

The gravity of abuse

Part III: No contact

The third in our series on one family's struggle to survive domestic violence

BY ROSETTE ROYALE
STREET NEWS SERVICE

Safe house

What if no one showed up? In early October 2009, Brandy Sweeney stood outside a grocery store in an unfamiliar neighborhood, her belongings gathered around her feet, her three-day-old son cradled in her arms. Someone was supposed to meet her there and drive her to a safe place, but the person hadn't arrived. So she waited. Two minutes, three minutes, four.

As customers walked by, Brandy searched their faces. Is that them? No one approached her. Maybe the person was late. So she waited. Five minutes, six, seven.

Standing in the parking lot, Brandy watched the sunlight drain out of the afternoon sky, felt a damp cold infuse the autumn air. Eight minutes, nine, 10. What if the person forgot? Several days before, after giving birth to

her son, Ian, she'd been accepted into the Eastside Domestic Violence Program. Known as EDVP, the program operates two safe houses for people fleeing violent relationships. During her pregnancy, she'd lived with Ian's father, Richard Duncan, in a smelly, chaotic motel in Seattle. He drank, she yelled, they fought, their arguments dragging them into violent clashes throughout the summer.

Then, on August 22, 2009, after a flurry of punching and scratching and shoving, Brandy, nearly eight months pregnant, suffered a black eye and fractured foot. Police hauled Richard to jail, while Brandy spent the last weeks of her pregnancy in the motel scrambling to find stable housing. Her search ended on September 30, 2009, the day she gave birth to Ian, when she received word there was space at the safe house.

Except she didn't know where it was. EDVP keeps its shelter addresses secret, to protect the women and their children from vengeful boyfriends and fathers. Brandy left the hospital on October 2 and took a cab, while Ian screamed his head off. The cab driver brought her to a grocery store, a drop-off point. A safe house staff member would ferry her the rest of the way.

So Brandy waited. Fifteen minutes, 20, 30 — and still, no one came. She wasn't prepared to be outside in the cold with a newborn. Without a phone, she couldn't call program staff. What if she was at the wrong spot? Brandy saw her life heading down the toilet. "Because that's where it was at that point," she remembers. "I had nothing going for me."

Then a woman walked out of the store. She carried something: a blanket. The woman handed it to Brandy. She burst into tears as she wrapped Ian in the blanket.

Rosette Royale is the assistant editor of *Real Change News*, *Street Roots*' sister paper in Seattle, Wash. "The gravity of abuse" grew out of a three-month 2010 Seattle University fellowship to study family homelessness in Washington state. The fellowship was funded by the Gates Foundation. All quotes, thoughts and feelings of individuals stem from interviews, personal correspondence, police reports and court documents. Research for the series lasted 22 months.

Do you want to use my phone? the woman asked.

Yes, said Brandy. She called EDVP. Oh, said the person who answered. We didn't know you were going to be there now. We thought later this afternoon.

I'm here, Brandy said. You need to come get me.

Brandy passed back the woman's phone and thanked her. The woman smiled, walked to her car and drove away. She never told Brandy her name.

Moments later, an EDVP staff member pulled up, apologizing. She helped Brandy and Ian settle in the car, and off they went, her son swaddled in a stranger's blanket as they rode to a place where everyone would be a stranger.

My Friend's Place and My Sister's Home: Those are the names EDVP gave its emergency shelters, both meant to act as screens. Say a mother and child moved into a shelter, and the child's schoolmate asked, "Where do you live?" The child, in all honesty, could reply, "My Friend's Place," without revealing his abusive home life or secret location.

The staff member parked in front of My Friend's Place, then gave Brandy a tour. The building was divided into a North House and South House, with five women, some with children and some without, living in each section. Downstairs, two resident rooms, a family room, a laundry, a shared bathroom. Upstairs, a living room, a kitchen, more resident spaces, another bathroom.

Brandy's room, downstairs, contained a twin bed, dresser, nightstand and TV, all squeezed in a small space. She holed up inside, breastfeeding Ian. She wanted to stay there forever and sort out her life, but staff prodded her to meet other residents. Reluctantly, she left her sanctuary.

