



violence, hope  
and healing  
in los angeles county

This book is part of the Violence, Hope and Healing in Los Angeles County: The Storytelling Project, developed by artist Olga Koumoundouros in collaboration with Los Angeles County Department of Public Health Office of Violence Prevention and Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture during her residency as Creative Strategist. By: Creative Strategist, Olga Koumoundouros and the people of Los Angeles County

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To the people of Los Angeles County:  
May your lives and experiences in your homes,  
streets and bodies be safe from harm.

## Message from Los Angeles County Department of Public Health

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health is deeply gratified by the publication of *Violence, Hope and Healing in Los Angeles County: The Storytelling Project*, the product of two year's work to gather, organize and now, present, the stories of Los Angeles residents affected by violence.

This Department is home to the county's Office of Violence Prevention, and prevention is the goal of this publication. As with any threat to public health, the Department of Public Health collects statistics on violence, tracks the specific health effects of violence, and designs programs and policies aimed at healing, prevention, and intervention. But in the case of violence, that is not enough. By highlighting these stories, we personalize and broaden our understanding of violence as a force shaping the health and wellbeing of county residents and make the human cost of violence accessible to all county residents.

These stories reflect the fact that while the cost of violence is imposed on communities across the county, it falls most heavily on low-income communities and communities of color, where social marginalization and disempowerment may lead to despair and rage and expose residents to violence within the criminal justice system. But there is a further message here – that healing is possible, and that violence is not inevitable; that it results from policies crafted by human beings

and can be averted by policies that honor the worth and support the dignity of all county residents.

The Department of Arts and Culture has been our primary partner in these efforts from start to publication. *Violence, Hope and Healing in Los Angeles County: The Storytelling Project* is a collaboration between our departments that centers the voices and experiences of those who are most impacted by violence. I would like to express our gratitude to Arts and Culture Director Kristin Sakoda and her staff, to Artist-in-Residence Olga Koumoundouros, who implemented this project, and to the leaders of the county agencies and community organizations who have advised us on this project as on all work of the Office of Violence Prevention. I would also like to thank the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, who voted to establish the Office in 2019, and have supported its efforts since.

Most of all, I would like to thank the survivors of violence who shared their stories of violence, healing, and hope. Thank you for using your voice to transform pain into power. Public Health looks forward to continuing to work together with survivors, advocates, community agencies and County Departments to create communities that are free from violence and where every community, family, adult, and child can lead a life free from the threat of violence in any form.

**Barbara Ferrer**, PhD, MPH, MEd  
Director, Los Angeles County Department of Public Health

## Message from Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture

At the Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture, we envision arts, culture, and creativity as integral to civic life. Through our mission, we invest in LA County's cultural life, provide resources for our region's cultural sector, catalyze cross-sector arts collaboration, and promote equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging—with arts and culture as a strategy to achieving the highest potential for all our people and communities. It is through this lens that we partnered with Creative Strategist Artist-in-Residence Olga Koumoundouros and the Department of Public Health on Violence, Hope and Healing in Los Angeles County: The Storytelling Project.

The Creative Strategist Program, originating from the LA County Cultural Equity and Inclusion Initiative, places artists in residence in County departments, working alongside staff to develop and implement artist-driven solutions to complex social challenges. Led by artist and Creative Strategist Olga Koumoundouros, this project is the culmination of a three-year residency with the Department of Public Health Office of Violence Prevention (OVP). Designed in collaboration with OVP and the Department of Arts and Culture, with data analysis provided by Community Health Councils, the project used arts-based, trauma-informed storytelling and photography to illuminate the ways violence impacts our communities and uplift pathways for self-discovery, self-expression, and healing.

This book is an example of the arts as a creative tool to humanize our lived experience, build empathy, advance narrative change, increase visibility, and inform policymaking for the future. I invite you to engage, reflect, share, and use it to propel us toward a bright tomorrow. Thank you to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, Department of Public Health, Arts and Culture staff, Olga Koumoundouros, Johnny Pérez, and every contributor who shared their story.

**Kristin Sakoda**

Director, Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture

### **Violence, Hope and Healing in Los Angeles County: The Storytelling Project**

*Violence, Hope and Healing in Los Angeles County: The Storytelling Project (Storytelling Project)* originated out of the Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture's Creative Strategist Program and is a collaboration between the Office of Violence Prevention, housed within the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, and the Department of Arts and Culture, and Creative Strategist Artist-in-Residence, Olga Koumoundouros. The project used art-based trauma-informed techniques to record the narratives of Los Angeles County residents from diverse backgrounds who have experienced violence at the individual or systemic level. Participants were asked to share their experiences with violence, advice they had for others enduring similar experiences, and any information they thought was important to emphasize to policy makers.

**The goal of the project is to uplift the voices and stories of survivors and those most impacted by violence in its many forms, to inform and guide violence prevention and intervention policies, practices and systems change that can have a lasting impact on individuals and communities.**

A total of 100 stories and 54 photographs were collected over a one-year period. Not all of those stories and photos can be presented in this book. All of the stories will be available, however, along with more detail about project methodology on the OVP and DAC websites.

## Content Warning

The stories presented in this book contain descriptions of violence that some readers might find upsetting. We invite all readers to trust their instincts and proceed with caution. We support you in doing whatever feels right for you. At the end of this book, you'll find a section on emotionally grounding techniques to bring you back into a centered, present, and safer space. We recommend taking a break in your reading by turning to this section or practicing any of your favorite forms of self-care.



## Safe and Healthy Children, Youth, and Families

Increase awareness and access to opportunities and resources that help all youth, families, and community members thrive and build positive relationships free of violence and hate and the harms caused by racism.

## Nicole Rojas

My name is Nicole Kathleen Rojas. I was born and raised in East Los Angeles.

My closest memory between two and three years old was that of my parents always arguing, always fighting. My mom was 19 when she had me. My dad was older than my mom; he served in Vietnam. My dad told me that one day he came home and that I said, “Daddy, are you and mommy going to fight again today?” My dad pretty much that day packed up some stuff and left.

I was kind of bounced around, but I spent the majority of my time with my grandmother. My older brother was sent off to go live with my grandfather in Portland, Oregon. I was spoiled by my grandmother; I was given a lot of love, care and attention. To me, my grandmother was my mother because she was the caretaker—the mother figure that was always there.

*‘I was so traumatized.’*

At five years old, my uncle took the most important person away from me, my grandmother. He was the oldest male in my mom’s family and had just come back home from the military. We didn’t know what was going on in his mind; maybe he had Post Traumatic Stress Disorder...his mind wasn’t maybe in the best place. One day after he’d been working graveyard when everybody was over and being loud, he came out of his room very angry and upset. For some reason, he thought it was a great idea to bring out his gun.

All my aunts got up and walked to the front of the apartment. I walked out of the house as well. I was sitting right outside the house with the door open; I could see what was going on inside. All of a sudden, I hear gunshots. Everybody comes out screaming, running from where they were in the apartment. I remember seeing my grandmother on the couch, full of blood. I remember the dog jumping on top of her, trying to protect her. Everybody screaming...everybody crying. It was very scary. I didn’t understand at all what was going on.

That night, they took me to my grandmother’s best friend’s house. I slept there with a couple of my aunts and my brothers. I was so traumatized that I peed on myself. But nobody could really help me; they were all hurting too. I just happened to be the youngest one at the time.

*‘You’re too late.’*

My mom finally settled back into our lives come junior high. She tried to put rules on me come middle school. I was like, *well, who the f\*\*k are you?* At that age I was like, *who are you? Who are you trying to be? All of a sudden now you want to be my mom? You’re too late.* That was a real battle. I’d roamed around my whole life, from elementary to junior high, kind of up and down the block, going to my friend’s houses—my second homes—probably because my first home didn’t feel like home.

There were so many stories of how many times she and I got into it, where people had to pull her off me. I think she let all her frustrations out on me. There was no other way she could hurt me that much, there was no other outlet she had, because she had to raise her brothers and sisters. Now she was raising us and then she was raising her step kids, right?

*‘I’d rather be dead than continue this life.’*

Upon reflection, I can see I hated my life—I hated it. I thought to myself, at that point in time, *God, why would you hand me such a f\*\*ked-up life? I’d rather be dead than to continue this life.* I was very suicidal, very emo, right? I always wore black...covered up...big sweaters...always looking down at the floor. The minute I was able to leave the house as I got older, I was out; I didn’t want to be there. She was so pissed off at me for wanting to leave. She told me to *get out of here, she never wanted to see me again, that I was never welcomed back.* Which wasn’t true. It was a very tumultuous time for me.

*‘We hide emotional abuse.’*

I didn’t understand at that time that we all come from trauma. There’s a lot of things that people don’t tell us about growing up as young people. Nobody ever teaches us what it means to have a healthy relationship. When I met my ex-husband, he’s part of the Indigenous movement as well, I thought I met the person I was going to spend my life with. *Hey, I’m ready, you’re ready, then we’re ready.* There’s a lot more to it. I ended up getting married and having three beautiful children. But that wasn’t so easy. I’ve been divorced for 10 years.

It was a very difficult, emotionally abusive relationship. He wasn’t a cheater,

just emotionally, mentally abusive. He was a narcissist and stuff. What do we call it now, gaslighting? Everybody was completely shocked when we got divorced, because everybody thought that everything was great between us. But I was dying inside. I knew [that] if I didn't leave the marriage, I was going to find myself not wanting to live again. In my mind, it was either going to be him or me...only one of us was going to survive. That fight-or-flight was kicking in.

I'd dealt with such an aggressive, harsh mom that his love didn't feel too far from home or foreign from what I'd dealt with my whole life. I'd put up with a lot, way too much.

I didn't want to put my children through what I'd experienced. The worst part about emotional mental abuse is [that] no one can see it. We hide it. I was so strong at that point as a Chicana and doing community work. I was working on my degree which I never thought I'd ever do. I was leading community as a youth advocate, understanding where all these youth came from... .

I want to say I'm grateful [that] even though all those things happened to me; I have the most amazing children. Everybody who meets them, sees their light, their beauty and how they're respectful. I believe that although we may have had certain circumstances, it doesn't mean that our children have to be victims to the circumstances we lived. I was 27 going on 28 when I had my first child, so I wasn't a young parent. I'd educated myself and taken some child development classes. I was nothing like my parents and I'm so grateful. I didn't walk any road that was similar to the road they walked. I believe there were people looking over me like my grandmother, who guided that journey and probably even when I tried killing myself. She's the one that probably pulled me back. I've forgiven my mom and my father. It took a lot of understanding. I've learned many, many lessons in life.



## Tim Kornegay

I was born in what's currently referred to as South LA, about a quarter mile from the University of Southern California campus. I currently live in Long Beach, California. I grew up around an enormous amount of violence—so much that I became numb to it and a participant in it. I think that there's an intersection between violence and racism. In the time period that I grew up [it was] the decline of the Black Power movement and the upsurge of gang activity in the current form that we know it: the Crips and Bloods.

As I grew up, the violence increased. Looking back on it now, it doesn't seem that it was extreme violence because it was mostly hand-to-hand combat...maybe some kind of jerry-rigged weapons—hammers, knives, a carjack—and people fighting. Transitioning into the '70s, it became guns.

*'My mind had to make an adjustment to violence.'*

My first encounter with violence was when I was between five and seven years old. My mother had a best friend who lived across the street from where we lived in that South Central LA area. Her son George was three years old [and] became my friend. There was a domestic issue between the mom and a boyfriend who may or may not have been George's dad and he killed George. He put George in the bathtub with scalding hot water and George died. That was my first very traumatic experience with violence. It's the first time that I formed the thought that, if I could kill somebody and get away with it, I would have done it to this individual that killed George.

There were many others. When I was about 12, transitioning from sixth to seventh grade, a young lady was my classmate. She was a bit precocious and hanging around individuals who [were] older than her, doing stuff that she shouldn't have been doing. She and another were killed by the police—they killed two people during that robbery. Soon after that, a school friend that I grew up with—we called him Toogie—was playing Russian Roulette with a gun and killed himself. Those three incidents of violence are the ones that I can say impacted me psychologically.

To keep from losing it, so to speak, my mind had to make an adjustment. As I began to grow up in a gang environment, things of that nature became commonplace: individuals getting shot, stabbed, assaulted by the police... .

When I turned 17 in 1979, I got shot. I got into an argument with an individual over a car. He shot me but he didn't shoot me well enough; I shot back. It was somebody I knew and had grown up with. Eventually we made friends.

I was fearful in the moment of impact. When I saw all the blood yet realized [that] I wasn't going to die, something occurred. My adjustment to violence was concretized...it became a way of life. Soon after that, once my stitches were healed, I got shot again in a dispute with another individual. They were under the influence of PCP (drugs).

*'I had no self-value.'*

I went to Youth Authority (prison in Sacramento) in 1979. I got out in [early] 1982. Immediately upon getting released, several of my friends were murdered as a result of gang activity and several went to prison for gang-related murders.

I got into a racial conflict and got stabbed in the back. It missed my heart by about an inch. It was another example of the violent nature that I'd adopted and the normalcy it had taken in my life. At that point I was psychologically unstable. I was super paranoid and felt like everybody who looked at me could possibly be planning to do the same thing and I couldn't let that happen. I ended up going to adult prison in 1982 for two years. I ended up in the California state prison in Folsom where it was inmate-versus-inmate in the process of not trying to get murdered by the guards, the corrections officers or both at the time.

They didn't believe in warning shots; they only fired live rounds. I've been shot at so many times in prison by correctional officers, I lost count. I witnessed them murder individuals in these concrete yards that they made us go to regularly as a form of discipline. I witnessed them shoot Mexicans, not only Blacks. I witnessed them shoot white boys in a ruthless manner. I witnessed them telling individuals, *you're not going to get away with what you did. The first opportunity we get, we're going to blow your brains out.* I watched them follow through with that.

*'Most of my childhood friends were lost between 1990 and 1992.'*

I managed to survive prison, while turning a three-year sentence into an eight-year sentence. When I got out in 1990, it was the height of the crack epidemic in

South LA. I was immediately introduced to the worst gang war in the history of South LA and California. Between 1990 and 1992, I think there were over 3000 murders. Most of my childhood friends were lost then. I found myself going to two or three funerals a week.

I'd refuse to go anywhere without a gun (except) but to sleep. I ended up getting a parole violation in 1993 for gun possession. I was one of the unlucky individuals who found themselves followed by a trail of police ten days after the 'three strikes' law came up. In March 1994, I was in possession of stolen property and a gun, with an enormous amount of law enforcement attempting to pull me over. I was on my way back to a prison that I'd just left with all the violence.

*'In prison time stops.'*

In prison time stops. My going back was like I never left. From 1995... 1996...1997, it was a repetition of violent incidents: prison riots, stabbings, the police trying to shoot people for stabbing, tear gas, the whole gambit of all the crazy things that take place in prison. One morning, ten years later, I had a brother two years older than me who passed away of heat stroke. Another individual who I grew up with and was really important to me and who introduced me to the gang culture, had gotten arrested and ended up with a life sentence. He'd been in prison since 1978; this is 2005. In his last board hearing, they told him he couldn't go home. He committed suicide in prison.

For me, it was the moment that shattered my thoughts. This was the epiphany moment where I woke up and realized, *this is it. I got to change. I have to have respect for my own values, my own life.* I had so much respect for this individual... [that] to see the culture, the life that we lived, the violence that we endured internally, externally... that we perpetrated...to see it crumbling his soul and breaking his heart to the point that he couldn't live another day in prison... . There was a degree of spirit that had been instilled within me from my parents that none of the violence and trauma and disappointment that I grew up in was able to totally eliminate.

*'I had an epiphany: I want it to be different.'*

The pilot light, so to speak, still burned in there when I woke up and said,

*I want it to be different.* It was there to be fueled by a different degree of behavior, a different mindset, to take my past and pull it into the future and say, *I've been there, done that. If you think that this is the way that you want to live your life, here are examples of what this life leads to... .*

I was able to make a transformation in prison. I got freed in August 2015 with a plan to get involved in change, to help individuals who were reminiscent of my younger self, that had nobody to look up to. I've been an anti-violence proponent, [saying] that there's a way to engage in conflict resolution...that violence is not the answer to every conflict...that's an option birthed from frustration. We don't understand that, because at seven, somebody witnessed the murder...because at 12, somebody had a friend die...because at 17, somebody was shot (then) at 20 all your friends are dead. You think it's okay; you don't know anything else.

