

A personal story of triumph

Suzannah (not her real name) was a young adult living in another county when she found herself in the hands of an abuser.

It changed the course of her life. At the time, she wondered if these things were really happening to her, then she saw “the reality is so mean and big that it is pretty much undeniable.”

Then it happened again.

Here is her story, in her own words:

What did I do to deserve this? Should I turn it in? Will anyone believe me? How can I face this person?

These all became questions that a normal 22-year-old is not really prepared to answer. It is different for every person. I did turn it in, but I didn't want to at first.

I did face that person in the courtroom, and it did NOT make me feel stronger, it made me scared and lonely. But I DID IT! I didn't even know until years later that it had empowered me, because it sure didn't at the time. The truth is, the very reason that harm was inflicted upon me — power and control — were the very two things that had been stolen from me.

Some people didn't know what to say, so they said nothing, and those who did say something said I needed to “move on and forgive that person.” Forgiving doesn't happen overnight.

Eventually, after seven years, I forgave the person who stole from

me, and I decided to choose how this would change me and move me.

I felt so free after forgiving and thinking I had “moved on” and “this didn't even happen to me” (denial) that I didn't even know I had gotten myself into an even worse situation. What could be worse?

The first person I married after this happened was an abuser.

An abuser at home can be so deceiving, especially if you have no real bruises or “proof” — even to yourself. I woke up one morning and realized that I had put myself, and now my daughter, into a situation and didn't know how to get out of it.

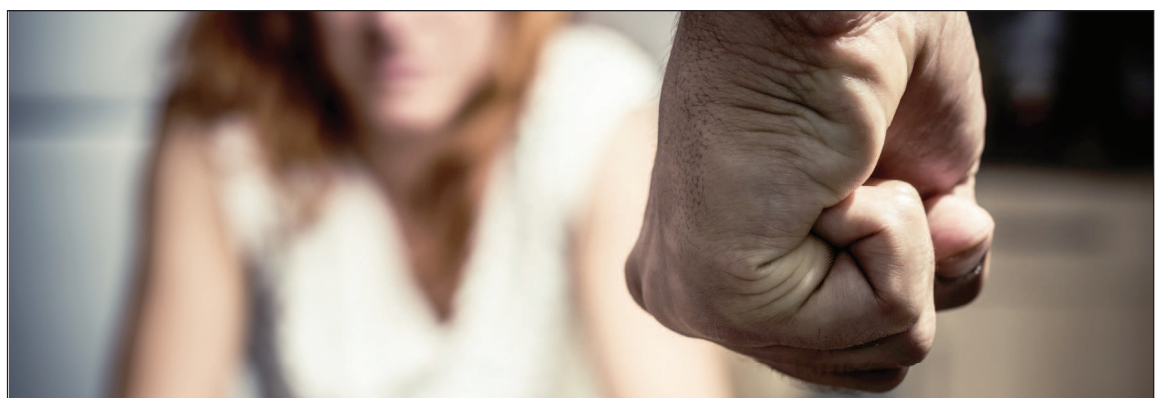
I had conquered and overcome so much, everyone thought I was so strong, what will they think now? I finally decided that I wouldn't want a life like this for my daughter, so I waited till my husband (at the time) went to work out of town, and I left. Yes! I snuck out, and moved to a crappy apartment and got my freedom.

It did not make me feel safe, and it did not empower me. It made me feel scared and lonely.

Brutal honesty is what will help someone else out of a similar situation!

It wasn't until much later in life that I realized what I had done was brave, courageous and commendable!

Faith can move mountains, but don't be surprised if God hands you a shovel! You can come through!



Red flags and warning signs of an abuser

- Extreme jealousy
- Possessiveness
- Unpredictability
- Bad temper
- Cruelty to animals
- Verbal abuse
- Extremely controlling behavior
- Antiquated beliefs about roles of women and men in relationships
- Forced sex, or disregard of their partner's unwillingness to have sex
- Sabotage of birth control methods or refusal to honor agreed upon methods
- Blaming the victim for anything bad that happens
- Sabotage or obstruction of the victim's ability to work or attend school
- Controls all the finances

- Abuse of other family members, children or pets
- Accusations of the victim flirting with others or having an affair
- Control of what the victim wears and how they act
- Demeaning the victim either privately or publicly, may say “It was just a joke”
- Embarrassment or humiliation of the victim in front of others
- Harassment at work

Shelly Whale-Murphy, executive director of Heart of Grant County added that “normal marriages or relationships have normal disagreements, but they're worked out with love and kindness, and that makes the difference between an abusive relationship and a normal relationship.”