Brandy, 27, shared little about her life with the other women. They hardly knew about Richard, how he sat in the King County Jail serving 120 days for assault in the fourth degree. Or how the court had issued a no-contact order that barred him from coming within 500 feet of Brandy or communicating through email, texts, voicemail and more, for two years. Or how, by Thanksgiving, he'd be released.

That no-contact order, issued by the Seattle Municipal Court, forbade Richard from contacting Brandy, but it didn't prohibit her from reaching him. Days before giving birth to Ian, Brandy sought to lift the order in hopes Richard could see his son after his release. A judge denied the



PHOTOS BY KATE BALDWIN

request. Brandy knew Richard craved a father-son connection, so she wrote him to share news of Ian.

Writing was her only option, since the jail didn't permit calls to inmates. Brandy couldn't receive calls herself — until staff gave her a free cell phone with 1,000 pre-paid minutes. She reached out to old friends and contacted her 8-year-old daughter, Skye, who lived in Idaho. She awaited their messages through a free voicemail service that is not connected to a customer's phone number. As the days progressed, Brandy realized the life she imagined being down the toilet was now a smooth sea.

Six weeks sailed by at the safe house with hardly a ripple. One day in mid-October, Brandy checked her free voicemail account. A message awaited. She listened. It was Richard. He wondered where she was. And Ian? I don't know if you've got a phone number yet, he said, or if you want to talk to me, but I'm sorry.

Richard? Already? And he apologized? Brandy thought he had a right to see Ian, but ... Did she want to see Richard? No — though a little part of her did.

A little more TLC

Work release: That's where Richard was when he broke the no-contact order and called Brandy.

Run by the King County Jail, the Work-Education-Release program provides transitional residences for roughly 160 men nearing the end of their sentences. Program enrollees are chosen at sentencing and,

once they enter the program, they can seek work, go to school or attend substance abuse treatment for part of the day. Then they're required to return to work release for the remainder of the day. On October 21, 2009, after he served 60 days, Richard was shuttled by jail guards into an old-school cell, complete with bars, on the tenth floor of the county courthouse.

Richard wanted to return to TLC, Trades Labor Corporation, the day-labor center where he worked prior to jail. But he needed a messenger. So he'd called Brandy's voicemail, using the work release pay phone. He hoped she would change her voicemail's outgoing message to include her phone number — and she did. When they spoke, Richard apologized, then asked her to check if his old boss would rehire him. His boss agreed.

When he'd first been hired at TLC, in February of that year, Richard had met Francisco Mitchell, and the two, often assigned to the same work sites, became friends. From the outside, their friendship made little sense: Richard, with his shaved head and clear blue eyes, sported a gallery of tattoos on his body, including "SKINHEAD" spelled out in blue ink across the upper fingers of both hands like brass knuckles; Francisco, with his thick accent and olive skin, had Mexican and white parents. Why in the world would a skinhead and a biracial man become buddies? For starters, Richard thought Francisco seemed like a cool dude. Plus, they both knew life on the inside, its racial divisions. So once Richard returned to his day-labor routine, he

and Francisco reconnected.

Though what Richard really craved was a connection with his family, with Ian. Of course, he couldn't see them legally for two years. But he'd already broken the no-contact order by calling Brandy. Then there were the multiple times they'd spoken since then. With each new conversation, Richard became convinced of one thing: "She wanted me back."

Finding a way back in

Brandy questioned if getting back through Richard was the right move.

When she thought about him, she experienced a tug of war of emotions. Pulling on one end were memories of how nice he could be, his claims he'd protect her. He'd worked to pay for a motel so she didn't have to spend her pregnancy in a tent. Plus, she loved him. And when you love someone, you stick by his side, don't you?

But then the other end of the rope pulled. Attached to it were memories of the put downs, the insults. The stalking, the black eye, the fractured foot. The way she spent her pregnancy in tears, swearing she'd leave. "When I think about the stuff that's happened," Brandy says. "I kinda think to myself, 'Why was I there?'"

She had one answer: Ian. She thought a son should know his father. Brandy reminded herself that even if Richard did horrible things, he wasn't a horrible person. So after speaking to Richard in work release, after hearing his apologies and his promises that he'd change, she felt the rope

tug. Yes, she'd try again.