*'Seek our support groups facilitated by trauma survivors.'*

I'd advise others to seek out support groups that have an understanding of what you've been through and that are facilitated by individuals who've been through what you've been through, who've survived trauma and have the skillset to share the roadmap to liberation. I don't disparage academic knowledge and research, but there's an element missing. You can't see an unrecognized need because you don't know the nuances of pain and triumph. All the research, theses and theories will never equip you with what independent folk can feel and give you.

*'None of the psychosocial needs are being addressed.'*

I think that there's an element in our schools that doesn't pay attention to culture, (to) the kids' lives and lifestyles and the stuff they go through. Kids come to school and get taught, but what about the kid who hasn't eaten in two days? What about the kid who's in an abusive family? What about the kid who's living couch-to-couch? None of those psychosocial needs are being addressed. You're getting an education curriculum that's 250 years old.

I think that the powers [authorities] validated my behavior by highlighting it and criminalizing me at an early age. My first arrest was probably when I was five years old for trespassing on a school campus to play on the monkey

bars. I got arrested; my bicycle was put in the back of a police car and [I was] taken home. Think of the follow up to that credentialing behavior...the moment that teachers, counselors and school security affirmed the identity created for me. They were like *okay, that's you* and validated my behavior. The moment I started claiming a gang and you accepted me being in a gang... . You didn't try to counsel me and help me out of that. You credentialed my status; you validated my behavior. The moment a law enforcement person saw me in the street and called me by my [gang] nickname in front of my friends...you let them know who I am [and] validated my behavior.

Part of the system failed. If you were bad, so to speak, then you weren't worthy of that [teacher] time. [For example] If somebody could have seen the fact that I could pick any lock I looked at when I was 12 years old, that I had some kind of gift, that I could maybe be an engineer...[that] would have helped me. If kids said they wanted to be an astronaut, ask, *what tools do you need to figure out how to get to the moon? Don't say, there's no way you'll ever be because A, B, C, D, E and F. Say, how do you think you're going to get there? Do not cut into the younger generation's dreams. Stop being dream killers. Help them dream bigger.*



## René García

My name is René García. I live at East 21st Street in downtown Los Angeles. I was born in 1978 in the city of Puebla, Mexico, into a family of eight siblings. I grew up in LA since age eight, when I was brought here from Mexico by my mom who had divorced my father. Once mom and dad split up, the kids are victims to all these outside forces that are trying to creep into the house. It causes a lot of pain.

*'I stabbed myself in the eye.'*

My dad was a federal employee in the hospital system in Mexico and worked as an ambulance driver for 35 years. I was left unsupervised by my mom with my dad; he had no time to deal with an infant. He left me with his brother who had five sisters. I was like a little prince there; I got everything I wanted.

At [the] age of three-and-a-half, I stabbed myself in the left eye. I threw a tantrum for a knife and it was given to me. I lost my grip on the knife. It went like an arrow straight into my eye. My aunt found me stuck underneath the bed, kicking and screaming. She pulled the knife out of my eye. Then [came] the burning [as when] you light a match and it burns...the pain felt like that, from head to neck. I couldn't stop screaming [so] she proceeded to gag me and tie my hands. She put me behind her couch for three days. She'd ungag me to feed me. I was very traumatized from that. I'd pass out. I'd hear my dad come in, ironically, driving an ambulance, looking for me.

When she ungagged me the third day, I remember I had a bowl of soup and I dropped to my knees with my hands down to my side and said, "*Matame*" That means *kill me*. She understood that I was in such pain that she needed to take me to the hospital. My father drove me. My head was like a watermelon; I had a massive infection. I remember I'd turn sideways so the liquid escaping my ears would hit the bed. I did that for three days. I survived that.

At age five, I got brought over the border by my mom to Houston and Corpus Christi, Texas, probably illegally. They operated on my eye three times in Houston. They couldn't save it. The next thing that I remember is [that] I'm going to preschool in Houston for a couple of weeks. The person my mom left me with after I got operated on is feeding me a bowl of soup. They leaned me over the couch and proceeded to rape me.

My mom took me back to my dad. She never found out about that. I didn't know this until I went through my own therapy—the part of the story where we relive the pain and the emotions behind it. I realized, *wait a minute. I was being raped*. The pain, the friction and all of that. I was raped at five by somebody very close to my mom, I don't know who, probably a boyfriend or real close friend to her.

*'I was about to be burned alive.'*

I was brought back to Mexico. I have siblings there who I don't fully know. I remember once this older one ties me to a pole while we're playing cowboys and Indians and decides to put rags around my body and sets me on fire. I was about to be burned alive. I'm eight years old. The neighbors rushed over. They formed a chain of about twenty grown men. They put the fire out because we had a well. My mom arrives; she finds the house is half-burned. My dad's really pissed at my brother.

Another time when she came home, she found my father in bed with her cousin, probably having sex. She'd been a security guard at the (Valero) Wilmington refineries in San Pedro (in Los Angeles). She goes to the van, loads up a 45 and a 9 (mm. gun) and fires at my dad. I remember it was probably 8:30 at night and really dark outside. I'm playing cards down the hallway and turned the hallway light on. I see my mom come, go to the room, rush out, come back and then my dad running out naked through the back door and my mom firing at him. I remember that. She fired two guns at him, missed all 15 shots. My dad lived to tell the story himself. I talk to him daily. We joke about it now. He says, "Yeah, your mom, thank God she wasn't a good shot because I wouldn't be here right now."

That was the last time I saw my dad under the same roof.

*'I was eight, working and going to night school.'*

She [my mom] came back to the United States after she separated from my dad. Somehow, she stopped sending money to us over there. I'm eight years old; I have four siblings. We have this huge two-story house with a water well and beautiful backyard, but no food. I decided. I told my siblings, "Look, you are nine. You are seven. I'm eight. You're six. You and you and you are going to go

to school and I'm going to go to work. I'm going to get some money so we can eat."

I got a job with a local grocery store owner that would give us credit. I bagged [groceries]. I organized the back of the store. I enrolled in night school. I was eight years old, going to school with grownups and I was working, putting food on the table.

I remember I was putting bottle caps on the dirt at the front of the store, because rain season was about to come. A man stopped me. He said, "Don't do that, that's slippery. The people are going to fall. If you want a job, I'll give you a job. You come work for me. I sell [to] about 200 stores in the city." I went to work for him. He became my godfather. He put me through Catholic school. He paid for my suit. I learned about 120 stores; I learned all five delivery routes. I'm already his right-hand man. He's one of the major wholesalers in Puebla. I feel part of something. I feel important; I feel gratified and appreciated. Within six months, I was making the same as the drivers. I learned at age eight that being honest was very valuable in life. I bought myself a motorcycle when I was nine, with all that money.

*'People are laughing at me 'cause I'm missing an eye.'*

Then my mom showed up and she brings me over the border illegally at age nine, to a beautiful apartment: 369 South Columbia, Apartment 435. The most beautiful view. You can see downtown. Every sunrise, every sunset was like a portrait. But there's no food in the refrigerator. I find myself, again, with hungry siblings, mice running around the room, no blankets, no food... I have two outfits that I brought from Mexico and there's holes being pierced through by washing them so much.

I get enrolled in school. People are laughing at me because I don't know the language, I'm missing an eye. I look weird. My clothes are out of size and worn out. I became a joke. People would bet on me, "What shirt is he wearing? What shirt is he wearing?" They knew I only had two shirts. The moment I figured out the joke was on me, I started joining them laughing. That stopped the jokes, like, *okay, it's not funny anymore. He knows we're laughing at him.*

They figured out that I was very good at math. I proceeded to pay attention at ESL (English as a Second Language) [class] and learned the language. I liked the sciences and other stuff. I took refuge in books because I didn't like the

life that I was living. The PE [Physical Education] teacher would ask me, "How come you don't have your PE clothes?" I said, "I cannot afford it. It's \$11. We don't have that." I'd get hand-me-downs from the teachers with shoes, shorts, even shirts that were left behind from people. That's the way teachers would help me. They'd provide for me.

*'What's the matter? You're angry all the time.'*

I remember this counselor, Mr. P. from middle school. He pulled me aside and said, "Mijo (mi hijo/my son), what's going on at home? You're an A student and the teachers tell me that you're angry all the time." I said, "I'm angry at drugs, because drugs are affecting my mom's life and they're affecting us." Even he kept quiet...he didn't report anything. He sent me to the nurse [with] a little note. She pulls out a \$200 voucher from Vons and gives it to me, so I am able to provide our house food for about two weeks. But I couldn't get a job. I was very frustrated.

I walked along the streets as a child on the weekends, looking for work and nobody would hire me. I'd try to wash cars. I'd try to put carts back to the market. I'd try to bag groceries in the store. I'd be escorted out by the employees. I'd try to go to construction sites and ask the men if I could clean up the job sites for them, if they'd just give me enough food to eat. Sometimes, they'd rush me out and say, "No, no, no. You can't be here. Go. You're too young. Come back when you're 18. We can employ you then."

I became 14 and because I was tall, I found someone who'd give me a job... this framing crew. I started against their will. I technically jumped the fence after they left [a mess] and organized all the wood on a Saturday. They came back on Sunday and saw it. I was there sitting down. I said, "See, I can do this for you if you let me." So, they let me. Each one gave me a few dollars. I was able to buy some food and some clothes. I liked working. I'm the *go out and get it* type.

They said, "You know what? You can come back next week and do that, but you're not going to come here, because this is clean. You're going to go to so-and-so and such a place." My first tools were a broom and not even a dustpan [but] a flat shovel. Then they gave me the hammer (to) pull out the nails from the lumber and started showing me how to cut. I got involved with construction.

*'My brother belonged to a gang.'*

Growing up, I had so much anger inside of me and I didn't know how to release it other than getting in fistfights. All along in high school, I encountered gangs. In junior high, somebody ratted me out because I got into a fistfight. I beat this one person up. He called my sister a fat blimp. I went to high school at Belmont High School in LA. There are nine active gangs within a mile radius. My brother belonged to one and they knew him by name. He had a bunch of gang member friends that I wasn't aware of but I found out real quick. Here came a group of five or six [other gang members] and they beat me up. They said, "That's so-and-so's brother." They left me unconscious.

He [the attacker] told some other group, a different gang, "That's so-and-so's brother." Here comes Simple Street...here comes Rockwood...here comes Crazy Riders and all these other gangs... . I'm like, "Wait a minute. You just beat me up yesterday." "No, so-and-so. We're so-and-so." I'm like, "I'm not in a gang." I started fighting back. But later, they came back with crowbars, baseball bats... so I stopped defending myself. I just took it. One time, I remember they beat me bad but didn't knock me out. I've got one of these shirts...this shirt is ripped. I'm walking out in the street and here comes my brother's homeboys. I know they're packing, because I remember they used to clean their guns at the house, at the apartment. All I have to do is turn around, point a finger and say, *they did it* and they'd have run after these kids and probably shot and killed them.

When they approached me, they said, "Hey, little homie. What happened?" I said, "Look, I'm not your little homie and nothing happened. I fell in high school." These other kids looked at me with fear in their eyes because these guys started showing their guns. They're not afraid of walking around, showing guns around. These guys looked at me like, *thank you for not telling them that* and they left. The beatings stopped then because they said, "You know what? Yeah, that guy's so-and-so's brother, but he's not a rat. He's not going to rat us out, so leave him alone.

*'I couldn't cash in my scholarship because I was here illegally.'*

In high school, I took AP (Advanced Placement) classes. It was around junior year when the beatings stopped, so I took all AP classes senior year. I passed them all with A's. I took architecture. I loved that. I got a certificate for the

best handmade 3D model and was offered a scholarship. I'd graduated [in the] top three percent of my high school class. UC [University of California] gave me something and some other schools offered something for engineering. But I couldn't cash in because I was here illegally. They said, "If you provide us with a Social Security number and a California ID, we can help you cash this scholarship." I couldn't do it, so I was very crushed. I graduated with a golden ribbon, top three percent of my class, just to find out that I couldn't get to my scholarships. That blew my bubble really quick. I remember walking out of the Office of Admissions, crying. I ended up at Los Angeles City College (LACC) in 1996.

*'I wanted to know what crack cocaine does.'*

It was my 18th birthday. September 6, 1996. I ran cross-country [track] all through high school so I ended up going into the team there [at LACC]. I remember on my birthday I had a uniform on from the team there, LACC Track and Field. I said, "What made me come here instead of USC (University of Southern California)?" I blamed crack cocaine [in the community]. *It's probably crack cocaine. I wonder how strong crack cocaine is...* . I put my clothes back on, went to the gym, took a shower, walked out of school, went straight to an ATM, pulled out \$300 and went and paid somebody to teach me how to smoke crack cocaine because I wanted to know.

I didn't find out till 16 years after that when I'd become what I hated. I'd become that person who lets people starve, who doesn't show up to life, who lies to everything, that doesn't care about rules or regulations. That is so abandoned in drug addiction, that has no hope, is financially and spiritually broken. I was underneath a bridge, trying to walk through a fence to drop 65 feet down. That's where God found me. I was about to take these steps and I fell on my face and I felt loved. I proceeded to walk to a [detox shelter]. I got a bed there for 30 days, first time I'd ever been there.

*'Drug use served to buffer all that pain.'*

I got clean at the shelter. Then I went and got a job. [But] I had this habit I couldn't get rid of, this trauma from childhood and all this pain that I'm dealing with. Drug use served as a means to buffer all that pain. I proceeded to self-

medicate. I remember I had this employer in Culver City. My boss had been fired because he'd steal from her. She made me wire the backyard. In the backyard, she threw a ring with a diamond as big as this stone here—a real diamond. She left it behind a pot. When I found it, I put it on the table and wrote a note: "Miss M., I found this ring..." She says, "Good, you're honest. I'm going to keep you and fire your boss. Would you mind running the three crews? I'll give you \$10 an hour more."

I was making \$35 an hour. We were remodeling about 20, 25 homes up in [the] Bel Air, Beverly Hills area. I brought my brother over, the ex-gang member. One day a week I wasn't there...I'd go and engage in my drug use. I told her, "This is what I do." She started crying. She goes, "You don't have to do that. Let's get you some help." I said, "If you find me the help, I'll go. Where?" One day, she told me about meetings. I had to get arrested to go to meetings. The meetings found me with a nudge from the judge. That worked, so now I've been clean, but it's been a struggle with the trauma.

*'I didn't qualify for DACA.'*

I fell through the cracks. I didn't quite qualify for DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals). They told me, "Yeah, you meet the dates, but you're one year older. You over-meet the deadline. You should have been one year younger." When they told me that, I felt tempted to say, *call somebody in Mexico. Send me some fake papers. I said, no, I can't do that. I can't get away with that. I can try, but at the end, it'll bite me.*

I can't really work for anyone, but I do own a handyman business now. I employ about seven people on a weekly basis. My checks don't bounce. I work for people like in the media...actors and reporters and lawyers—high-power lawyers, high-power attorneys... . It's been quite a ride. I've done the best I can with what I have. I used to complain a lot about politics and the weather and I see that the best thing I can do is just go get it. Nobody's going to hand me anything. I've got to go out and get it.

*'There could be a questionnaire about violence at home.'*

I think a lot of problems in society come from families being broken up and the kids end up paying a lot of the collateral. I think there could maybe be

a questionnaire implemented in the school, maybe [in] homeroom, about violence at home or things that the kids are going through that nobody will ask them in public. Teachers themselves don't ask. I'd like to have some way that the students get to answer the questionnaire in private, maybe anonymously. Then somebody could help them. There could be a department that could help those cases that are extreme and obscure, you know? There's a lot of stuff that goes on in the households that the system never gets to find out until it's too late. These traumas get caused in the family nucleus or by the family nucleus being broken.

We're taught growing up in the barrios, in the neighborhoods, that you don't see anything. You don't say anything. You sure don't go around asking things. You keep quiet. That's life in the barrios, community-wise. You see something, you mind your own business. It's a sad thing because there's a lot of injustice going on.

In my older siblings' case, when my mom returned and did that to them [left], they were already grown up. Life was a lot better for them because somebody said something. *Wait a minute. We're not going to allow that. We actually reported her. They became legal [with papers]. I said, man, I wish that somebody else would have done that for me, because now you guys have your papers and you can go on to college.* Which they did.

The governmental policy I'd plead for is [that] a lot of people like me that fell through the cracks with DACA and are not being helped. I am paying \$5,200 to get my teeth redone and that's fine. I don't want handouts from the government. But at least some type of help with my Social Security number so that I can go and buy a house. Some policy that would enable people that didn't make the cut, that fell through the cracks, that have been overlooked, that met the requisites [so] maybe [they] could be reconsidered to become part of, or extended, the privilege of such benefits. I do want to buy house. I want to build credit. Without a Social Security number, it's very hard. I'm struggling. It could be a little easier because life is hard enough as it is.