The Eagle/Angel Carpenter

Heart of Grant County advocate Cindy Kalin, left, and executive director Shelly Whale-Murphy assist people who have been affected by domestic violence at their office in John Day.

ABUSE

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The most important thing person can do when someone shares their abuse, Whale-Murphy said, is listen to the person and believe what they say.

“It's important to listen and believe because many times the perpetrator is seen as a wonderful, kind, giving person, which is part of their manipulative scheme to hide what they really do,” she said.

They know that if they go down the street to help grandma pack in wood, they'll appear to be a nice

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Shelly Whale-Murphy

Heart of Grant County executive director

person, when they're actually abusing their wife at home, she said.

Meanwhile, the abused lives a life “thinking no one will believe them, which propels them to hold the secret longer, which means they don't get the help they need,” she said. “By holding the secret longer, it just makes it harder for her to

tell, and it continues to uphold his manipulative plan — so, listening and believing is very important.”

If a friend or relative of one experiencing abuse has questions, they can call Heart's office.

“We don't mind people calling and asking questions,” she said.

However, to start the pro-

cess, the advocates at Heart need to speak with the victim.

“A friend of a client called and said ‘I'm going to give them your phone number,’ and that's a great start.” Whale-Murphy said.

They can help the victim develop a safety plan.

“Leaving is a process that sometimes takes weeks and

in some cases months,” she said. “Our clients are wise and innovative with their safety practices. ... They're the ones that know what's best, and they know what sets him off, and when the safe time is to leave.”

Whale-Murphy said most of the clients they help are female, but services are equally available to males.

She said that while they're not clinicians, they are there to advocate for victims.

“We are there to help them navigate their journey to get free of violence in the best way that we can with the services we can offer,” she said.

She said some people don't realize they're in an abusive situation.

“There are some things we tell our clients: You do not deserve what you are living with. You are not the cause of his behavior — he intentionally chooses to behave as he does,” she said.

“If they choose to have more contact with us, we definitely become a strength or a supporting factor in their life,” Whale-Murphy said. “We're there to strengthen and encourage them.”

Heart's office number is 541-575-4335 and their emergency hotline is 541-620-1342.

ADVOCATES

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program director Andrea Officer. “They are really in denial of domestic violence happening in rural communities.”

Officer works alongside Kimberly Neault, a victim intervention specialist, and Mike Durr, an investigator and forensic interviewer, for the DA at the Grant County Courthouse in Canyon City.

Officer said they are there to explain each part of the process as the victim navigates the judicial system. A no contact order is automatically

placed on any domestic violence assault cases.

If the victim fears for their safety and/or the safety of their children, options for housing, transportation and other forms of support from other agencies are explored.

Officer said they can also help the victim acquire the documents needed for restitution, including damages such as medical bills and loss of wages due to injury — any out-of-pocket receipts that are over and above what any available insurance will pay.

A personal call is made to the victim, notifying them of the arraignment date; during an arraignment the

defendant is notified, in court, of the charges they face.

Usually 30 days from arraignment, a plea hearing is set.

“The DA and deputy DA (Mara Houck) will discuss what their plea offer will look like and get the victim's input,” Officer said. “Then at the plea hearing, if the defendant takes the plea, they can go right into sentencing, at which time the victim has a chance to speak at sentencing and share their feelings on how the crime affected them.”

If the defendant pleads not guilty, a trial date is set, and advocates are present during the trial to assist.

Neault added they're there to offer support.

“It's not our job to be judgmental of the situation,” she said. “If they're visiting us, it's often because something bad has happened, and their life has been turned upside-down.”

Officer said they try to offer victims tools and resources to move forward.

“We hope that they come away from their ordeal stronger and with more faith in themselves for meeting the challenges in their lives,” she said. “It's especially important for families to understand that domestic violence doesn't just affect that individual or family, it affects the whole

community and society.”

She added, “When men and women turn a blind eye to how women are treated, it gives an attitude of tolerance toward rape, assault and domestic violence toward children, which demoralizes the core of our community.”

Neault said she enjoys being an advocate.

“It's a hard job, but I like that I'm able to try to help,” she said.

“We like to encourage people,” Officer said. “I like to encourage people to be better.”

For more information, call Officer at the DA's office at 541-575-4026.