantine. Cliff wouldn't give the kids back to me.

For our second interim hearing, we didn't get to go back to the same senior registrar. I went into the second interim hearing feeling positive that either the girls would be returned to me full-time, or that I would get increased contact with Chelsea or at least some more contact with Frieda. By this point it had been nearly 9 months since I had seen Frieda because Cliff had not sent her to any of the contact visits or produced full disclosure of his financials (which were ordered at the last interim hearing). I thought that all the evidence backed my story that I had never hurt my girls and that Cliff had a history of family violence and that he was perpetrating further abuse through parental alienation. We had previously been ordered to do financial mediation. Twice we tried and Cliff's pulled out on the day or the day before. I thought the court would adversely look at Cliff as someone who was not respecting the court. I thought the court would see through his lies.

On the day of the second interim hearing, the family therapist who was not requested to write a report, wrote a report and submitted it to the court around thirty minutes before hearing was due to commence. So, when the hearing commenced, we were instantly adjourned so that everyone could read it. But what happened was the independent children's lawyer and the family therapist had conversations between themselves. I don't know what they discussed. But I do know that the independent children's lawyer was privy to drafts of the family therapist's report. I believe that the family therapist was heavily influenced the independent children's lawyer's understanding.

I'm really aware that the dominant discourse in Family Law Courts is that "mothers take children away from abusive fathers" and if a father takes a child away from a mother, then the "mother must have done something really bad". That's how our society sees it. The family therapists' report said that I am "dysregulated, persecuted and paranoid" and questioned whether I was really a victim of family violence. In the session the family therapist had asked me "what evidence do you have of family violence?" I said "Cliff has got a criminal conviction, is that enough for you? What evidence would satisfy you that I am the victim of family violence?" In his report he said that while I claimed to be a victim, he questioned this, "is she the victim or the abuser – I don't know?" and "she never disclosed the any incidents of violence until after she left". This report also said that about me, "Nicole is projecting her childhood trauma onto her children" and "the children have aligned themselves with their father because they feel safer with him than the mother". The report goes on to say that "Nicole is caught in the narrative of parental alienation", and that I can't entertain any other reason why my children would reject me.

The family therapists' report said that I am "dysregulated, persecuted and paranoid" and questioned whether I was really a victim of family violence.

At the second interim hearing the independent children's lawyer again recommended that my children live with Cliff and that they basically have no contact with me. We were also ordered to do more family therapy with the same family therapist who was biased against me even though my barrister had argued strongly to get a new family therapist. The judge said, "nothing's changed, the existing orders stand" and that was just devastating. The judge also went to say things like, "this

woman has never apologised for the trauma her children experienced when the police arrested the father”.

I was sitting there, but I actually ended up leaving to go to the toilet. I remember thinking “I can't believe I'm being held accountable for the violence against me and the actions that the police independently took” and I also remember thinking “why is this my fault? Why isn't anyone saying, ‘if you don't commit family violence, stalking and harassment, then you don't get arrested?’” I could have been in trouble if I hadn't breached Cliff. Not reporting the breaches, could have been used against me as being an unprotective mother. The police made the decision to arrest Cliff and as soon as I found out he would be arrested I asked the police about the girls and how they could be protected from witnessing this. So, it was really hard to sit there while I was chastised for the violence Cliff inflicted on me, and for the actions of the police, two things I had absolutely no control over.

From my perspective the system has supported Cliff the abuser, and in my attempts to try to counter his actions they have made me sound deranged in comparison. I've been accused of being out for revenge and prepared to say or do anything to discredit Cliff. I think it was because I am educated and because I did my research; I got the overwhelming response from Family Law court “this didn't really happen, you are just trying to play the system”. It really hurts me that nobody ever asked the question, “if Cliff really loved his children, why would he keep them from their mother?” Also no one asked, “why is Cliff able to breach the court orders, not follow the single expert's advice and basically have no consequences for his violence and abuse?”

The family therapist said, “there's a big difference between knowing it here”, pointing at his head and “knowing it here”, pointing at his heart.

For the sake of my children, I had to do even more family therapy and I did absolutely everything the family therapist asked of me. I read the books, I listened to the podcasts, I did parenting courses. But nothing that I did could convince the family therapist that I was a genuinely “good”, “safe mother”. At one point when I advised the therapist of all the work I had done to improve my parenting skills the family therapist said, “there's a big difference between knowing it here”, pointing at his head and “knowing it here”, pointing at his heart. He would say things to me like, “your job as a mother is to be the kinder, wiser, stronger person. You just need to show up”.

It was exhausting trying to show this man I was worthy of mothering my own daughters. After all I did not have a history of abusing or neglecting the girls. The family therapist said to me at one point “I know your children better than you do; they trust me”. At that point I decided to stop trying to build a rapport with this man. I pushed back, telling him, “You've met my children three times for an hour. You do not know my children better than me”.