## Melvin Farmer

My name is Melvin Farmer. I currently live in Westmont, Los Angeles. I've had many encounters with violence. I've had to deal with violence personally. Growing up, I witnessed a lot of domestic violence between my parents. It was a lot of fights... . Most of it I try to forget. There was a period of my life that was not comfortable, not welcoming, not the childhood I'd wish for any child. I'm definitely tired of it. My little sister...seeing her relationships and how domestic violence passes down through generations...it's almost a mental illness in itself. I got to tell my story. I got to keep fighting and advocating.

*'Everyone is a potential shooter at this point.'*

I was 16 years old. I didn't know why or who shot me. It was one of those things. Even though we hear about people getting shot every day where I live and it's normal, it's not necessarily normal happening directly to you until it does. For me to not know who did it, what their reasoning was for doing it, is a bit more scary than it just happening. Now every time I'm coming into that area [of Compton], my PTSD is high, just peaking. I don't know who shot me, so everyone is a potential shooter at this point.

The crazy part is [that] the bullet didn't hurt me at the time; I didn't even know I got shot. I felt a slight burn on [my] arm. I was running so fast. I thought I probably scraped it on a wall or something. Then I felt something dripping down my arm. I looked and there's blood and this huge hole in my arm. I immediately took my shirt off, wrapped it around the arm, tied it up.

Right before I got shot, I was literally at an event with [Congresswoman] Maxine Waters—I was talking and taking pictures with Maxine Waters. A couple of hours later I'm in the back of an ambulance... .

*'The police weren't really trying to help.'*

The police did a bad job that day, to be honest. We called them. They drove past my house twice, so I'm sitting there waiting for them. When they finally got there, they were asking questions that weren't really trying to help. It was more so like, *why are they shooting at you guys?* So that was upsetting, to have the police interacting with me like that. By the time the ambulance got there, things

weren't very calm. As time went by, I started to notice how much more of this bullet I was feeling.

After I got shot in Compton, we had to leave that area and moved here. They were telling me to go to a therapist. The hair on the back of your neck is constantly up. You can't even focus on being scared of the therapist because you're scared that anybody is the shooter. I had my fair share dealing with domestic violence and gang violence and basically being a product of my environment. Even if you're doing something good, you still get treated like anybody else.

*'Why are you making me feel like the bad guy?'*

That incident, when I got shot, made me so angry at the system—more than the actual people that shot me—because of the way they dealt with the situation, from start to finish. From when they first pulled up on [the] scene they're like, "You're Black. You're a young male. There's a reason this happened to you. You must be affiliated with a gang or something." *I just got shot. Why are you making me feel like the bad guy?* Once they got to understanding, *okay, he doesn't do any of this stuff. His gang knowledge is very lack-of, [then]* they seemed like they didn't really want to help too much.

My mom was fighting hard to try to get services because she has firsthand experience with this, too. Her brother was shot and killed. I guess she understood how it was from her experience of having to see how the family starts off fresh and trying to maintain themselves and then later, it's uncontrollable. She was finding it hard to get me any services that would help long-term with the aftermath of dealing with all of this. They were sending her on wild goose chases. *Call this number and call that number...the same number.* Telling us to call the number somebody else gave us that we already called... .

I know for a moment there, when it's fresh, happening to us, we all go into the deep victim state of, *why me? I don't deserve this* type of thinking and going through our life. I don't know what it was that broke me out of mourning but I know that we're not alone. There are other survivors that are willing to share their testimony, that stay with us to advocate. Those who want to learn a bit more about my trauma—my story—can listen to my music. It's on all music platforms. It's 2-Hungry.

*‘Sharing your story makes you feel more powerful.’*

The main thing I would say [to policy makers] is [to] provide resources and don't just make them resources tailored to gang stuff. Because a lot of us might be Black and we may grow up in these areas, but it's still uncomfortable to sit in recovery spaces or spaces of healing, that are mainly meant for gangs. Especially with somebody like me, not knowing who it was that could be sitting there right next to me. Just provide a lot of different resources and make them tailored to individual experiences. That would be greatly appreciated.

Restorative justice circles: I don't know if too many people know about those, but I find those to be very efficient for anything—for every situation. We've done them at school for debriefing the class. Even though we probably didn't think there was tension there, we walked out of that room feeling in some ways better and united. Just that one circle that you may have with that one classmate that you don't have any other classes with, could change the relationship you have for the rest of your life. I would [also] say make mental health services easily accessible.



## David Guizar

On December 16, 1983, my brother Oscar was murdered on 110th and Vermont in the South Central LA Westmont area. I found out that he'd been murdered the day after it happened. I was helping some neighbors decorate a car for a *quinceañera*, a sweet 16. I remember seeing my sister-in-law from about 40 yards away. She was like, "Where's your mom?" I told her, "Go through the front door." We lived in an apartment building. Next thing you know, I heard my mom shout and cry, "Nooo!"

This was the biggest shock of my life. When I go back, it feels like yesterday. I was 10 at the time. I just sat there, watching my mom sobbing. My mom started making phone calls telling people what happened. Right away [I] disengaged in all that was to follow. That day is very hard to forget because of what my mom went through, what I felt, [and] went through and how I didn't give myself permission to cry. I remember thinking, *No, I can't cry...I have to be tough.*

*'What does safety look like?'*

I went back to school and had no one to be able to talk to about what happened. It was so tough. I was in the fifth grade, you know? It's very difficult to go through that being so young. I was expected to memorize all types of stuff [in class] and I think my school performance was low. The resources that we could have tapped into were not there. Whatever it may be, there wasn't any response system in place that held our hands, that navigated the process with us, whether it was speaking with law enforcement, victim services of any type, maybe even food assistance. It became difficult for my mom to work and manage all of us.

Early on, I began to be exposed to a lot of unhealthy elements. My mom really wanted to have us safe. What does safety look like or what was a safety net for us? There wasn't one there. Now I see it with a bit more clarity.

*'I worked on being a good person.'*

When I was probably 11 years old, after that incident with my brother, we moved. I loved sports. We were living in a community where a lot of the

neighborhood kids liked to play sports and I remember we'd have a blast playing with sticks and little rocks in the dirt lots. We'd always find ways to play and stay active. I wanted to play baseball, [but] my mom would say something like, "Well, we can't afford it."

Going into junior high, [then] high school, I worked on wanting to be well and a good person. I started to hang out with a couple of neighbors. They loved playing football; I'd play with them and I got really good at it. They used to play football for the local Pop Warner team. I asked my mom if I could play too [but] she was like, "No, we can't afford it." I grew up with this amazing love for football and I never got to play it. I think that I got [it] embedded in my mind that *I just can't do it*. Even when a high school coach asked me if I'd try out for the team, I was like, "No, I can't." It's kind of the regret of my life.

*'We couldn't even go to the park.'*

I became active in street life. It was something that came after trying to be good. All these playgrounds that were available in the community weren't accessible to us. The Catholic school down the street and the elementary school closed down. How do you get in? You jump the gate. We'd jump gates to play baseball, football, basketball and ride our bikes in 'safe' spaces. We couldn't go to every park because of the gang affiliations there. Even though I didn't want to see it that way, that was the reality. My life took a route with a lot of alcohol, drugs and violence.

In my early teens, [some] dudes pulled up pointing guns at us, taking stuff from me. Sometimes it was just because they knew I lived on a certain block. I understood, because it's what I saw as a young kid all around. Although I really tried to avoid it, one day I was like, you know, *it's going down*. I became a little bit more active, trying to do *it* first before it happened to me.

In my late teenage years, after being in and out of school, I ended up at Metropolitan High School. I kept in mind that my mom wanted me to graduate. Even though my life was all over the place, I knew I wanted to graduate for her and for myself. I saw that as the last opportunity for me—where there was a safety net, even though it wasn't apparent. The principal at the school, Mrs. M., really extended herself. She saw a pattern and worked with me. She was like, "You're doing good in the classes that you do go to, but all these other classes, I'm going to work with you on that. I want to see your grades improve." I was

like, *wow, that was pretty unique*. So, I set that standard for myself and started to do my best in that school.

*'I was in the trenches.'*

Outside of school it was hard. I was in the trenches, dudes pulling up and things were happening. Either them or me taking shots at them...big fights. The night street life was intense and violent. It was heavy in the '90s. I would see some of my friends end up in prison.

I think being in that high school at the time and connecting to the peer counseling group, even with guys that I didn't even get along with, helped. There's a guy named E. that used to go to the school. I remember I used to get into it with fellas of his 'hood. By the time it was almost close to us graduating, he was like, "Man, you guys got to leave this guy alone." I earned a pass and it made my life a little bit easier so that I could actually learn to navigate around and build bridges in different communities. It took me learning how to trust others, but also how to better respect the street elements.

*'Fatherhood has often been difficult.'*

I became a dad pretty young; I'm a father of three. My first son was born when I was 19, named after my older brother Oscar. My daughter A. and son D. are my youngest. My fatherhood experience has often been very difficult. I often struggled to be a good man to my children and their mothers. I've done work with folks involved with Trauma Informed LA. This experience helped me with elements of my toxic masculinity. It's very important for me and has added a lens that I didn't have to look at myself—how I grew up and my behavior.

Alcoholism and substance abuse helped me to cope with my trauma and hide my feelings about my reckless lifestyle. In 2006, I was on a good one, as they say. It really hit me in a way where I felt shame. I felt the discomfort of being who I was. I called a good friend of mine, E. and I was like, "Hey, I'm having trouble with these drugs." I went to meet up with her. She said, "You look like shit." "I feel like it," I said and I really did. E. suggested I start on a journey of recovery.

I've been sober for 15 years. While it's been very difficult, it's made things a bit more manageable.

*'I just knew there had to be another side.'*

In 2012, my brother Gilbert went to a wedding and an argument with a guy occurred. It happened in the community near where I grew up where we used to jump all those gates to those playgrounds. He happened to be back in that area and he got shot and didn't make it. It was super heartbreaking. He left behind his four children. My mom was starting to break out of what had happened to Oscar and show a little bit more expression. I was beginning to learn about some of the things she'd gone through in her own life, [what] got in the way of her own healing. When Gilbert was shot, I knew there had to be another side.

A good friend of mine, A., invited me to be a part of a crime survivors group. It was formed to advocate for better support systems for those most harmed and least helped. A. lost his son, Terrell when he came home from college, a young kid and a good friend of my son. When I committed myself to that work, I talked to my mom about it. She said, "Yes, you can do that." I wanted to have her permission to use my brother and that story and family experience. When the incident with Gilbert occurred, we were organizing our first meeting. So, it was very fresh when I became involved in doing advocacy and learning about victims' compensation...learning about trauma and what the response should be for the family, for myself, for my mother... . It was a very, very difficult process to try to navigate, a lot of barriers.

I remember going to help my brother's wife fill out the victim's compensation application. She needed some support. We were literally at the police station sitting on the other side of an interrogation room, being interviewed by the advocate. I'm like, *this doesn't feel right*. I started to observe a lot of that stuff and started to share those kinds of experiences with the advocacy group. The biggest support for me while going through that process was that I was able to lean on my sobriety. I had some hardships around that process, disconnecting myself emotionally and [at] other times going through emotional breakdowns.

*'I inherited what everyone else was experiencing around me.'*

I'm Gilbert's brother and that's one of the things that I learned from losing my brother. I felt that I inherited what everybody else was experiencing around me

as it related to what happened to Oscar. No one else's experience with Gilbert was like mine, yet I had to give everybody space for their own relationship to him, whether it's his kids or my mother. My brother's ex-wife called me the other day and she was like, "Little D. is now asking." He was only four or five years old when it happened; it was difficult for him to comprehend what was happening. It reminded me of me when I was that young and trying to understand what happened.

I know firsthand that medical care is very important to recover from trauma. If we don't understand what's happening to us in our trauma, it will take its toll on our physical being as well. My mom passed away a couple years ago. I know there was lots of mental and physical trauma caught up in her body.

*'What if we sent therapists into the community?'*

The lens in which our system responds to harm, especially in our communities of color, has been very harmful, with a hard-on-crime approach of suppression and incarceration as the driving solutions. As it stands now, I think it makes the situation much worse.

J. [a colleague] at another support and advocacy group in Los Angeles, came home after spending a long time in prison. He described his process of parole. [It] included a victim assessment in which he acknowledged everything that happened and [to] everyone, from the person he harmed to their families, community, first responders as victims of the crime. I was like, *wow*.

What if the response process was that way in our community? In the immediate aftermath [of an incident], we sent therapists and intervention to those directly and in the immediate elements of the occurrence to receive support? We could have healthier communities, right? Because I know that when I was like, *well, I'm going to hurt you before you hurt me*, it was a response of my trauma and me not being in a good space. So, I think that is very, very important. Someone gave me another example the other day...when there's a family court, the purpose should be to reunify the family through those courts. Can we have some type of reconciliation if people want in on that?

*'I've found a way to be with those feelings.'*

I think that as an adult, the biggest advice is to celebrate my relationship to my brothers. Now I can do that. I'm a little bit more conscious, a little bit more aware of my feelings. I'm not intoxicating myself [in order] to not cry, to not be angry. I've found a way to be with those feelings. I go through those moments where I know I could try to get revenge on what's happened, but that's not my best choice. Being able to focus on my wellness by being open about what happened and really being true to what works for me has been important.

It's all based on the type of relationship that I had to my brothers. My brother Oscar loved me so much; my brother Gilbert loved me so much. He knew I was trying to get away from the gang lifestyle and it was very important for him to tell people. He used to be ashamed because I was getting caught up in it to where he was like, "Oh, that's my little brother. He's doing good stuff." I feel like the best thing I can do is to say their names, *Oscar, Gilbert*, so that they can be a part of the story.

*'People learn they're change makers.'*

The advice that I would give is, try to live your life and find ways to elevate your loved ones and your experience. It's important that people learn that they're not a statistic that I could dig up in the LA Times and say, "This person was murdered; a gunshot." That people learn [that] they're change makers. As far as advice to my younger self? The logical thing is to be true to yourself, ask questions. In order for that to happen, there needs to be a support system, you know? That support system is going to [need to] be responsive, to ask questions like, *hey, are you all right?*

I think that we need more response systems. We need recreation. We need long-term sustainable investment in our communities, to our smaller organizations directly on the frontlines. The Dodgers just played a World Series. They had one African-American, Mookie Betts, on their team. Where's the investment in our parks and recreation for diverse participation in youth sports, business development, home ownership? Can there be scholarships, equity programs?

I have a big connection to sports. It's like *what could have been...* . We have scholars, entrepreneurs, world-class caliber athletes in our communities

that aren't connected. We have world-class scholars in our communities that are dealing with this trauma. We have intergenerational violence; we need intergenerational *healing*.

*'What if the response to harm is with love?'*

In LA, there's a lot of alternatives to incarceration. There's Measure J. How can we look at these not as pilot [programs], but as re-investments for the next decade-plus, so that we begin to see the shift? So that the response to harm is with love? So that we find ways to support each other and respond in a different way?

The systems remain difficult to access. The barriers to accessing victim services...the deadlines. If you didn't fill it out correctly, if you are classified as being gang-related, you're not going to qualify for victim's compensation. There are different ways people are shamed, not just in my experience of the tragedy that happened in my life, but in the variety of different folks that I've had a chance to meet. Sexual assault...domestic violence...they all go through so many difficult challenges to access some type of support.

I think the judicial system needs change; the system that's there to support us is very difficult to access and is inequitable.

*'The person that's caused that harm is hurt, too.'*

There needs to be a shift in how we're supporting victims and that we're able to be trauma-informed in the process. When I spoke about intimate partner violence (IPV), a good friend of mine, S., was sharing with me what it felt like for her to work in one of these shelters with DV (domestic violence) folks. She said, "I learned that the person that's harmed needs help, but also the person that caused that harm, because they're hurt somewhere too." And I was like, *wow. I need to talk about this, because there's shame in my heart.* That's how I started to open up. So, I think that having more of that work in our communities is super important.

I'm a part of a crime survivors group and I've worked on initiatives. We change laws. We have a chapter [in] Los Angeles. There's a lot of people that have come out to say, *Hey, I'm a victim.* We changed the narrative of what and who a victim is. We call it a *survivor* because the feeling of being a *victim* is not

too popular, right?

We used to have one trauma recovery center in CA. We now have 14, all through advocacy, all through sharing our stories of what our needs are. Hopefully, that builds on the question of what should our elected officials know [to help]. We need more of a proper response.



