

My Story

By Kayla, Survivor and Former Resilience Client, April 2021

My mother cleaned the floors and bathrooms of a large mall while she was pregnant with me. It was summertime in Chicago when I arrived earlier than expected, a tiny baby born to a Mexican father and mother, with two older brothers. The morning I was born, many other babies were also born. My mom says she was told there were no rooms available for us, so I was born in what looked to be a supply closet. The hospital did not charge her for my birth. My mom likes to remind me that I was a “free” baby. I take pride in being a free baby too, but I can’t help wondering if they did it on purpose when they saw my Mexican last name.

I watched my mother go through college to obtain her BA degree in Education. My dad worked long hours at the factory way before I was born. Our weekends were spent at our soccer games. My father loved to blast all kinds of music out of our homes. I love the memory of watching my parents dancing together, feeling their love for one another. I was nine years old when my father and I attended a Valentine’s Father & Daughter Dance at the park and we won a twist dance contest. We made the front page of the local newspaper. That’s the last good memory I have before everything changed.

I was around ten years old when someone very close to me, so close they shared about half of the same genes as me- began to sexually abuse me over the next few years. My eleventh birthday wish was to make it stop, but my wish did not come true. I didn’t mark it down in a notebook when his abuse ceased- but I have notebooks full of the after-effects, the thoughts. For the next fourteen years, his horrible secret was kept within every inch of my heart, body, and mind. I was an innocent prisoner held in by the sheer fear of hurting my parents as much as he had hurt me. I think I was afraid they would shatter if I spoke my truth. I was sixteen years old the first time my then-boyfriend drove me to my first free therapy appointment. I was very lucky and am grateful to have had an amazing therapist the first time, and more after. I spent the past decade in and out of offices, trying to sort out all of the deep pain I had buried in parts of myself, some that I still cannot access. I was very lost, trying to survive between the reality I was giving to all those around me and the reality I had faced almost daily behind closed eyes. Abuse continued to follow me like I was the source of its fire- endlessly, there was no escape. From person to person, I was never in control. I could only wail alone into my pillow or my dog’s furry little body. May he rest in love. My mind’s memory slipped away from me, and I lost sense of time as protection. I know my body remembers it all, I try to connect.

Despite my learning disability in math, I tested into one of the best Chicago public high schools in the city. I traveled on two public buses for 45 minutes to an hour to get there. I graduated- a stoner with a suspension on record, but with a diploma in my hand. My suspension was over a minor issue that had turned into something much more serious. I cut class because school was a bore and I was trying to cope with my undiagnosed severe depression and complex PTSD. No one noticed, they were only present to judge and punish me. Before I could process what I was being accused of, policemen practically interrogated me, even suggesting my friend was “putting all the blame on me”. As a youth development specialist, advocate, and now educator- to consider not just one, but two grown white men try to coerce a fourteen-year-old child to admit to things they did not commit, without even their

parents' consent before questioning, is beyond disgusting. I lost two weeks of education and the trust of my parents completely. Police do not belong in schools.

I worked retail as much I could my senior year so that I could have money to go far away in the name of higher education. Quickly, I tried to use alcohol to cope, it took control of my life and worsened my mental illnesses. I didn't eat, because I was not hungry. I didn't care, because I felt death was my friend, a form of freedom I so desperately sought. I dropped out of university after two years and found myself couch surfing with friends. Then I experienced my worst abusive relationship. He love-bombed me, putting me on a pedestal, showing me how safe it was to be in his arms. Then he would gaslight me, using threats to harm himself, scaring me, to make me stay with him. After one of my attempts to leave, he called me 60 times in one day. He would show up at my job, at my friend's house, I didn't think I would ever escape. But I did. My mother experienced trauma, as well as my grandmother, and all the women before her too. The violence we experienced because men could hurt us, left us scarred and with sealed lips, the silence carried on.

I landed a position as a child care worker in a residential setting, it was there that I witnessed first-hand the pain that migrant children and their families face in the chase of survival. I imagined my parents as these children. I gave the children I worked for my all, but I could not carry so much sorrow without snapping in two. I was often triggered, not realizing the toll the work was taking on me. Eventually, I made the difficult decision to leave a position I had fought so hard for. I continued my journey in the non-profit sector, trying to find my place. My passion took me to Portland, Oregon for a career opportunity teaching social justice to middle school kids in their school. At the low-income school, I experienced adultism and racism from the school staff, but the worst part was watching it happen to the students I served. This position motivated me to grow and I look back with a warm heart, tinged with bitterness. Now I work for a social service agency that has too much bureaucracy and white leadership. My parents say I shouldn't complain, but I do. I choose to serve young people in need as my life's work because I wish someone had connected with me when I was younger so that I would have felt safe to open up about what I was experiencing. Through my work, I have had the honor to build relationships with amazing young people, that I will never forget.

In order to keep myself safe, I admitted myself to a hospital, it was one of the hardest things I have ever done. Through this experience of all-day therapy and care from a team of mental health and medical professionals, I found my pain had subsided for just enough time that I could remember how it felt to breathe freely. My time there was not spent alone. I connected with different people, therapists, nurses, but mostly those struggling with the desire to live. Every day was mentally challenging and intense. Not knowing when I could leave was scary. My experience is my own, unique to me- so I cannot say all in-patient care was like mine. I was then recommended to attend out-patient care: 4 days a week, from 8 am to 3 pm, for two months on top of my weekly talk therapy sessions. There I learned more about my mental illnesses, how it affects me, and the tools I can use to better manage and cope with the trauma. Healing was shockingly possible. Taking full control of my life, I determinedly set out to overcome what was done to me, if not to prove to myself that I had always deserved much better. Perhaps you can imagine the immensity of the soul work that was and continues to stretch out in front of me. There is no quitting for me.

I am a resilient, queer, Mexican-American woman who loves myself deeply to the core, so much that I choose freedom. The freedom to share my story, to be as I am in this moment and to continue to



rise after it. To tell other survivors- you too can heal. I see you, my fellow person. I am always present in our shared collective spirit, and I send you all of my love. You deserve to be free and loved by yourself and others unconditionally.

If you are not a survivor- I ask you to question and push back on the rape culture we all exist in, to challenge your family and friends, to believe survivors, and to speak out. Abuse has existed since humans came to be, to not see a future where this does not exist, is to accept that it is okay. It is not. It never has or will be.