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change. The fog of manipulation and abuse was slowly lifting. Through art therapy and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder classes, Mary began to realize that there was a way to move on from her abuse.

"I finally understood that I wasn't the crazy one, it was (my ex-husband)," she says. "The negative things were not true, it was just a way to get into my head."

Even her abuser could feel the change. Mary has kept in touch with her ex-husband through e-mail — being primarily a verbal abuser, therapists thought it best to cut off phone communication — solely because they have children together.

"I can even tell through his e-mails that he's thrown off by my empowerment," says Mary. "Instead of me being the reactive and insecure one in the relationship, he's the reactive one. He doesn't know how to control me anymore."

This new sense of independent strength couldn't have come soon enough. Shortly after her escape from her abusive husband, Mary was met with a slew of other stressful issues. First, her family's bikes were stolen, then her car. Next, her youngest child broke her leg. Now, she's faced with a shattered ankle.

"As I was going along in my healing process, traumas kept happening, which definitely slowed the process down," she says. "But we have gotten through it. If anything, it shows how we've gotten stronger."

Mary says she's grown closer to her children, who are all involved in various Gateway courses, through this tumultuous time — proving to be one of the few "benefits" of the process.

"The stress level is much lower, there's a lot less anger in our house," she says. "We are no longer debilitated by trauma. And it's going to continue to happen. So all we can do is ask ourselves: How quickly can we recover?"

Anna

Anna, who moved to the United States from Russia two years ago, was married only five months before she fled her abuser. Lacking insurance, immigration papers, an address and a grasp of the English language, Anna couldn't be more terrified.

"It was so, so scary," she recalls.

After dropping off her 17-year-old son at a youth shelter, a woman gave her the number for Gateway. Nervous that she wouldn't be able to communicate, but desperate, Anna called and left a voicemail message.

"An hour later, I got a call back from a woman who spoke my language," says Anna. "She was kind, quiet and understood me. I knew I must go there."

Anna quickly made the center a daily stop after her abuse. There, she secured a lawyer to place a restraining order on her husband, and had help filling out immigration papers and a work permit. She also was able to enroll in English courses at Portland Community College.

"The most important part was speaking with a counselor," Anna says. "I had no idea how much my husband controlled what was in my mind."

Anna had met her husband, a military official, on the East Coast, and then moved to Portland to live with him. Before they married, he seemed like a "good person," she says. But she soon thought differently.

"He would tell my son and I that he was up here and we were down there," Anna says, spreading her arms wide vertically. "He was the boss."

He also was in possession of all of Anna's paperwork, information and finances, making it virtually impossible for her to escape. Soon after speaking to a therapist, Anna understood why.

"I realized he must have a serious mental problem," she says. "Living with him, I thought it was me. I thought I was the crazy one. But it was him."

Now, Anna volunteers at Gateway, in between classes and job hunting. Not only did the network of peers help her get back on her feet, but it provided a home away from home. A family.

"After the abuse, I felt like nothing; below human," Anna says. "But now I feel strong and independent. I am a woman. I have rights."

Susan

Susan never thought she would find herself in an abusive relationship.

"I always told myself, 'I will never let that happen to me, it's ridiculous,'" she says. "I was so arrogant."

But, while working on her master's degree on counseling in California a few years' back, she was swept up in a manipulative, violent relationship before she could react. And it wasn't just a physical attack.

"Sure, it affected me mentally and physically, but it was more a power play," Susan says. "He wanted control and found it by punishing me."

When Susan began to seek legal help to separate from her abusive husband, he had already meddled with the system. The judge on her case to receive full custody of her child was being fed a heap of re-election money from her husband's law firm. Thus, she was playing a losing game.

"It's politics," she says. "And it can break your soul."

Not only had her husband tucked a bill in the law's pocket, he had permanently ruined her finances. Susan's credit was destroyed and was in bottomless debt when she finally fled California with her 5-year-old son in a desperate search for refuge. Living out of her car, she had no way to apply for food stamps, let alone a job, without an address or solid credit.

After being turned away from countless social agencies, support groups that didn't allow children (or provide daycare), and shrugged off by every landlord, Susan was at the end of her rope.

"Gateway was the first place that actually treated me like an intelligent, strong adult — not a victim," she says. "I had found it hard to ask for help until then, because everyone had their own preconceived idea of a domestic abuse victim. I wasn't it."

Slowly, Susan has been finding solid ground. She found a place to live, to start, at an affordable housing apartment complex, along with childcare and counseling. Her credit remains botched, but she's working to recover it with time.

"Things are looking up," she says. "I now have a safe place to live with my child, when I can lock the door and have peace. That's all I can ask for right now."

But while Susan remains personally bruised from this experience, she stresses that it's not a private, stand-alone problem. It's been raised to a national scale.

"Domestic violence is a systemic, cultural illness. A cancer. In families, it's merely a symptom of a larger reality," she says. "It can't continue the way it is. What it takes is a community and government working together to fight it, openly. It's long overdue."

**The names of the women in this article were changed*

Companions

By Avendor

Your love is a river
Flowing across gypsy lands
Past war-ravaged fields
Behind garbage cans
Where lovers kiss
And smokers stand
So for me
While you still can
And cover my back
Like a good friend can

We're short on change
But we can scrap
You can do this
And I can try that
And hopefully
In the orange sherbet sundown
We'll find a place to hang
Out in this town
You see we'll unwind
Brows dampened with sweat
Be seen simply as
Two quiet silhouettes

Running our hands over our knees
Wondering about so many, many things...



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