



Community Responds to Domestic Violence

Two years ago, I was married to a man who I'd been with for ten years prior, and our relationship had troubles, had issues that people go through. Over the last year of our marriage, my former partner was going through training as a police officer, and at the same time, we had just relocated to a new state. And we were struggling with some large issues in the marriage, and things had gotten more difficult. And I just became increasingly afraid of someone that I used to feel really safe with.

I have three kids and, they were at that time, I guess, 10, 6, and 4, and they were, they were witnessing a lot of arguments, a lot of loud screaming, a lot of doors being slammed, a lot of, a lot of things that I felt were really unsafe for them to see. My home just felt more and more dangerous, more and more like I didn't know what was going to happen. I saw him acting in very controlling ways that I hadn't seen before. I felt scared to leave the house, I felt scared to come home, I felt scared to sleep in my bed.

I think the, the last straw, I guess, came one night when I had gone to a friend's house and my partner followed me, in his car. And when I arrived at my friend's house, he pulled up and, got out of the car at the same time that I did, and was yelling and screaming horrible things at me, and I felt very afraid but I didn't know what to do. I knew wherever I went he would follow me, so I decided I would go to my office, which was nearby, and it was night time so there wouldn't be anybody there. I had a key to the building and he didn't but I ran into my office and into the building, which he didn't have a key to get into. But the whole time he was just screaming at me, just trying to get me to come with him, trying to get me to have a conversation with him. And then when I finally got inside, I waited for a few minutes and he left. So that was the immediate situation I was dealing with.

So I called a friend, who came and met me at my office, and she suggested that I call another friend who had a house I could go to while we figured out what to do, so that's what I did. So when we got there, everybody sort of sat around in the living room and just reassured me that it was, it was, safe for me to be there, that they were welcoming of it, that they understood, you know, that I was at this point on the run from someone who was furious and had a gun and I still felt bad. I felt like I was exposing people to something that I couldn't control, something I was, you know terrified of, but I didn't know, I didn't know, what else to do at that point, and they were saying it was where they wanted me to be.

My friends asked me, are there some people that I could gather up, that I could call, that might be, you might like to have support from in this time. I guess I should say that being part of this, this community organization UBUNTU, which is committed to ending sexual violence, meant that we had a way of, of responding that I knew people would come together. I knew if I needed help people would come and talk to me and we could work it out together. So it didn't feel like, it didn't feel strange to meet, to call people and say, "Hey, I need, I need help, and that this is what's going on." And at the same time, experiencing these things in my home, felt like people would see me differently, people would judge me, people would think I was a hypocrite, people would think I was weak. And I remember being really troubled by that the first few days. But I got reassurances from, from folks that that was exactly what the point of the organization was, and that experiencing harm is not about being strong or weak, that experiencing harm just is, and that it's what we choose to do about it.

So, we made phone calls, and asked people to come over. We had 7 or 8 people come over and just started talking through what, what to do. Which at that point felt totally overwhelming, I was still on, "Is this really happening to me?" and, "What can I do to, I don't know, make it okay?" Rather than thinking of anything beyond tomorrow, or, next week. But I think my wants were something like: I want to be in my home; I want my kids to feel safe; I think I said, "I want ____ to leave." I think those were basically it at that moment, and then we just brainstormed like what, what needs to happen right now in the next hour, in the next day, in the next week, for, you know, for those wants to happen, and we just, we walked through it so if I want, if I to be in my home, how do we make that happen? How do we make sure that that's a safe space? And, I think one of the answers to that question was, at least in the, in the near future, having folks be there with me.

So we eventually set up a schedule. We put out an email with a schedule for the week, and blanks for people to fill in, and, I was amazed that people did fill it in. And they did come by. They came by every day and they



came and sat in my living room, and they brought food, and we just sat together. I, I was amazed at that. That was the one, that was how we got home to be a safe space for me again. When we were thinking about whether to call the police or not, I did feel like I needed some help in calming the situation down, but I didn't know what to do, because if I can't call his, his, friends on the job, and I can't call them in--it doesn't seem right to call them in an unofficial way, because who knows what's going to happen with that. And calling them in an official way doesn't necessarily seem like it's going to produce any certain results either. So we tried to think about who could talk to _____, then. And, I think we had figured out some people in the community that he could talk to, if he was open to doing that.

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I had people checking on me, people staying, during the daytime hours, sometimes overnight for the next week, and it just felt good. It felt so good to have this full house, you know, this busy house of people coming by, and, you know, people were playing with the kids, and we were making art in the kitchen, and someone was always making tea, and it felt not alone.

In terms of talking about successes, I guess the biggest one is that I did get all three things that I wanted, that I identified as wants to happen. That, my kids went through that time feeling safe; that, ___ did leave the house; that I was able to return home; and that all that happened in, in a fairly short amount of time. So in terms of success, I'd say, ultimately for me as a survivor, that, those were the most meaningful successes.

Another success in terms of communication was that, I think w-, we made a phone list immediately, that was one of the first things we did, so I always knew I had someone to call, and that people would call and check on me. Because at that time I think it was hard, I was worried about people burning out, I was worried about people feeling overwhelmed by me and my stuff. So, the fact that I didn't have to constantly, hour by hour, be reaching out for needs to be met because we'd identified them beforehand and there were enough people involved that it felt like no one was carrying all of it, or more than they could. It certainly wasn't that things didn't feel hard, it felt, it felt really hard.

I think what was helpful was this wasn't an intervention where it was like, "how are we going to get _____ away from _____?" It was like, "how are we going to make sure that, that there's not harm happening in our community? How are we going to make sure that we've done our best to address that? And that the problem was consistently the harm. The problem was consistently the events or the behaviors, or the things that were harmful that were happening, but not him that was a problem. Not my choice to stay as long as I had that was a problem. But, but that was... not the relationship that was the problem.

That made it possible for me to feel like I could come into the space and say what I needed, which at that time really included not being someone who was perpetrating harm against him by engaging the power of the state, or by, you know, which whether or not it would have benefited me in that moment, could only have had negative effects on him. And then I got to make a decision about like what do I really need right now to do my work, to take care of my kids, to get through this day, to heal. You know?

We need to trust people to be the experts on their own lives and to take them seriously and have faith in people to set the course for working from harm to transformation. I think that comes from... best from people who are experiencing harm and have a vision for themselves about what they want. And to give people time to identify what that is and be willing to sit with the discomfort of not being able to rescue somebody in a, in a simple or quick way. I think that those values were ultimately the most healing for me.