The last time I saw the family therapist was a joint session between me and Chelsea. At that session the family therapist kept leading Chelsea to say that she was terrified of me. The family therapist never said one positive thing about me. My daughter, Chelsea is normally very softly spoken. But in this meeting Chelsea was forthright and pushed back on the therapist's suggestion that she was fearful of me. She said, “no, I am not scared of my mum. My dad told me the same thing earlier. It's like both you and my dad want me to say that I am scared of my mum when I am not”. The therapist could have understood that this was an admission from Chelsea that her dad had been coaching her

on what to say, instead the family therapist said, “Chelsea I have never seen this side of you, you are being so aggressive and direct, maybe you will grow up to be a lawyer one day”. After that session the family therapist withdrew his services saying that he felt therapy was not working. It’s been two years since that last so-called “therapy session” and the horrible legacy of this “therapy” still has a negative impact.

I spoke to a social worker at a domestic and family violence service about what had happened with the family therapist – she said to me “oh my god you weren’t seeing him were you? Oh, we know he supports abusers”. In hindsight this family therapist was gaslighting me into believing that it was all my fault. He said that he was committed to restoring the relationship between the girls and me but instead he made the rupture worse, and he emboldened Cliff to keep abusing the girls by alienating them from me.

In the past I have said, “in a way it would have been easier if my children had died”. That sounds awful. But if my children had have died, the world would have been sympathetic, people would have protected me and cared for me. Instead, got a lot of dismissive responses. My co-workers would tell me that the family system that the government designed actually works. I felt judged and misunderstood by them. This affected my relationships with my co-workers. So, my career was in the toilet as well. My manager was not understanding either. She said to me, “you are a leader, you need to act like one”. My workplace had no capacity to support a victim of domestic violence or trauma. I think there is a need to educate employers on how to respond better to staff experiencing family violence trauma. Workplace diversity says, “everyone has something of value to offer”, this applies to survivors of violence too.

“In a way it would have been easier if my children had died”.

I can’t get back the three, almost four years I have already lost with my children. I never saw Frieda finish primary school. Frieda needed additional supports. I worked so friggging hard with that school to get my daughter through. I fought so hard for her. The first thing Cliff did was take her off her medication and he stopped her Occupational Therapy and all the support I had worked so hard for. Cliff sat in court saying, “Frieda’s going really well”. Yeah well, you know I just got a mid-semester report last week and 5 of her 7 teachers said that they were concerned about her lack of academic progression. My daughter is not okay.

In the first couple of years after Cliff took the girls, I got very depressed, even suicidal at one point. My brother and sister-in-law were fundamental in pulling me through that dark tunnel. I also now have a great psychologist. After the family therapist withdrew his services after the second interim hearing, I started focusing on trying to be the best version of me. I did a lot of work in all the areas that Cliff’s legal side had said I was deficient in. After that, I focused on “accepting me” which included coming up with a new definition of mothering. So, if I am not going to be my daughters’ mother in the traditional sense, in the sense that I am in their everyday lives, making sure they get to school on time, that they do their homework and brush their teeth etc. So, I’ve had to reimagine “how can I be a mother and what does that mean?”

I've got lots of photos of my kids up in my house. The photos are all up my hallway, they're on my fridge around my desk where I work from home, they are everywhere. I don't have any of the cards and drawings that the girls made for me from before I left, but I've got the Mother's Day coloured in flowers that Chelsea made for me at school and a portrait Frieda drew of me and another that she

drew of herself. I actually have these portraits framed and hanging in my loungeroom. I've got the girls school merit awards on display in the kitchen. I've got these things up because I want the girls to know that my home is their home. They might not be here. But I want them to know they've always got a home with me.

I am learning to become okay with the fact that my daughters are no longer with me. I am trying to make peace with the fact my girls are gone. I may not be the mother that I thought I was going to be but that makes me no less of a mother. It's not a very easy thought to let go of. But you know Chelsea is twelve now and I don't know when her period is going to come. So, I bought her period undies, pads and a couple of books on Girls Stuff and periods. I want Chelsea to be prepared even if I'm not there. I don't know how her dad is going to handle this. I don't know if Frieda will help her or not. Doing this will mean that Chelsea won't feel so confronted when it happens. That is mothering. Even though I haven't seen Frieda in almost 4 years, I still am actively involved in her individual learning plan at school and that is mothering.

I started doing a lot of regional trips, Adelaide is not a bad place, but sometimes it feels like my prison. But I have started doing these day trips and overnight trips to the dessert and the Flinders Rangers and other areas around here. As soon as I am out of the city I can breathe again. I've started accepting social invitations including spending Mother's Day at the football with friends. Instead of sitting at home missing my kids I went out and had a cracker of an afternoon in the sun laughing and watching the footy. That was something that I used to enjoy before I married Cliff. I do daily meditations and have joined a local yoga class. My feeling is the longer this goes on, the less likely it is that my children are going to come home. So, I'm trying to process that as well as heal from the trauma of my relationship with Cliff. Some days, I'm a little bit fragile, other days I do quite well and most days, it's a mixture of both.

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

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- 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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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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