## Mildred Brown

My name is Mildred Elizabeth Brown. I'm a 56-year-old African-American woman. I was born in Oakland, California and raised in Los Angeles County after the age of 14. I've lived in the San Fernando Valley since 2008 through supportive housing. I'm also a survivor of childhood molestation by a family member, from the age of eight until I was 11. This was by my grandfather on my father's side. I truly believe that at the age of eight is where my life stopped because I felt like my innocence had been taken. I couldn't even realize all these things at that time being so young. I was a scared little girl.

I grew up in a very dysfunctional household. I was the product of teenage parents. I have an older sister and two younger brothers, one by a different mother. All I ever knew growing up as a child was domestic violence. My parents argued all the time and fought constantly. After my parents divorced, my mother moved to Los Angeles County [and] my younger brother and I stayed with my father. There was a lot of back and forth and fights, [us] being played and used as pawns. My dad would send us to San Diego with his parents every summer and that's where the sexual abuse took place.

*'He didn't believe me.'*

I tried to tell my dad what was going on, but he didn't believe me. He'd continuously send me back to that situation until one summer, I ran away from San Diego to Los Angeles, trying to connect with my mother. Being 11 years old, I had that determination that I didn't want to be there. I was successful. I got on the freeway. A young lady picked me up and was like, "What are you doing out here?" My God, I tried to tell her, *I want to go to my mom*. She helped me. She took me to the police department where they contacted my mother. They allowed her to send a ticket and put me on the bus. That's how I got to Los Angeles.

Unfortunately, when my father found out, he was there at my mother's front door and took me by gunpoint, not even 24 hours later. I ended up back with my father where I was physically and verbally abused, beat, whooped, mentally abused since a young age. So much so [that] I didn't even understand the trauma that I was suffering. When I became 12 or 13, I was finally able to speak up for myself and say, "Hey, I don't want to be here with you. I want to be

with my mom." I guess he felt defeated so he let me go.

*'I was looking for a knight and found a monster.'*

My mother was very easygoing and kind of lenient with me and my older sister. We were able to go out on dates with boys and stuff. We weren't being reckless or anything like that, just able to experience teenage life. But having suffered these things that I'd gone through at the earlier age, I never dealt with them; I never sought counseling. I never even talked about it because, growing up in the '60s and '70s, we never discussed those things. I repressed it.

Beginning in my teenage years and into adulthood, I didn't feel like I was a complete person. There was always something there that I felt was keeping me from being a successful person, from living a normal life. I had trust issues. I've always had an issue with men where I needed men to validate me. I was looking for that knight in shining armor to rescue me and unfortunately, what I found was a monster.

I met a man 15 years older than me. I was 22; he was like 30-something. Of course, he told me he loved me and how beautiful I was and I felt like, *this is the love that I have so longed for, that I've been searching for...*

Unfortunately, that love turned into abuse. It started with name-calling. Then a slap here, a push there...pulling hair...sexual assault...being abused and being terrified... . And you know, *nobody's going to love you like I love you*. And, *if you ever try to leave me, this is going to happen*. I went through that because I felt like that's what I deserved. I thought that's what love was. If I wasn't being called out by my name or yelled at, then I wasn't being loved. So, I took that abuse. I dealt with that for over a year that very first time. [Then] he sold me for \$10. I was forced to have sex with this stranger because when I refused, I was brutally beat. I felt like I had no other choice; this was my life. This is what I'd become.

*'I felt like that was all I deserved.'*

I went through that for about six more months. I finally told my dad what was going on, that I was being abused. He came to my rescue. He put that man in his place and told him *if you ever touch my daughter again, you are going to have a problem*. But that wasn't the end of it because I constantly found myself

in toxic relationships over and over and over again. I felt like that was all I deserved—that was the best that I would ever get. I kept allowing myself to fall into those abusive situations.

That experience led to substance and alcohol abuse. Most of the time I was depressed. I needed something to numb that pain. I self-medicated thinking that *this was all that I'll ever have in life*. I'd ask, *do I really deserve this? Is this really what I want?* But it had been embedded in my head that if I tried to leave, I'd be found and the result would not be nice. That was my first abusive marriage.

My second abusive marriage was maybe 15 years later, but it was the same cycle of physical and mental and verbal abuse. Feeling like that was all I ever deserved. That was what I'd always gravitate to. It was me believing that was love. That was all I had ever known; that was all I'd ever seen.

I really didn't have a good relationship with my family. My mother's and my relationship hadn't always been that good. Another issue I was dealing with was being traumatized by abandonment issues. *Why didn't you take me and our brother when you took our sister? Like, how could you take one child and leave the other two?* I was always dealing with those abandonment issues. I fought so hard to gain her love and for her to put her arms around me and tell me, *baby it's going to be okay*. But I never got that. I never had her support. I'm dealing with repressed issues that I've never, ever been able to even talk about. Our relationship was never the best.

### *'I began selling myself.'*

I was introduced to Skid Row through my second husband. He took me down there and I fell through the cracks. I became drug-addicted. I began selling myself. I was verbally and mentally abused while living on the street. I was in a depressive state of mind. I felt useless and worthless and not worthy, not wanting to live. I did find myself suicidal.

Being in the marriage, I felt like there was no way out for me. I didn't have the right state of mind to understand what I was suffering from and seek help. Not knowing that I was feeling this way because I had trauma issues that I wasn't dealing with. That didn't come until I finally escaped my abuser.

### *'I'm going to die on Skid Row.'*

There was one incident this very last time where we'd been up all night, using drugs. I'd been beaten. I'd been made to do things that I didn't want to do and I was just tired, disgusted. I didn't want to live anymore. He told me, "This is what you're going to do...you're going to go over here and you're going to do that." And I refused. I said, "No, I'm not." I had a feeling of defeat, that, *if I don't take charge now, I never will. I'm going to die in the streets on Skid Row*. I was like in a daze [when] I felt a slap across my face so hard that my whole face was burning. I snapped out of it. He was like, "Do you hear me? Do you hear me?" I guess he kind of felt like *something ain't right* because my response was different from all the other times. He said, "If you try to leave, I'm going to beat you so bad the police won't even be able to recognize you."

At that moment, we were on James Wood Street and Eighth Street, [in] downtown LA. The light changed red and the cars started coming and I ran with all my might into the middle of the street, into ongoing traffic. Cars were skidding and stopping. I just ran; I didn't care. I ran into a market, a supermarket. I told them to please *call the police, call the police!* He came in there after me but with all the attention that I was getting, he had a second thought and turned around and ran.

The police came and took me to a safe house. I felt safe there for a little while, but not for long. It was embedded in the back of my head that, *if you ever leave, I'm going to find you*. I wasn't feeling safe but I stayed in that safe house for about a week. I don't know what God had put on my mom's heart but she let me come and stay with her for a little while. At that time nothing in my life had yet healed. I was still suffering from this trauma that I'd never addressed. Once again, I found myself in another toxic relationship.

I became homeless and ended up receiving mental health services after going to a psychiatric facility behind Martin Luther King hospital. I stayed there for 14 days because I was suicidal. Getting into the mental health system is really hard when you don't have a stable place to live. You don't have bus fare; your hygiene is not the best. Being a woman out there in those streets, homeless...I didn't feel clean—I wasn't clean. I hadn't been able to bathe my body. It was a humiliating feeling to have to walk around like that.

*'How can I help you?'*

After going through mental health [services], I came in contact with a lady there. She called me into her office and she said, *what can I do for you today? How can I help you?* And I tell you, I cried uncontrollably for about an hour. That lady put her arms around me and she told me it was going to be okay. That was the first time that I think I had ever felt any type of compassion or understanding, somebody in there for *me*. I'd never experienced that.

I began going to groups and seeing the doctor and started the medication and she really worked with me. She broke it down; she uncovered those layers. I mean, it went back to that eight-year-old girl sexually molested by her grandfather for four years. I began to understand why I was always depressed, why I couldn't stay focused, why I felt so unworthy and useless in my life. Why I always gravitated to toxic relationships, put myself in domestic violence type situations. How I didn't know that I was worthy of being loved...that these people that I've encountered in my life were sick and had problems. Through this process I began to understand my trauma.

It's been decades of trauma and it still feels fresh. It's still there, but it's also a healing process. Through that, I learned myself all over again. Learned who Mildred is and what I'm deserving of... . Not being homeless, but [to] be in supportive housing. To deal with the childhood trauma. I'm breaking that cycle by sharing my story and talking about what I experienced. It's a healing process; that's my journey.

*'You are not alone.'*

Today I'm an advocate. Hopefully it will give someone the strength that they need, to what I endured and experienced, to know in their mind that *you're worthy. You don't deserve to be treated with domestic violence. No one deserves that. You deserve to be loved and treated like a human being and a person. Try to reach out.* I know it's hard because you don't know if a person is going to be receptive, if they're going to judge you or not, but do it for yourself. You deserve that. I truly hope that by sharing my story, it will help that fellow person gain confidence, to know that *you are not alone*.

Policy-wise, [my advice is] take a closer look at the individuals that are out there seeking support. I'm a single woman with no children. There are not a

lot of resources out there for a single individual. A lot of times I would have to go crawl up on the side of a building because there was nothing available for a single female. A lot of doors were slammed in my face because it was like, *well, we can't help you, go over here...* . I go but they're like, *no, we can't help you, you need to go over there.* You start feeling defeated because *I know I don't have any children or I don't have any income.* I feel like I was treated unfairly because of that situation. I feel like more resources could be extended toward single individuals.

I want to say that it's truly an honor to be a part of this project. I thank you all for allowing our voices to be heard, to be able to share my experience of what I went through with the world. Hopefully it will help someone.



## Easther Mulipola

My name is Easther Mulipola. I'm from Rosemead but I'm speaking about my experiences in Long Beach and Stanton. My life hasn't merely been affected by violence; it's been shaped by it. I've witnessed domestic violence, lost my brother to gang violence and became a victim of gun violence. The violence creeps into your life, into what we do, see, say, wear. If we don't become victims, sometimes we become victimizers. It's what we know. I have family members who were wild in different ways. My stories and dynamics are unique to me, but the violence is part of a shared experience of many in my community.

My brother was killed on October 12, 2002. He was just a baby, only 20 years old. When a person is taken from you, no matter what you do, there's still a missing piece. That's how it is in my family; that hole is my brother. The memory hasn't been washed away with time.

My brother got into a funky situation with a gang member known as P. at a house party in Orange County. P. wasn't invited. The host family encouraged my brother to ask P. to leave as politely as possible. P. was offended by the request and felt disrespected. He threatened my brother, saying, "I'll be back," and made a reference to '187', a well-known reference to the penal code section for murder.

My brother wasn't staying with my family. Two days after, he called my mother, saying, "I want to come home." My mother asked, *why this sudden change?* My brother responded that he'd had a dream in which our deceased grandfather had come to him, asking, "what are you doing with your life?" My brother said, "I don't know grandpa." Our grandfather said, "Go home. Make it right. Get your affairs in order." Such dreams are given a great deal of weight in our Samoan community. It's believed that the dead can communicate with us through dreams. This would've marked the first time that all the siblings would be under one roof. There was a sense of joy in this anticipated togetherness.

*'Your brother's body is in the morgue.'*

On Friday night, we didn't say goodbye. The next morning, we get a knock at the door at six o'clock. It's (our) cousins, John and Paul and his grandma and auntie. We're like, *this must be serious because the boys brought an elder to the house.* The first thing I thought was, *oh, man, my brother's not here. He's*

*probably locked up.* Grandma started talking in Samoan. "I'm here to tell you your brother's body is at the morgue." We're like, *wait, what?!* We all started screaming.

They explained that his friends had picked him up and were all chilling before going out. P. showed up with three friends. My brother wanted to squash it (stop the conflict). P. was like, "Okay, then follow me to the front." Nobody knew that P. went to the kitchen, armed himself with a knife and hid it inside his sweater. My brother walked after him. He wore a red jersey. P. shanks my brother three times. The knife pierced his arm, heart and one of his lungs. After, he punched and kicked him.

Blood is gushing out; they said it was like water. They were like, *call 911.* They were taking too long, so the boys said, *f\*\*k it, we'll just take him to the hospital.* Driving to the ER, that dude (P.) follows them to make sure that my brother's dead. When the police got there, they asked him, "Can you identify the person who did this?" He said, "P." and took his last breaths. Within an hour, my brother died.

Driving to Orange County that day was one of my darkest moments. My mom was in shock...this was her baby. My dad was in disbelief. But in that dark moment, I had clarity and felt a piece of warmth. When we got to the coroner's office, she handed (us) an envelope of his stuff, like his ID, Social (Security) card. I was like, *I want his jersey.* I wanted the last thing he wore when he walked this earth.

*'We knew nothing about victims of violent crimes support.'*

We knew nothing about victims of violent crimes support. Sitting there, a counselor from the mortuary overheard us. She said, "California has a victim of crimes compensation program and they can help families with funeral arrangements and things like that. You've got to get the okay from the attorney that's meeting with the detective that's working on [the] case. They'll set you up." And they did.

In my experience, Orange County has better resources than LA County with regard to victim's compensation. They were able to find the dude that killed my brother two weeks after. They had gang surveillance of that neighborhood; the detective was able to shake him out. His neighborhood gave him up. He had his mother go with him [to] turn himself in. He was a well-

known gang member.

*'Oh shit, I think I got shot.'*

At that time, I was working with the children's ministry at my church. My faith helped me to navigate violence, through those times when I felt that the burden of grief and emotion was too great. My faith continued to carry me through the anger, questions and doubt.

Three months after we laid my brother to rest, I got shot on January 3, 2003. We lived in Long Beach at the time. We were on Pine Avenue, between 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> streets. I got back from a church event; I was winding down. I heard gunshots in the alley, which is normal, but it sounded really close. Me and my neighbor were standing in the front of my apartment complex wondering, *where is the shooting coming from?* A car comes down from 29<sup>th</sup>; at the corner, this person is hanging out the window...they start shooting. I turn to run and get hit. I was like, *oh shit, I think I got shot...I got shot!*

We were hit with a hollow-point tip. The bullet came in thru my left side, thru my stomach and went out the same way. I kicked open the door to my house. Everyone's screaming. My whole left side is getting numb...it's getting hot. I was like, "I can't breathe." My neighbor calls the police. We're now outside the apartment complex. It's surrounded with Polynesians; all my neighbors are Samoans. I felt so embarrassed. I'm more worried about [what] everybody's saying about me because I got shot.

The officer was like, "Ma'am, was it gang related? What were they saying?" I was like, "I don't know; I heard gunshots in the alley." My family got mad at me. "What are you trying to do?" We just buried my brother and now I go and get shot. It happened so quickly.

*'Navigating violence is different from person to person.'*

Navigating violence is different from person to person. My problem was that I couldn't acknowledge the pain. I was like, *oh no, I'm good, I'm fine*. But inside, I was hurting, breaking down. I drank a lot. After work, I'd party like there was no tomorrow; I drank to get drunk. Within an hour, I passed out. My thing was, *if I remember what I did last night, then I wasn't drunk enough*. That was my way of thinking. I'm grateful that, in the midst of all this, with all the violence,

I didn't turn to drugs.

A lot of us from dysfunctional or broken homes get stuck and don't realize that. A part of us can stay stagnant mentally, behaviorally. I get moments where I'm immature. I'm not used to opening up, sharing. When I open up, it's like a flood; it's a lot for people to digest. I'll spazz out, then afterwards, I break down.

*'I've experienced trauma in all shapes.'*

Half of my life, I've been a navigator seeking healing and direction. I've experienced trauma in all shapes and sizes. I've [also] been discriminated against for being from Long Beach. People look down on that, thinking that it's low budget, but I take pride in Long Beach. It instilled perseverance.

In the midst of all this violence, people were praying for me. My family, my grandparents...they set up foundations; they planted the word of God in me. That's why I'd encourage anybody navigating violence to take forgiveness with them. *Forgive those that hurt you. You're just holding on to that hurt*. My experience is more than just how to persevere, but how to *maintain: maintain your sanity so that you don't go off on others*. Don't stay in that self-pitying place. I was able to incorporate and build. As a survivor, I'm more aware of my value, perseverance, talent and skills. I also learned from my mom. She's the rock of our family. My mom endured so much physical abuse and suffered in silence. She wore those scars on her body. That's how I look at my gunshot wound.

*'Be kind to yourself first.'*

The navigating tools I'd encourage people to take with them are patience, understanding, kindness. These things start with the self. As dysfunctional survivors, we tend to care for others before ourselves. Be kind to yourself first, patient, love yourself first. I wish there were more people who were sensitive, empathetic and patient.