But before Richard finished his stint in work release on Nov. 9, Brandy had already moved from the safe house into a two-bedroom duplex in Renton. She'd found the place through Way Back Inn, a transitional housing program that assisted homeless families. Before Brandy gave Richard the address, she laid down a ground rule: no drinking. Then she counted the days before his arrival.

Richard was still mad he'd been arrested for assaulting Brandy, so when he arrived at the door, he didn't know whether to hug her or yell at her. He settled for a hug.

The pair made small talk, and Brandy was surprised: Richard was so nice, caring. It brought back old times. Richard went to see Ian, rousing his son so he could hold him for the first time. Startled, Ian crumpled his six-week-old face into a grimace and bawled. Richard wept, too. Father and son, together, in tears.

Brandy sensed what a good dad Richard might become. Even though she couldn't shake an uncomfortable feeling, an intuition that raised a small red flag, she told Richard he could stay. "I just really wanted to make it work," Brandy says.

Besides, Thanksgiving wasn't far off, and, with the family together, maybe they'd feel thankful. Things worked out for the first couple of weeks, but the holiday was a bust: Richard ate the turkey Brandy roasted, then drank, a violation of the no-drinking condition, until he passed out. The situation worsened two days later, Nov. 28. Black Saturday.

he yelled. The officer, seated in a chair near Brandy, heard every word. While he screamed, Brandy's body shook. She hung up.

When the officer asked if Brandy would sign a written statement, Brandy was too scared. If I cooperate with you, she said, Richard might get more violent.

The police dispatched a K9 unit to search for Richard. No luck. Concerned about Brandy's safety, the officer contacted a Way Back Inn employee, who moved Brandy and Ian into a motel. As she prepared to settle in for the night, her phone rang again: Richard.

I'm sorry, he said. I won't do it again. Promise. I just want to be with you and Ian.

I don't want to be with you, Brandy said. Which was true. For the moment. But Richard insisted, sweetly, they should be together. When Brandy considered how he had moved out to Renton, where he didn't know anyone, to start a family, she felt responsible. His words raised doubts she could care for Ian alone. With Richard around, wouldn't it be easier? "And I thought if I loved him enough," she recalls, "he'd change."

Richard swore he would. Honestly. She told him the motel's address. A little while later, he knocked. Brandy let him in. And hours after the assault, they were together again.

Days later, Brandy returned to the duplex. Aiming to protect her from Richard, program staff secured another space, further south, in Tukwila. No one at Way Back Inn ever knew Richard followed her to the new apartment. He moved in.

But the crying. Ian wouldn't quit crying. Richard knew that's what babies did, but still. "If you're not used to it," Richard says, "there's no getting used to it." Add to that another fight — again Brandy holding Ian, again Richard pushing her, again Brandy falling, again Ian safe — and Richard decided he had to get away. He'd go to Boise, where they first met. Brandy welcomed the breathing space. So they bought him a bus ticket, and the pair said goodbye.

Richard figured it was their last goodbye, because he had no intention of returning to Seattle. Sure, he cared for his family, but the crying, the nagging, the fighting — good riddance. He swore he'd never come back.

But never, it doesn't always last forever. Sometimes, it lasts only a few weeks. So Richard, after barely a month in Idaho, made another decision: He'd try it one last time with Brandy.

One coincidence after another

With Richard gone most of January 2010, Brandy enjoyed the quiet. Ian had turned three months old. A new year, a new start — broken by an old pattern: Richard returned.

Strapped for cash, he went back to TLC. He landed a job at a construction site in south Seattle, a partially built residential complex containing 351 luxury apartments called the Station at Othello Park. Richard rode the bus, and Brandy often met him in the late afternoon at the TLC office. Sometimes they went out for Mexican and had a beer. Then they bused home, mother, father and child. A family.

But the transitional housing at Way Back Inn only lasted three months, so the search for a place to live began anew. As February approached, Brandy heard from Hope Place, a shelter run by the Union Gospel Mission that served roughly 80 female-run households. The shelter took boys up to 18, but no adult males. That would force Brandy and Richard to separate.

Or maybe not, because Hope Place stood in all its five-story glory on a recently developed tract of land on South Othello Street. Walk three blocks due east, and you'd be standing in front of a squat, gray apartment building. Directly across the street was the Station at Othello Park, Richard's new workplace.

Don't you fucking tell the cops anything,

See ABUSE, page 10