My advice peer to peer? There's no right way or thing to say or do. When a person is going through it, just be there. Provide a listening ear, a shoulder. That's all people need sometimes... a space and somebody to hear them out. After we're done talking, we're like, *okay I feel better*.

*'My passion is with young people.'*

I began volunteering with different organizations. Now I'm a paralegal. I co-founded a criminal record-clearing company that helps with expungements. My dedication and fight are with my grassroots organization. I wanted to incorporate what I'm already doing with what I've been through, in honor of my brother. Our mission is to empower disenfranchised individuals and families from communities of color to overcome personal and legal barriers and help them achieve self-sustainability. *How do you overcome this hardship right here and get a job, or improve on your job skills or education?*

My passion is young people. We've got to find a way to bridge gaps between kids and their homes...if they're experiencing these types of things (violence) in their homes because maybe there's no jobs, or limited income resources, or food or housing. Pacific Islanders are over-housed. We end up in apartments overfilled with lots of people. We can't afford adequate, nice houses.

*'We need more funding for women.'*

We need more accessible, affordable legal access to representation. We need more cultural-related service providers that understand the needs of different groups. You need more capacity-building, more life coaches in this area. We need help to guide people through those moments or seasons of their lives. Sometimes we get stuck in those seasons...we end up becoming victims, over and over again. Women of color need more support for businesses, empowerment, powwow. We need policy makers to provide more funding for women and women tackling women issues. This isn't just a one agency thing. I think everybody needs to be hands-on.



## Noretta Quiroz

My name is Noretta Ann Quiroz. I'm 52 years old. I was born on Thanksgiving, 1968. I live in Westchester, California, Los Angeles, right next to LAX International Airport. I have been living here since Cinco de Mayo of May 2012. I was raised by my mom in Whittier, California, in the suburbs of LA County. She was a single mom and a school teacher. My grandma was a big part of my life too. They were Hispanic, all born here. They were a tight-knit family.

I was born with a developmental disability. I was in special education as a kid and I never knew what my disability was until a couple of years ago; no one sat down and explained to me what I had. The mental health system never told me, even though they knew it was an intellectual disability. I never knew as a child that I had developed another personality. Then again, I was let down by my mom, too, so I'm pretty angry about that. She never told me what my disability was growing up. I just knew I was different from regular kids. I also had developmental health issues. I didn't know this until high school.

*'My mom was embarrassed by my disability.'*

When I look back, I used to disassociate a lot as a child. The teachers thought I was daydreaming...I really believed I was there [in the dream]. My family never told me I was exhibiting another personality. My mom took me out of special education when I was in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and I really needed help. I couldn't finish school so I dropped out. She didn't want people to know that I had this disability. She was embarrassed because she was a school teacher. It affected my life, education-wise.

*'He started molesting me at a young age.'*

When I was little, I'd go with my grandma every summer to her sister's house in Escondido, California. My family owned avocado orchards; they used to sell to the big markets in San Diego. They were Hispanic. It was my aunt Bertha's and uncle Lupa's property. I used to love to spend the summers there [and] run through the avocado orchards. Escondido wasn't super populated yet in the '70s when I was little. They'd drive into San Diego to go to the market and be gone a while. When my grandma and my aunt Bertha would leave, he'd (Uncle

Lupa) follow me to the avocado orchards. He started molesting me at a young age.

In 2016, I started to have flashbacks of my childhood. I remember he sexually assaulted me. I was nine, in the avocado orchards, when my grandmother and my aunt Bertha were gone to San Diego one day. My aunt Amelia caught him. He got off me and I ran to my great aunt. I don't remember anything else. The good news is that he never did it again, but it ruined my life because he raped me. I was nine and I didn't know anything about sex yet. I never told my aunt Bertha or my grandmother about being molested.

I never told my mom, though she knew something was wrong. After that summer, I started to have a lot of behavioral problems. She'd asked me many times if someone did something to me, but I kept saying No. I lived like that until I was probably 26 years old. I recently found out that my grandma experienced domestic violence in her marriage. It made me sad. When I look at all the family dynamics with the older generation, it doesn't surprise me that these things happen[ed] to me. It makes sense.

*'My stepdad didn't acknowledge me.'*

My mom was really a good loving mom when I was a kid growing up. She did the best she could for me, but she always had issues with men, too. I had two stepdads. She married when I was about 11 or 12. The man never mistreated me, but he didn't acknowledge me in the house. We never talked; I didn't know him. That went on until I was about 14 and they divorced. Then she was single for a long time. When I was about 17, she remarried the same type of man. [He] ignored me. I wanted to get away from my stepdad because I didn't like him. I look back and it kind of reminds me of my great aunt Bertha's husband [who] molested me every chance he got.

*'I had developed this sense of not having self-worth.'*

I dropped out of high school and got married to my high school sweetheart at 18. His name was Lauren. He grew up in Whittier with me. That was a big mistake, let me tell you. The family were Jehovah's Witnesses. I grew up Catholic but we weren't big practitioners. We started to argue a lot. It wasn't working out because of their religious beliefs, basically. Then he talked me into

getting off birth control. He talked me into having my baby. I wanted to wait [to see] if our marriage was going to work out or not. Her name's Courtney and she's 26 now. She has a son of her own, my grandson Levi; he has autism. After I had my daughter, the marriage went very dark. It led to domestic violence. I had to leave because he started hitting me.

When she was about seven months old, I filed for divorce. I had [also] met a real nice guy from Manhattan Beach. He was good to me but it didn't work out because of me. I wasn't ready. I already had developed this sense of not having self-worth.

*'Mental illness was a stigma.'*

When my daughter was about one or two, I started hearing voices, seeing things that weren't there. I didn't know what was going on and was afraid to tell people, I knew my family wouldn't understand. They think people who have mental illness should be locked up. It was a stigma, especially in the '70s.

After the divorce, I went to Venice because I had no resources. I didn't even know what my disability was. I started partying in my '20s as a coping mechanism. I'd developed depression and anxiety. I started going out to clubs in Hollywood and Los Angeles with old friends who grew up in the San Gabriel Valley with me. When I was a kid, I was in the mod scene. I had scooters. We used to have scooter rallies up to Big Bear. They were all pretty decent kids, didn't do drugs. That always made me happy. I hold onto those memories every day. I met a lot of great people.

I was very naïve, too. I started to drift away, meet other people with a very different upbringing than me. I started becoming sexually promiscuous. I couldn't figure out why I was being that way. I used to go to Club '70s on Highland off of Melrose. I started doing speed and coke here and there, drinking a lot, partying... I was on the streets and got involved with a very rough crowd in the Santa Monica-Venice area. I hadn't been exposed to gangs. That was different.

I met a guy that grew up in Santa Monica named C. He was a gang member from the gang called Suicidal. They also skate with Dogtown. I started living with a friend in Venice, very deep partying. It was a disappointment for my mom. I know now that I hurt her. I was really running away from myself. She did raise my daughter [for] the first five years of her life because I was so busy

partying and going out with that gang member.

*'For the first time, I have some self-confidence.'*

At 32, I decided to go back to adult school at San Gabriel Valley and pursue my high school diploma. I told this amazing teacher that I had a disability; I was special ed. I told her and she listened. She accommodated me. I graduated. For the first time in my life, I had some self-confidence because I got straight As. I also was given a scholarship to go to any community college of my choice. That was a really big deal. I was like, *wow, I've never had any of this.*

One day, my stepdad was home and we had a big fight. He threw the menudo pot at me. He walked out the door and took off and we didn't see him for three weeks. She took him back, but said I had to leave. I'd just rebuilt my life from domestic violence; I had no money saved up, no plan. She ended up dumping me at a [family homeless] shelter in Venice, the day I graduated from my ceremony as valedictorian of my class. I went home and she'd changed the locks. She had all my stuff packed for me on the porch.

It was a horrible experience in the shelter. I was there for months. I was like, *I can't stay in this place. I'd rather sleep on the damn streets.* I had a friend named J. who was a drug counselor in Santa Monica. He was the answer to my prayers. I moved to Inglewood for two years. He wanted me to fulfill my scholarship so I chose LA Trade Tech. I wanted to take fashion because I'm very creative. I went to the art program through the Regional Center. I'm an artist with a local arts program that supports developmentally disabled artists. I've been with them for three years now. They saved my life. Art really is a healer.

My diagnosis was now a dual diagnosis. It was a big roller coaster for 20 years. I struggled with homelessness. I stayed with my mom for a while as I got older in my '30s. We used to fight all the time. It really affected my daughter. She became a cutter in ninth grade. I tried to get her help, but my mom was always interfering. Once again, *'mental health is for crazy people.'* My daughter needed help. I don't even know how she is [now]. We don't have a relationship.

*'I finally got the help I needed.'*

One day I saw a flyer on the floor for a women's shelter in Santa Monica. I told the director there my situation. I had a really good case manager. I was able

to go to the women's shelter. I was there only two and a half months because my case manager was concerned about my diabetes. They transferred me to another place. I was happy because it was an apartment environment. I was like, *wow, this is like a four-star kind of environment.* I absolutely loved the other tenants.

I really started to get well there. I had a really good case manager. I liked it because it was a small mental health [facility]. I finished their programs to be independent after eight months. I loved it because I was in the Jewish neighborhood. The clients were Jewish. The rabbis would do really wonderful stuff for us. I used to have so much fun. It was a wonderful community at Beverlywood.

I had a really good psychiatrist, too. She straight up told me that I had another personality. I had a breakthrough. I still had a hard time with that, because with double or multiple personalities...they don't recognize each other. I don't remember the other personality having a name or anything, but I know that she did exist. I'm wondering what she did when she wasn't that other personality. It does scare me till this day.

*'I was getting a lot of flashbacks.'*

I remember when I started to have flashbacks of being sexually assaulted as a little girl. I was really manifesting the other personality. I got sick; I almost died here in my apartment in 2016. I had Bell's palsy and shingles at the same time. My hair fell out; I had all these bald patches. Me and this little cat that I adopted from a bad situation—he was going through the same manifestations...his hair turned gray and so did mine.

[Also], E. found me again. He started coming back around 2017, while I was getting a lot of flashbacks. One day he broke into my apartment and threw hot boiling water at me. They arrested him, but Covid hit. He is out free right now in Venice, selling dope. Regional Center put me under protective services. I do have a restraining order. It's good until next year.

[Later], I got hit by a car and dragged...a hit-and-run. I couldn't walk for months; I had to have knee surgery. Now I suffer from physical pain constantly. I don't walk right. I'm a miracle really in the sense that I bounced back the way I did. It was true determination to live. My cat has helped me to live, this little cat.

*'It was a true determination to live.'*

I recently won my Social Security in 2019; my Social Security case had been in appeal since 2008. I kept getting rejected because of the felony. [In the early 2000s], I had a family friend, M., a lawyer; he got my felony reduced to a misdemeanor and erased. I'm still owed a ton of benefits. I was able to send everything to the people in the congressional office. That's where I'm at right now. I still need representation.

I've been able to pay off debt from the past. I had to pay restitution to my mom for six years; it took my life savings away. I found out that I have a disability trust [but] my advocate said it won't show up on my end till my mom passes. So, I'm alone, I'm single, but I have some good women friends in my life now. I've been attending a really good church where I grew up. I'm happy right now. I am in a good, healthy place.



## Joey Bloomfield

My given name is Joseph Gregg Bloomfield; I go by Joey. I currently reside in West Hills, in the San Fernando Valley. I raised my kids in North County, San Diego. In 2013, after a failed marriage, I ended up back in the Valley. I am here as a suicide survivor. But my story really starts as a child.

Back in the 70s, there were things called paper boys who delivered newspapers. When I was roughly ten years old, I ended up being molested by an old man that I delivered the paper to and I think that changed the trajectory of my life. I have a family history of mental illness: a mother who suffered from depression all her adult life, both my sisters, my aunt and my grandmother. My first occurrence, which happened in my senior year of college, I stopped functioning for about a week. I thought it was the stress of school and a paper. In hindsight, I realize that was my first depression. I was around 21.

As I entered the work world, I suffered a bout of depression and had to quit a job. I sought help, had a misdiagnosis. Because of my family history, I was diagnosed depressed and it went on; antidepressant drugs didn't help. I was diagnosed bipolar in my mid-20s. I went on different meds and it seemed to help; I was on those meds till my late 40s. However, I still suffered from debilitating depressions. I was diagnosed hypo-manic, which means little manias that looked like hyper-productivity. It wasn't stereotypical mania where you spend time outdoors or thinking you could do crazy things like Superman. I was hyper productive, slept less. I got way more done and I was just super motivated, but my depressions were mean and debilitating. I lost every job that I ever had prior to leaving the workforce due to my depression.

This was back in the 90s. I can't imagine companies can get away with letting people go like that now. But that's how I lost my jobs. I'd go out on leave for depression and couldn't get back to work in the time frame that was acceptable to my employers.

*'I couldn't function.'*

In 1999, I was working for a company in the garment industry that went under and I stopped working. In less than a year my wife and I had our first child. I became a stay-at-home father. I still suffered from those depressions. This is how I found out about my mom. I'd take the kids to school, go home

and sleep until I had to go pick them up. I remember I talked to my mom about that and she told me she did the same thing when we were kids. In 2013, my marriage fell apart. I was no longer living with my kids, no longer taking care of them.

The marriage fell apart because of me. I fell apart. I fell into a depression for seven years. From 2013 to 2016, I sat on my parents' couch and I did not move. I take that back; I moved from the couch to the bed, to the couch. I would eat, I would shower—barely—and I sat. I was not a functioning member of society. I didn't speak to anybody; you could not get a hold of me. I wouldn't answer the phone, I didn't respond to email, I wouldn't respond to text. The only people that could talk to me were my parents and my siblings, *if they came by*, when they came by. But to be honest, when I knew somebody was coming by our house, I'd leave. I'd take my mom's car and go park in the park and hide out. I just hope.

I saw no future for myself. I thought, there was nothing else for me; I thought my only purpose in this world was to create my three daughters and I basically lost them. Not legally, I don't mean that. I could have seen them; I just couldn't. I couldn't function. I didn't want them to see their father, who was a shell of a man. So, I hid.

I dreamt about my girls every night. I woke up crying every day and I just sat, hoping that something would change. And nothing changed because I didn't do anything. So, in 2016, I attempted to remove myself from this world. I felt I was a burden. I felt that I would never be loved again. I felt that everybody hated me and I felt like everyone would be better off if I wasn't here. I'm learning to say this: I succeeded at living. I did not fail in my suicide attempt, *I succeeded in living. I should be here.* It was dumb luck that I didn't succeed.

*'I wanted the pain to go away.'*

I'm telling you this story because I want to help others. I can't imagine anyone hurting the way I did. I tried to hang myself and it worked. I was out. But it (the rope) broke, so I fell.

I'm very lucky. I'm not a religious man—born Jewish but raised with no religion. But I feel like some divine intervention went on that day, not just because I fell. I was in a bedroom in my house and I'm assuming my father heard the thump. There were no locks on the doors, but the door was closed.

He knocked. He said, “Joe, are you okay?” I had just come to. I didn’t want him to see me like that. I said in my best voice “Dad, I’m fine, I’m fine. Don’t worry, I’m good.” For whatever reason, he never opened the door and walked away.

After that, I still didn’t get better for about four years, but I never thought about suicide again. I don’t think about it anymore. I mean, I talk about it, I’m in groups, I spoke on a panel. But that’s not some place where my brain goes anymore. Why? I don’t know. Why I attempted [suicide]? I DO know. I don’t think I wanted to die, but I wanted the pain to go away. I’ve read a lot about people like me. It’s the pain. People don’t understand when they say suicide is a very selfish act. You haven’t stood in my shoes or any of our shoes, to know what’s going on in our brain. I firmly believed I was doing a favor to everybody else. I was acting, I thought, in *their* interest, not mine. I didn’t even think about the fact that my dad might find me; it didn’t dawn on me until I told this story to my therapist. *F\*\*k, my dad would have found me.*

*‘They needed to give me something to do.’*

That was 2016. My little sister was very concerned about me. She put me on a plane and took me to Houston to live with her. She tried to help me and I basically sat on her couch. I came back and then one of my oldest friends who lived in Simi Valley with his wife Veronica came to see me one. He basically physically removed me from that house and said, “You’re dying here and I don’t want you to. I’m taking you to my house and you can live with us.” I said, “Walt, I have no money. I can’t function.” He said, “Joey, you can live with us for the rest of your life and never pay us a cent. But I’m not going to allow you to die at your parents’ house like you are.” Keep in mind, I didn’t tell anybody about my attempt you know—nobody knew.

So, I moved to Simi Valley and basically sat on their couch. When I first got there, they really were gung-ho on trying to help me. Veronica would say, “Oh, I found you this job. You can do this, or you can do that.” Although, cognitively, I could understand how you’re supposed to do things, I couldn’t do it. One of the first things that she did to try to give me some purpose was ask me to vacuum the house. She and Walt left for work. I spent the next seven hours thinking, *how am I going to vacuum the house? Oh, my goodness.* I recognize how silly that sounds. Everybody knows how. Just before they got home, I managed to get the house vacuumed but I stressed about it all day. That’s how

the depressed mind works. A simple task like vacuuming! Needless to say, they figured out how nonfunctioning I really was. I give them credit for saving my life because they figured out (that) they needed to give me something to do.

*‘It was giving me my purpose back.’*

The first task was the vacuum. Then Veronica would give me other chores to do around the house. They didn’t even know, but it was giving me purpose back. They had three Akitas, all three big 100-pound dogs. They said, “We want you to start walking the dogs for us every day.” I remember I said yes to everything because they took me in and fed me. I started to walk their dogs. I had no muscle, from the years I sat on the couches, my body had atrophied.

I was scared to death of the walks, but I had to take the dogs out. Like I said, 300 pounds of dogs, very friendly to people, but to other animals, they were not! If a rabbit or cat or another dog ran by, they’d try to take off after it. I hated it, they knocked me down many times. But I felt like I had to do it for Walt and Veronica because of what they were doing for me, so I kept doing it. I believe that was the beginning of me starting to come back.

I’d walk them every morning and if I had to go somewhere, say I had an appointment or something, in the morning, no dog walk that day. I remember one day coming back from somewhere thinking, *gosh, I need to walk those dogs. I want to walk them* and that’s when I realized it had shifted from the walks being for them, to the walks being for me. I started walking them longer and longer. I walked their dogs for two years. My mind started to feel a sense of worth.

*‘Every day I cared for them; my self-esteem increased.’*

Then something that most people would think was sort of tragic happened, but I credit it for my full return. My parents were now not able to take care of themselves. I have three siblings who all work. They asked me to move back in with mom and dad, so I did. Every day that went by, that I was taking care of them, my self-esteem and self-worth increased. My self-value was going up as they were dying. Basically, I watched my parents die. I knew the day that my dad was going to die. I called all my siblings so they could come that day and he died that night.

I moved back in with Walt and Veronica, rather than staying in the empty house because I didn't feel like I could take care of myself. A week later, I was walking the dogs and I felt an overwhelming sense of somebody watching me. My inclination was to look up. Obviously, there are clouds in the sky [but] I saw my parents smiling down at me and they were happy. That day was the day I decided to start living again. I felt like when they passed they took all my guilt and shame away with them. I forgave myself for all the transgressions and the failed marriage. I forgave myself and said, *it's time to live again*. That was 2020.

So many amazing things have occurred in the last two years. I have so much hope and so much to live for. I think the most important thing are my daughters. They were 13, 11 and 9 at the time in 2013 when the marriage fell apart and my 13-year-old didn't speak to me until 2020. She was the oldest and seven years, she did not talk to me. Now we have a relationship, a good relationship. I see her as often as I can. She's a senior at San Diego State University and my middle daughter is a sophomore at UC Santa Barbara, which is not far from me. I go up there as often as she'll let me. And my baby is in high school. I haven't seen her in four years, but she's texting me and I have a lot of hope.

*'My purpose is helping people.'*

So, I figured out my purpose is helping people. I was a dad...I was a stay-at-home dad...what was my purpose? To take care of my girls. What pulled me out of this seven-year massive depression? It was helping my parents. I shared on social media my struggles and that I attempted [suicide]. The first time I tell anybody, I share it with the public. I remember I had a 187 Facebook friends at the time and I feel like I heard from every single one of them. I heard a lot of *thank you for sharing I have a friend I have a daughter I have a son I struggle*. My cousin who was raised in St. Louis, that I didn't really see, reached out to me after seeing my post. She had a nonprofit she was trying to get started. We are now very close to being a legit nonprofit to help educate people and spread the word about mental illness. It's her brainchild: *Go find one reason to live and let that be enough*.

I have a compelling story. I didn't function for seven years. Now I've made a comeback and I want to help. People have said to me, "Joey, you should be a therapist. You have such life experience and the way you can talk to people, you

could help so many." I say, "No, I don't want to do that. That was my major—psychology—but that's not what I want to do. I don't want to help one person one at a time. I want to help thousands at one time. Put me in front of an audience and let me speak and tell my story. Hopefully it will have an impact." I think it will. I'd like to be a motivational speaker.

After posting on social media, a friend from junior high/high school reached out to me. She'd lost her brother to suicide and wanted to talk to me because she had this guilt that she could have saved him because she was the last one that he spoke to. She introduced me to this mental health organization. She had gone to SOS groups—survivors of suicide—and she told me, "This is an organization that would probably have a group for you."

*'It's amazing to speak to people who have stood in your shoes.'*

Then I decided I wanted to be a peer in these groups, the SOSA groups—survivors of suicide attempts. They said, "That's great. But you can't just be a peer. You've got to go through the program as a patient first." I said, "No problem, whatever I need to do."

That group was amazing. I was there thinking, *I'm going to help. I'm going to help out*. But it helped me. I'm now in my third group and I can't tell you how amazing it is to speak with people who have stood in your own shoes. I saw a therapist and psychiatrist my whole adult life...it never, ever had an impact like this.

I'm still pursuing being a peer [advocate]. I've done three groups now as a patient. The people I've met are amazing. I let it be known that I wanted to speak publicly to share my story. Then, in September, the Suicide Prevention Network had their annual summit. I was asked and spoke on that panel as an suicide attempt survivor.

*'My advice: it never always gets worse.'*

*I will share with you what worked for me, it might not work for everyone*. I've had a lot of people reach out to me and I tell them the same thing. *This is what helped me [or] would have helped me*. I don't want to say it's going to work because everybody's different. My advice is, *it never always gets worse. There is light*. From somebody that took seven years to find the light, don't give up,

don't give up!

I gave up. I understand the pain, I understand the tremendous pain. If I had failed my attempt to live, I wouldn't be here now, experiencing what I'm experiencing now, which is an amazing life.

For those who have someone who's suffering, my advice is, let them know you're there. Sit with them in their dark place. You can't fix people. I wasn't fixable. I wasn't ready for help. You can't help somebody who's not ready. Just let them know you're there.

It seems that mental health is now getting more attention. I'm grateful for that. It amazes me the stories of what happens when you seek help for mental health or you are labeled mentally ill. I told you earlier, I'm Jewish, I grew up in the San Fernando Valley and all my friends were Jewish. I didn't even know that I was a minority. I never experienced any discrimination, any prejudice, nothing ever in my life for being a Jew. It took my ex-wife in my '20s to ask me, "How's it feel to be a minority? What are you talking about? I'm a white guy. I'm not a minority." She said, "You're Jewish." To me, that wasn't a thing...maybe that's me being naive and sheltered. Whatever it is, I never experienced anything. In fact, when I worked in the garment industry, having a Jewish last name helped me. But when I was diagnosed bipolar, I cannot tell you how many times I've been discriminated against or felt prejudiced against because I was labeled mentally ill. It infuriates me. If you come down, unfortunately, with a diagnosis of cancer, is there stigma? Are you shunned? Looked at differently? Avoided? A physical illness is a physical illness and most people don't think twice about it. But a mental illness? People are like, "You're faking it. It's not a real thing or you better stay away from that title because of the stigma." They're crazy, all the labels. The other day, our group leader made a statement that hit me so hard. She said, "Why do we take ourselves to the hospital when we have an injury? Appendicitis! We go right away... . But when we're suffering mentally, do we take ourselves to the hospital?" No. That stigma needs to change. In the media the stigma needs to be erased. I never, ever got the help I needed because of 1) finances and 2) (I) didn't know how to get help. I didn't know it was available. The public needs to be made more aware of this information. There is help!



## Safe and Thriving Neighborhoods

Build nurturing, supportive environments for communities, including safe public spaces, resources for basic needs, community-driven safety strategies, arts and culture programs, and opportunities for neighbors to connect.

## Jabbar Stroud

My name is Jabbar Stroud. I was born in Chicago and raised on the south side. You had to grow up fast on the south side because a lot of families over there were intertwined with the street life. There was a lot of violence. There were a lot of alcoholics, a lot of gang activity. You had to protect yourself early, because if you mess with the wrong kids on the block who were related to someone in that lifestyle, you had a lot of repercussions. My mom died giving birth to my brother, when I was one. I primarily lived with my father and my grandmother until age seven. My father took on a second wife—my stepmother. Looking at violence in my household, my dad was very, very, very abusive towards my stepmom until they broke up. Definitely a tumultuous relationship...a lot of drug abuse, alcoholism and domestic violence. I remember a lot of neglect in terms of my upbringing from my father and stepmother. I remember an altercation between them [and] their addiction. A lot of disregard of respect for my grandmother by my father. My grandmother was kind of a nurturing guide.

My mom ended up having four nieces and nephews, as well. They were young and wild; they liked to party. I ended up moving in with my other grandmother on my mother's side [and] that grandmother moved to California. It kind of broke up my brother and sisters and me. I have two older sisters, one younger brother. Older sister—rest in peace; younger brother—also rest in peace, due to violence. We were still growing up when we moved out here to California. There were a lot of gangs out here.

*'Kids learn the behavior in their households.'*

When you're young, your parents are watching the house, so they tell you to go outside and play. You go outside and find your own things to do. I remember a lot of inward youth—young men—who did thrill-seeking. We'd go up to the train tracks and play. I remember once seeing a young man's body, battered. I come to find out that he was beaten with a bat and thrown on the railroad tracks. The train ran over him as well. I remember that vividly. I was about six years old.

I remember a lot of the time going to [the] park. A lot of shootings...a lot of fights...that was just the norm growing up. I always had my head in sports.

It was my way of expressing myself, [a] way to get frustrations out when I was older. Thinking back, I kept sports as a distraction; it kept me [from] being caught up in a lot of things to avoid if you protect yourself. Kids continue the cycle of behavior that they learn in their households and environment. They adopt it quick.

I don't remember violence in the household with my grandmother on my mom's side. The only thing that was really troubling was butt whippings. We got into a lot of mischievous things. My uncle was a disciplinarian; it was for disciplinary purposes; that was his means of development—to keep order and respect in the household. I remember they'd make us stand in line to get our butt whipped or get a pop upside the head.

*'Her behavior emulated my mother.'*

My older sister was seven years older. She had fond memories of my mother; she knew more and was more bonded. Looking back, I could see her behavior emulating my mom. She was grown up, very rebellious, ran the streets, got into a lot of fights, started abusing alcohol and drugs. She knew a lot of things that took place between my dad and my mom—my birth mom. My sister abused drugs and alcohol her whole life. She never got her life on track. She was never acknowledged by her father. You could tell she always was seeking some kind of kinship or father in her life, through all the different relationships that she had. I could tell that she never found that. She was constantly in abusive relationships—a lot of violence. Then, trying to find that love and that bond with my grandmother who let her get away with a lot of things, coddled that behavior, enabled it in a sense. When she passed away, she was kind of emulating the lifestyle that my mom actually lived.

*'The attraction to violence was seeing it in my dad.'*

I was still doing sports and stuff like that when I came to LA. I ended up in third grade coming out here in my grandmother's household. I continued to go to school and play sports up to when I was 13-and-a-half. My dad also moved out here. It was the same ...people using drugs. Lots of gang violence out here and [the] influence of gang groups.

My dad started to drink and get high. It was something that he couldn't

escape. He really couldn't be present the way that he wanted to be, just like his own father. He was neglectful. I guess my attraction to violence [was] seeing it in my dad. He obtained a job at the VA hospital, doing commercial cleaning work. Met a few friends there...ended up drinking. Never was home, never was present, always hanging out with his friends. Drunk a lot so he was always driving drunk or high. One thing I did discover, once he stopped drinking and using drugs, was that he was wounded as a soldier in the war. I think that was one of the things that continued to haunt him—that he was always trying to escape. He [also] lost a couple of childhood friends that went off to war. My auntie's husband served in Vietnam as well. Very disturbing upbringing as well...very neglected...he was an orphan baby so he had a lot of healing to do himself.

My older cousin was in the street life. I started constantly getting involved in it. I really had trouble getting past that in life, just seeing the bodies out here. I started doing a lot more mischievous things, breaking into things, drinking alcohol. My dad was an alcoholic, my grandfather died of alcoholism...so that was always coming into my life and you know, my baby sister used to drink a lot and do drugs. When I was young, she used to feed us alcohol, like play games and stuff and sing songs. That was normal in my life; that felt familiar. All my friends were alcoholics. Definitely in the lifestyle, living the street life.

Like my father, I can see that I stopped caring in a sense.

*'He was always trying to escape.'*

Once he stopped drinking and using drugs, [I learned] he was wounded as a soldier in the war. hat was one of the things that continued to haunt him—that he was always trying to escape. He lost a couple of childhood friends that went off to war.

*'Hurt people hurt people.'*

My first incident of violence was a purse snatching. I walked up on a lady and her friend and snatched her purse. I ended up getting caught, going to juvenile hall. That put me back into survival mode because a lot of youths in the juvenile system are from gangs. I felt the need to represent myself, have an attitude, trying to become, a man. The mentality in there [is] survival of the fittest; you're going to represent yourself or be preyed upon. You got a lot of kids out

there coming from backgrounds that either your big brother or somebody was on the side of the neighborhood...they imitated those steps.

Like they say, hurt people hurt people. There wasn't a lot of nurturing and guiding inside there. They were well-meaning, but you had to be more security-minded. Interaction with youth and staff, was always some form of aggressive love...a constant apprehension of others. They were comfortable with violence, [how] to deal with that type of environment...be a police officer or something like that. They were more officers than staff.

Once I got out, I spiraled into alcoholism and did more crime. Robberies...a lot more fights...became more aggressive. I imitated what my father was to me.; My grandma tried to [have me] see a psychiatrist. I guess I disrespected her authority; my teenage rebellion came off disrespectful towards her. She was very hardworking and always did anything in my best interest. Other family members were involved [in gang life]. My cousin was carrying and that would bring deeper criminal activity—selling drugs, that violence, living the drug life. You become more protective carrying more weapons, in case individuals want to challenge what you have or your reputation or who you are. You have competition and gun violence. [A] lot of bad behavior engaging people, in relationships. [A] lot of abuse in relationships.

*'You learn emotion will get you killed.'*

I did another robbery at 17 and got about two months [prison time]. Got out at 18-and-a-half. I ended up getting drunk and robbed a liquor store, got into a fight, ended up shooting an individual. I was on the run.] I was about 21 and living with an offense of going out of state. I ended up extradited back to California for the crime I committed at the liquor store. I had a 23-and-a-half-year sentence.

Prison life was very different from jail and juvenile...a lot of rules of engagement. You had to learn how to be our conception of manhood in that world. You have to stand your ground. You learn emotions are going to get you killed in there, so you become more closed off of your emotions. There's so much violence in that environment, with the staff or because of the inmates. A lot of violence between staff and inmates; they think we deserve no respect. Respect is one of the most important values in prison...having that pure respect...unless you cross certain lines. Then it will be the rules of engagement.

*'I didn't want to be violent.'*

Looking back, I didn't see myself as being someone that wanted to be violent but it was always surrounding me. Learning how to protect yourself and part of it being normal. I didn't feel that I was the drug life. When I was a drug dealer, I saw people using drugs and the paths that led them up to that point. I thought I was better off. That was my way of feeling my self-esteem and ego. To look down on others that were in a lowly position or even hurt.

I was doing a lot of reflecting in prison. I thought about something someone said to me: *it's always wrong to pick on people that are weaker than you. Protect people that are weaker than you.* That's hard to admit to yourself—that you try to make yourself look strong by hurting others and having dominion over people will make you stronger or look better and be respected. That really is pretty weak. That's a hard thing to admit to yourself. It erases a lot of the myths that we create in this life, that you think made you a man. That was very profound, very eye opening. You reflect and admit to yourself why you've been a dirt bag.

Everybody sent me on this path to 'be your true self, your true humanitarian self'—who are you as a human being and what that full capacity could mean. That was heartfelt in its relationship to a sense of purpose. I really am trying to challenge myself in the mental, spiritual and physical sense of myself, trying to reach that acceptance. It's like you have to treat people with respect and they might see what we were doing as having been disrespectful? These are people from the community and you know most of these people you're around. [It's a] matter of *treat you with the same respect that's come to you if they need something, you know?*

*'We all have redeemable qualities.'*

I connected with a lot of individuals while I was in there [prison] that were very conscious, finding answers, dialoguing. Always having these forms of 'deep thinking' or even 'critical thinking'. *Where did we all go wrong? What can we do to challenge ourselves? How can we be of service to others? To influence each other and carry that torch as we come out here and gain our freedom and make amends. Be a beacon to others, to show them that the bridge is out and it's about the path.*

Everybody has a story to tell. That's one of the things I like that this project is doing. Having a social worker really dig in and find out about individuals and figure out what's been wrong, what led them up to this point. It's taking on something that's been missing in the criminal justice system. We don't look at the root cause. Something led them to that point and they need to be understood. How can we counteract, attack that and root that out before we can end up in a cycle of this spiral of behavior? I think that's an imperative. We all have redeemable qualities.

Being institutionalized, we know that there are unredeemable qualities as well. We're not naïve about that. But for the most part, there are individuals in there [prison] who have a lot of value and redeemable gifts and talents that could be lent to society and be of service. Not only to themselves and the ones they love, but to a lot of individuals in this world. A lot of hidden jewels and gems in there.

*'We need preventive measures to acquire public safety.'*

We need preventative measures in place so we can acquire public safety. We can jeopardize others if we don't. The challenges are making sure that we provide people with the right services needed to offset the behavior. There has to be a shared input on both sides, to have a balanced view of it all. Looking at it from the victim's side can feel uncomfortable...some people have lost lives. I've taken a life myself...I have.

I think about that household...what it does to somebody. How is that family and [what it] made them feel. I think a lot about that in terms of the victim's family and what power and influence I had, the trauma I brought to the household. They had a path...now a missing component in their life. Their father...they miss him. A presence in their life giving some comfort to them. That heartfelt pain they felt motivates me to change. That's what motivates me to continue to do this work because [it's all] *six degrees or three degrees of separation*. I disrupted a whole life—a whole lot of lives.

*'Be in service to others.'*

I try to be an influence on others. I want to tell individuals how powerful they are in terms of the actions that they take. Think before there's something they

might act on. My one action led to so many lives being disrupted. Think about that, not just about yourself, but how much influence we have on each other. I always try to live by a quote that I ran into: “Be the need instead of being the problem.” *Be in need of others, in service to others.* The true value of success is the success you impact in others.

I was truly amazed at a lot of individuals that chose to learn to better themselves, tap into those gifts and talents and understand who they are and try to live out their potential. That’s one thing that motivates me. I went to school, I learned, I got good grades. I’m like, *man, I got a lot of potential.* But I didn’t see the value of it at the time. So [now], I try to live out that potential and be of service and have a purpose.

*‘Interact with both sides.’*

I think lawmakers can be more insightful before they write something into law. Interact with both sides, not just one side. Don’t just rely on people that are outside the system, that have no insight in how we view the criminal justice system.

I hope we can continue to have these forums and dialogues with lawmakers. I would love for them to continue to talk with individuals in these institutions. Ask them what went wrong in their life, what can we do to improve, where it’s fair and balanced for both sides.

## Kesau'c Hill

I was born and raised in Pacoima, California, in the northeast section of the San Fernando Valley. I reside now in Palmdale, California, in the Antelope Valley in southern California. My family were migrants from Louisiana. On my father's side, it was Alabama; on my mom's side, Louisiana. We kind of migrated to Pacoima during the '40s—1942—right after World War II.

A lot of military populations ended up migrating west to receive better opportunities during the '40s and '50s and, of course, they segregated communities. Pacoima was one of the segregated, military-based communities, where you had [an] Indigenous, Hispanic and predominantly Black population. My grandfather on my dad's side bought a house and lived there. My great-grandmother and her husband ended up moving and living there and my mom. [It's] a low-income, predominantly Black and Hispanic population, so you can imagine poverty levels in the community. It was home nonetheless and a place I'm proud of growing up and identifying with. It was the only community that I knew.

Until five or six years old, we had a very stable family; the family structure was there. My mom and my dad were married...father in the home...and there was me and my sister. However, all that took a drastic turn once my father was arrested. That actually broke up the home. He was part of one of the oldest motorcycle clubs in the San Fernando Valley, The Fugitives. That connection landed him in jail. That was violence for my young mind, to see the only foundation and structure that I understood ripped apart and to be done with guns blaring.

*'I fought when they separated me from my sister.'*

Can you imagine being a five-year-old and you think that your father's the most powerful person in the world and your mother is the haven of all safeties and then that's taken away? You see your father slammed on his face and handcuffed and hogtied and thrown—literally hogtied into the car—and you witnessed it? You see that your mom can't help you and she's supposed to be that haven of safety? Then they send you to a foster home. It was a violence to my reality when my family was taken away and I was put into foster care. I didn't fight when they separated me from my parents, but I fought tooth and

nail when they tried to separate me from my little sister. I remember the change in my mentality then.

Once I made it out of the foster home, my mom got custody of us. Now mom is a single parent, trying to raise not two, but three children. Living in low-income housing, we now get the violence that's more than mental. I am being bombarded with a violence that was hard for my young mind to even understand. My mom started getting into relationships that turned out to be abusive. Being the oldest boy, I felt this need to protect her.

The constant domestic violence that my mom endured, I also endured physically, not because he attacked me, but because I threw myself into the fray every time. It got to the point where she would fear that; whenever her boyfriend had become violent, I'd possibly get hurt in the process. This went on all the way up to when I was graduating 6th grade elementary. I remember the beauty of the graduation itself—this feeling of accomplishment, like, *I'm actually no longer in elementary.*

I used to always try to get her to leave the relationship. "I don't know what you see in this guy. You know that there's nothing." I didn't understand. Once he turned that violence towards my sister [it changed]. My sister had reported once that he came into her room at night. I asked, "Did he touch you?" She said, "No, but he comes every night." [But] my mom took it as, "Oh, he's just checking on you guys. What's the problem with that?" She couldn't see the potential danger. She couldn't see what we were seeing as young children.

I tell this story because that's the first time that violence entered, beyond my imagination, into pre-planning. Now I really wanted to hurt someone and it was this guy. I remember going around my neighborhood asking people for a gun and people [asking], "What do you want a gun for?" [I said], "I'm going to shoot my mom's boyfriend." They said, "No, I'm not going to give you a gun to shoot your mom's boyfriend."

I waited until he fell asleep on the couch and tried to hit him with a bat. But I walked in front of the TV and my shadow alerted him. He opened his eyes and caught the bat. He chased me out the front door. Now, we lived upstairs and I used to jump from the rails (second floor) all the time...hang jump. As boys, we tend to be reckless like that. I jumped from the front rail and the neighbors thought he threw me [off], so they called the police. Men came out and people were attacking him. It was this big old thing, because they thought he threw me over the rail. The police came along again and here's my second trip to foster

care because the police officers said, “there’s obviously some violence going on within the home.” When I got out of foster care, I was 13 years old. The concept of this violence and this rage had already germinated within me.

*‘I didn’t have a father there.’*

There’s another story that plays a major role during this time. [It was] right before my incident with my mom’s boyfriend. A neighborhood guy—he wasn’t my friend, he was a grown man and I was a kid—was killed. I knew him. I watched the murder. I tell this story when I mentor youth, because I remember not having anyone to talk to about that trauma. I didn’t have my father there and for some reason, in my young mind, my father should be the person to talk me through this death that I just saw.

I wanted to tell my mom, but I felt like my mom was the wrong person to talk to about this. Whenever I’m dealing with death or violence, I should have had a father to talk to. Instead, there was a void and absence. Then the situation with my mom’s boyfriend happened.

*‘Gang-banging for the sake of identity.’*

Like I said, the first violence was mental. It was a reality check that my world wasn’t as safe as I thought it was, that my father wasn’t the hero that I thought he was. In place of that, I’m looking at the white police officers as the power and someone to fear. As disruptors of peace. I never saw them as to protect and serve me. They were always this outside entity that came along to cause discord and trauma.

By the time I was 13, I was affiliated with a gang. People would always say that gangs were a bad influence...*you’re hanging around bad company*. We like to paint that picture. However, the reality for me, in all honesty, was totally different. Rage was already in me so gangs became the perfect vehicle for me to express a rage that was there and unaddressed. I dove headlong into the gangs. It was like *this was my identity, this was my calling*. I’d fight every opportunity I got; fighting elevated my social status. I’m gangbanging for the sake of identity. I’m thinking this is what I’m identified as. All of this shaping me, because now my mom is on drugs.

Three days after my 16th birthday, I ended up in prison for murder.

Gangbanging. I ended up stabbing a man 19 times...19 times! I only remember four. You see? I say that because, remember, this is what I’m talking about as far as a rage that’s been built up to such a point that I’d become intoxicated by it.

They tried me as an adult; that’s part of the system. They tried me before I even ever had an ID. I was young enough to still be changed, to still be reached. The fact that it was my first offense, that I had never been arrested or anything ever—it didn’t matter. The fact that I had a B grade point average didn’t matter. What mattered was the complexion of my skin, the community I came from and the violence itself—not the causative factors.

I turned 16 on April 19. [On] April 22, I was incarcerated in an adult facility and spent over 26 years in prison. I was in the LA County jail, thrown in with grown men. I’m talking about predators—30-, 40-, 50-year-olds—experienced predators, experienced criminals. I had no understanding of this. You throw me in this and you tell me this is where I’m going to be for the rest of my life.

*‘This wasn’t the person I wanted to be.’*

My whole reality and my life—*my survival*—depended on how violent I could be. When I was on the streets as a child, violence was a reactionary emotion, based on a whole lot of my life experience. Now that I’m in prison serving a life sentence, violence has to be my life skill. You see? I have to change my mind and grow up real quick, because all of it counts *right now*. I don’t have a second day; I don’t have a pre-exam to go to. It all matters *right now*.

I remember being in the county jail and there was a young guy that went in about the same age as I was. He was upstairs. I didn’t see it, but I heard it, the sound of him being raped in prison. I was lying on my back, listening to it. The sound of it is more horrific than the visual, because the imagination takes over. I remember thinking, *that won’t be me, that won’t be me*. I promised myself a level of violence and immediately I began to act on that.

I became known as the guy that would fight and stab and whatever the case. This made it easy for me to survive in prison because the reputation preceded me. *Okay, that kid right there, he’ll go. Don’t go there with him unless you’re ready to go there with him, because he’s going to go*. But the whole time, that wasn’t the person that I wanted to be. I still had contact with my mom. I still had contact with my grandmother.

*'Your value is less than a cigarette.'*

Prison is a barbaric environment. It's never designed to rehabilitate or to fix any problem, but to mentally break [you]. Not just our mental state, but our humanity. We forget what that is. Prison begins with violence... physically, emotionally, spiritually...prison is assaulting on all of those things every day... day in and day out...where your life value becomes less than a cigarette. Let that sink in.

I remember watching a guy being beat bad, a white guy. In there, everything is racial and racially divided. I remember that there was hope for me because I watched a white guy being victimized by his own people and my heart went out [to him], like, *somebody should help him*. Even though I couldn't at the time because the rules would have been against me. I said to myself, *I never want to lose that feeling. I don't want to lose that, because that's a sacred part of my humanity that's going to be necessary if I'm ever to get out of here. I have to hold onto that.*

*'Poetry was my therapy.'*

A lot of guys do different things in prison for therapy. They lift weights, they run, they exercise, they play cards, they paint. For me, it was poetry. Being in that type of environment, you need therapy, but they don't provide therapy for you. I didn't consider myself a poet because I had this big, bad gang member identity to uphold. Saying, *I am the toughest guy in the yard and I do poetry*, didn't kind of go together, right? So, I kept my poetry to myself; I'd share it with people close to me. It wasn't until I ended up in the hole (solitary confinement) that I got out and called myself a poet.

Poetry was my place to put things and get things from. I realized that it was a powerful tool for me so I can self-analyze. I can get out whatever I'd built up and put it somewhere. Anger only becomes rage when you don't have a place to put [it]. Now I can read this poetry and see what bothered me. I see what I spent a lot of time on. *What did I think a lot about? How did I feel about the world around me and myself?* Poetry became a powerful tool for me all the way up until I got out of there. When I left that place, I realized that poetry wasn't a thing to be ashamed of, especially in that environment.

*'I feared losing my mind.'*

One of the things that I talk to the youth about is [that] I didn't fear death. I didn't fear killing anybody, didn't fear fighting, didn't fear losing or winning. What I did fear was losing my mind—I feared that.

We had a gang riot in the [prison] yard and leaders got separated from the rest of the general population for obvious reasons. This time they put me in solitary confinement for 98 days, without any human contact, showers every three days. They didn't like me because I was more of a Malcolm [X] figure. I used to speak about oppression, about the prison and the prison industrial complex and reform. I made an enemy of the officers and a lot of the authority there. Once they got the opportunity to get their hands on me, they did.

That was the ultimate test for me, sitting in the confinement of that small cell without any human contact for 98 days. You can never imagine what kind of struggle that is, the challenge of keeping yourself together. Anything physical is nothing compared to that...trying to hold on, to keep a grip on your own sanity. To do that, I wrote poetry. I'd write and write. I'd write on every piece of paper I could get...inmate request forms, inmate grievance forms...whatever I can write on. The police realized what I was doing and stopped providing me with those papers; they said it was destruction of state property. I took a pencil and started to write poetry on the walls. You take your finger and smear it, [it] bolds the print. I'm writing poetry and bolding the print all across the cell wall... .

*'Do you want to kill yourself?'*

They sent in a psych (psychiatrist) to see if I was suicidal and to take pictures of the wall, to see if I was planning on harming someone or myself. They found that it was just poetry. The only thing they're concerned about is, *are you going to kill yourself?* They don't even ask you if you're going to kill anybody else. I always thought that was peculiar, because you don't get a lot of suicides in prison. You have a lot of homicide in prison. Shouldn't the question be, *do you feel like harming anyone else?* To me, that was part of the insanity of the environment I was living in.

*‘I was left with a 15-year-old’s perspective.’*

I got the opportunity to attend college in prison. I ended up getting a Bachelor’s degree from the University of La Verne in behavioral science. I had this idea that I was going to get out of prison and mentor youth. That was my whole goal. I didn’t want youth to be subjected to the same thing that I went through, because I never had a life on the street as an adult. The reality of the world that I left was a 15-year-old’s perspective, a 15-year-old’s mental and emotional baggage.

I always believed that one day I was going to go home. I didn’t know how... maybe an old man. The reality of that hit me while watching a movie called *Shawshank Redemption*. I was like, *one day they’re going to let me go home*. Fortunately, I still had youth in me by the time they let me go at 44. It gave me a unique perspective.

I can talk to youth about what they’re going through because I remember it. It’s all I knew. I can talk to them about the pitfalls of gangs and the violence of the streets, whether it’s in the home [or] on the street corner. I can talk to them about the violence of institutionalization, the violence of foster care and what that does to the emotion and the psyche. I can talk about the peer pressure, of what’s expected of them in gangs and how the misconception of identity is thrown onto the gangs. I talk to them about the pitfalls of that and where that’s going to get you.

*‘Where do I fit in the social scheme of things?’*

I tell people, “Young children aren’t just members of gangs...they look at that as their identity.” The last thing that you want to take from a growing adolescent is their identity. That’s the time that we’re so confused, when we become most rebellious to our parents because we’re trying to figure out who we are. It’s that fiery stage that identity is important. It’s sad that gangs became that source of identity, so much so that it’s mainstream now. I come home and it’s in rap music now, it’s on television. It’s even more a part of the identity and human psyche of a lot of the youth coming up.

*‘Find a thing they’re creative in.’*

I tell youth that there’s two things I can’t tell you to save my life. One, I can’t tell you how many fights I’ve had. Two, I can’t tell you how many books I’ve read. That was my anomaly. I hit the prison reading. Even when I was in the hole, I read the Bible from cover to cover—twice—from Genesis to Revelation. There were a lot of spiritual principles that I got from that. I needed the words to heal me. Once I started reading the Bible, the verse transferred over to the wall.

I would always encourage them to find that thing that they’re creative in and express it, especially in that type of environment. There’s a beauty in your creativity. There’s power in your own voice. Even if that power is to say no, that is a beautiful power. [As in], *no, I will not do that*.

*‘I’m free, but what do I do with that stuff?’*

When I finally got out in 2013, I remember sitting on the bunk thinking, *now here I am, a 44-year-old man and they’re telling me, ‘You’re going home at 5:00 in the morning tomorrow.’ What do I do with that?* I’ve never had a California ID. I’ve never had a driver’s license. *What do I do?* I’ve never even experienced high school, had the high school pride and football games. Now you’re going to release me back into society. I’m worried about post-traumatic stress, because of all the things that I’ve gone through in prison. That’s not going to be undone overnight. *I’m free, [but] what do I do with that stuff?*

Sure enough, that was a whole other thing trying to adjust to society—a different type of violence. A violence on the senses: smell, touch, feel, sight... . We forget [that] in prison, sensory deprivation is a part of the mental punishment. We only get to see certain colors, wear certain colors. You don’t hear a baby cry. You don’t hear a woman’s voice. You don’t smell perfume. When I first got out, they put me in a halfway house. The first thing that I noticed was the sound of a barking dog. I’m looking out the window, *where’s the dog?* It was the neighbor’s dog. I wanted to see the dog bad, because I’ve gone almost 30 years without seeing or hearing a dog.

*‘Post-traumatic stress is inevitable.’*

Post-traumatic stress is inevitable. The migraine headaches, the waking up with

anxiety in the middle of the night because you don't know where you are... . You wake up from a bed...there's no cell, no bars, no toilet. I remember losing my breath, going through a full-on anxiety attack where I had to go outside and calm myself so that I can breathe. These happened on various occasions.

When I teach Trauma to Transformation in an alternative creative writing center for former gang members, we go into halfway houses and talk to guys who've done long-term [sentences]. I explain the types of post-traumatic stress that they may experience. And anger...temper issues. You wonder why you're angry all the time. All of this stuff comes from that prison lifestyle.

*'I made it out with good in me.'*

I made it out with good in me. That's why I say even though violence is perpetuated, it's not [set] in stone. It's changeable. We can change it. All it takes is the effort to do so. I'm an example of that...not an example to be followed, but an example that change is possible. Know there is good in them.

I'd like to end with this. There's an African proverb that says: *It takes a village to raise a child*. We like to quote that part, because it does...it takes a village to raise a child. However, there's another part to that proverb: *Invite the youth in or they'll burn the village down*. We can't give up on the youth. We can't continue to demonize the youth as if they're the problem for society's atrocity. That's not true. The problems are on top. They're happening in those buildings where policies are being made. The youth are just acting out or reacting based on their environment, without the life experience to make better decisions. That's on us. We have to get the youth more involved in social issues. We have to listen to them. It takes a village to raise a child, but if we don't invite them in, they'll burn it down. That'll be on us. So, invite the youth in.

*Still Good in Me*

*'...The devil's been trying to melt me, but that's not the life I was dealt, see?  
I knew that there was still good in me to see the man that I could be,  
should be, would be. That's when the reality of it all took me... '*

*[Excerpt from a poem by Keasu'c Hill,  
written on his last night in prison]*



## Tue Huynh

My name is Tue Huynh and I live in Rosemead, California. I moved here from a halfway house not too long ago. I was born and raised in Vietnam. Growing up, I didn't have much to look up to or look forward to, because I didn't have any role models or somebody to give me guidance. I didn't have a stable environment like other people. My mom had her own kids from another marriage; my father also had his own kids. They came from a poor background.

I can remember growing up and moving from one place to another after the Vietnam War because pretty much the whole economy failed, which forced my family to move to find work. My father had to find a way to escape Vietnam; he escaped when I was 4 years old. So, we moved in with our half siblings from my mom's side.

Growing up in my family in Vietnam, they use the traditional technique of corporal punishment; it was normal in the household. None of my family members called it that except for my father. We were pretty much abused either verbally or physically; everybody tolerated it. Lack of education is another issue leading to violence in our household.

*'We would go to America to have a better life.'*

In 1992 my father let us know that he remarried and had another wife in America. At that time my mom was devastated and decided we would go to America to have a better life. I remember my father didn't want my mom to come over. Me and my little brother didn't really feel like going over there but my mom kept forcing us. One day we're like, *okay*. We decided to go to America.

A few months before we were to leave, our mom decided to stay and become a nun and live at the [Buddhist] temple. I was devastated. That's one of the top moments in my childhood because I can see the moment of transition where I had to move from being a teenager to adulthood. It's like I can see the change in my life and I didn't like it, but there was nothing much that I could do—I had to go. I moved here at 13 to go live with my father and his new family.

My father had left me when I was four [so] the bonding wasn't there. At that time, I didn't accept [his] love. He used to be in the military, so he's very strict; he had a lot of rules and curfews. Every time I needed to behave, either

he yelled at me or beat me up. I looked at it as a punishment more than a correction and pretty much gave in and did what he got me to do. I felt trapped; I felt a lot of anger in myself...going to school, learning another language...it was very difficult for me...I didn't have any friends at the school. Nobody helped me understand how I'm dealing with the moment.

*'This feels like family to me.'*

When I moved to high school I started hanging out with the wrong crew, somebody that can take me as I am. [I] get some love from the guys I hang out with. That's something I'm missing in my household. I felt, *okay, this feels like family to me*. Some people maybe are in gangs because they took the wrong path, because they have to survive. For me, personally, it was more like a choice. I didn't have to, but it was because I came from a broken home. I chose to have them as a family. I now had somebody to support me, somebody looking after me. I was at such a young age, with such a lack of knowledge, that's why it led me to the wrong path.

If we look back to my life, at a young age, especially in my teenage years, I'm feeling like all the other youths, compulsive and lacking in thinking. Pretty much I react to things and take on the influence of the people I'm hanging out with at that time. The lack of education, the broken home, the child abuse and how the community is not safe for me...all these things lead to prison.

I joined the gang at age 15. Six months later a fight broke out in school...I was there when it happened. One of my friends in the same gang got beat up by the other guy. I had a weapon in my hand, a knife. However, I didn't hurt anybody with my weapon. All I know is that I had a knife in my hand. At that time, we were surrounded and so I don't know...I yelled. Somebody started rushing in but they saw I had a knife. Nobody wanted to come close to me. After everything was done, we went through the park in San Jose. That's when we realized that my friend who was beaten up had a knife that he used to whack the [other] guy one time. He saw a small amount of blood on his knife. Nobody thought that this would be very serious, that it could lead to somebody's life being taken.

Later on, when I was arrested, I found out that the guy didn't survive that one stab. Because I was in the gang and had a knife on me, I was charged for gang participation, manslaughter and assault with a deadly weapon, even

though I didn't [do it] or saw anybody [do it]. I was there when it happened. I still was charged with it.

*'I was exposed to a lot of violence in the Supermax.'*

I was arrested when I was 17. I was 19 when I came to prison. They sent me to the 180 level at a Supermax [prison]. That was very tough. I was exposed to a lot of violence...I was exposed to so many things. Everywhere I go was [a] gang member or other people there for murder. Stabbing and fighting was happening so often. We had two, three months of normal programs in total each year; the rest of the year we were on lockdown, always something happening. Every time we'd get locked down, something else would happen.

I was so stressed by the environment. I was pretty much in a constant traumatized state. I started using a lot of drugs because I wanted to release stress and to kill time. From using drugs, I started to sell drugs inside. That was the only way for me to maintain my habit. Selling drugs, making money. I started to blend in with the prison politics and hang out with guys that taught [me] some techniques while I'm selling drugs. Those are the things that slowly, slowly I became.

Looking back now at that whole time, it wasn't something that just happened [to me]. I'm an adaptable, social person. So pretty much because of where I lived and the way I was exposed, I was led to the path I chose.

I served a total of 19 years. After 18 of those years, I went before the parole board and they found me suitable for parole, that I'm no longer a threat to society. I got granted parole and released in 2018. As soon as I got this news I [then] received an ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) call because I'm not a citizen...I was on my way to get deported. I went to Immigration [and] I told them exactly what happened. Because of my rehabilitation and because of my situation—that I wasn't the guy that did it [the crime]—they granted me an Adjustment of Status, which is a Green Card. 'You can stay for a second chance.'

*'I was in a desperate state.'*

In 2008, I started to turn my life around because I hit rock bottom. I was facing a life sentence for a new case. I went to the Security Housing Unit (SHU) [as a] punishment for those who break the law. They gave me 15 months and

indeterminate SHU time with no date to get out. When I hit rock bottom, I felt so helpless. That's the moment I realized that this life didn't work for me; this life was not good. I was stressed, I was beginning to get depressed. It made me change at that moment.

After two years in isolation in the SHU, I luckily got the chance to see the parole board and they released me. It didn't take me one day to change my life; it took me a long time. Because of that little sparkle in my head: *I need to change my life. I have the date to come home and I have a life to live.*

When I first got out, I didn't join any groups. [But] I got a lot of resources because I went into the less harsh environment. At 270, unlike 180 Supermax, everyone has more programs. A lot of correctional self-help classes are through correspondence courses. I took some from the American Institute. They have anger management, addiction and other courses. I fell in love with them...pretty much was guided through the books. Everything I read in there was like, *wow I have a lot of things in common with things I'm reading in these books.*

*'Quality of life is about helping other people.'*

I started to take a step from the past. I've been involved with victim awareness, anger management, gang awareness...a lot of different self-help classes. It's helped bring awareness of myself and how I related to other people and the problem in where I came from—all the root causes—and how one story related to the other. How my peers always influenced me, how they prevented me from growing from all the things that happened. A lot of stuff [that] I learned through my peers and my own experiences, I used as a tool to help to overcome my own struggle.

I think the first stage is the awareness of what happened in my life; after that it was the *desire* to change. The first state, it takes a long time. Could be months, could be a year. It took me maybe two to three years to really transform my whole life.

After that I started to build my own value in life. I figured out what the quality of life is about; it's helping other people. How I've been involved with the community and [to] promote my happiness in life. How it's helped me succeed as a person—to figure out what's best for me—not just to maintain and survive.

*'I thought I had all the answers.'*

Right now, I'm very active in the community and help others. Those are the things that I'm doing at this moment. I want to focus on education and giving back to the community. To make change, we must work with the youth. That's when my trouble started, when I was young. The lack of thinking: I thought I knew everything, I thought I had all the answers. At that time I was so curious about the world and I wanted to experience things. But in reality, my state of mind and way of thinking wasn't stable. I'd react to a lot of things and not think. That caused me a lot of trouble.

My advice to the youth? The way you think can predict the future for you. It's not like you change your way of thinking quickly. I think the most important thing is [that] you have to find value in life, the thing that promotes a quality of life. Even though some of you will have no education or maybe a lack of resources or support from the community or the family. Don't look at it as a challenge but look at it as an opportunity—for you. How do you make the best out of your life? It's up to you, it's in your hands. The more that you promote your quality of life, the better for building the things that are important to you.

If you don't, maybe you can look at all the role models out there. I'm not talking about the gang leader, other gang members or somebody you think can change the world by doing harm to the community. No, I'm talking about the people that use their leadership as a positive role model; somebody that can change life in the community, promote the value of the community.

I know that a lot of people in the community think that people impacted by the [prison] system commit another horrible crime. I did commit a horrible crime. However, we're human beings; we admit we're not perfect and we make a lot of mistakes in life. [But] it's not that people wake up one day and commit a crime. This is something that we're exposed to in the environment. It takes a long path to get to where we are and we make a lot of mistakes because we don't have all the resources we need. We don't have a lot of support from our families and the community and the people that we hang out with. Probably they have the lack of knowledge and education just like us. That's why we become who we became.

*'People are changing all the time.'*

I don't want to say that the government let me down. They don't know anything about my life. I just hope that they can look at us as somebody impacted by the system and not somebody that harms this system in an evil way. They should know that people are changing all the time; it's not that everybody stays the same. A lot of people change and turn their lives around. Nobody stays the same from a young age, we get older and older. We change and our way of thinking changes and our body changes.

The thing that matters the most is, how do we learn from that? How do we make it better? How do we make it useful in the way that promotes life in other people? I want them to look at us as changing human beings. I'm hoping they can change the policy [to be] a little bit more flexible with the people impacted by the system...to lead with compassion. As a system-impacted person today, I want to use my story, to share with other people what I've been through. Hopefully my story can help other people, especially youth or people struggling with life, to see the pathway on their own and overcome that.



## Amanda Perez

My name is Amanda Perez, I was born and raised in East Los Angeles in a family of seven. Growing up, I witnessed family, environment, mental, physical and emotional violence. Starting with my father, who was abusive and an alcoholic, he always managed to work and put food on the table. Mom was the homemaker and a domestic worker, a member of a Union. My mother was soft spoken where my father was strict and harsh.

When you have five siblings and you're barely making ends meet, there's plenty of pressure, mainly fights about money. Down the line, I understood why so much violence in the home occurred. We lived in the projects and violence was the norm. I [also] lived in juvenile hall most of my young life and again was exposed to violence. Eventually my mother left the home because of the abuse and we'd be there to pretty much navigate for ourselves with our father. As the second oldest, I was the one who'd get abused as well as my youngest sister. It was [the] worst whenever he had a hangover, until I was strong enough to defend myself.

In those days, hitchhiking and running away was common. By age 10, I ran away several times. When I was 11 yrs old, I left home totally. I used drugs since [being] 11 years old, many times. When you're hungry or cold or emotionally injured or just want to feel good, you do what you need to do. I chose to use drugs and at times drink. Eventually I did become addicted.

*'Why would you put yourself in harm's way?'*

Well, when you don't have what you need, all you know is that you must survive one way or another. It's a mindset. "If it's going to make you feel good, you're going to do it." As in my situation, I was a risk taker and suffered behind it. I've witnessed rapes with friends and was a victim of rape/kidnap, violence with guns. I've jumped out of cars, buildings, been sold, sold drugs, arrested, gang violence, victim of so much trauma and I'm fortunate to talk about it.

*'I witnessed two martial laws.'*

In my lifetime, I witnessed two martial laws. Watts riots, I was about seven,eight years of age. If you lived in the projects, it was traumatizing during

the Watts riots, as young as we were, we understood racism. It was very clear to us that if you were a different color, things were not going to be the same. When you see military in your streets, you're traumatized. I wondered "Why are they here?" It didn't make sense. It was a sad moment. Many people got injured.

*'Xicana/o Power.'*

I was [also] there at the Xicana/o Moratorium. Again, martial law. It was trying times, because they had the Vietnam War and we'd already seen friends of ours being drafted that never came back from the war. I understood how many of our people were slaughtered...put on the front lines. During the Xicana/o Moratorium, I learned why my mother would bow her head down every time she'd see white people—only white—not African-Americans, not Asians. I remember watching her walk with her head down. It bothered me because I couldn't understand then why she did that. Later I understood it was her upbringing in the racist state [of] Texas, especially in those days where there were signs that read: No Blacks or Mexicans allowed. One time when I was on probation and had Caucasian probation officers, she'd put her head down [too] and I'd tell her not to, "Mom, don't bow down." She couldn't help herself, her trauma was deeply seeded. My mother was a union member, she took me to a union town-hall [meeting]. I remember one time she stood up and spoke out. I tried to pull her down to sit. "No, don't say nothing. Stay quiet." But she continued to speak, before long people were clapping. I felt so proud of her and I believe I found my voice as well.

Growing up in East Los Angeles in turbulent times, I recall hearing our gente say: "Be Proud and Brown!" The slogan, "Brown Power!" I was probably about 13 and we started using the slogan, "Xicana/o Power." For us, it meant the world for a young person that people would not even take the time to listen or talk to us...we had a voice. Our schools lacked material too. All they would teach you was sewing and mechanics. That was what you're supposed to become. I dropped out of seventh grade. I had to learn for myself and be self-taught to survive. After the Vietnam War, the nation began to pay more attention to the people because of the uprisings that took place around the country, which meant young people like myself had an opportunity to become educated whether through vocational or educational.

*'I wanted to do something with my life.'*

By 15, I was tired of going in and out of jail, tired of running around wild. I wanted to do something with my life. I did not know I was pregnant. I was young, I was afraid. I went to speak about this to my probation officer, Mrs. P., African American.[She] listened to me and said, "Amanda, you can do anything you want. I'm going to put you in the Peace Corps." For me, that was something that I'd never heard of. *A program that would help me become or do or be something? How can that be possible?* One day, she told me, "Amanda, I'm going to get you some clothes from the state." It was by using a clothing voucher. I remember driving from the probation office here in East LA to just around the block into Monterey Park and I was blown away. I said, "Wait a minute, that's right down my street...how could that be?" I'd never noticed before that the streets were different, the environment was totally different. *How could that be?* It was segregated. I had never noticed environmental trauma.

She took me into a department store, JCPenney's. She walked in with me, a little gangster girl. She said to me, "Go get yourself some clothes." When she paid with the voucher, a Caucasian woman refused to accept the state voucher. That officer did so eloquently say "Let me speak to your supervisor." The supervisor spoke to her and was so apologetic. I thought, *wow, this is marvelous! This is great! She negotiated. We got what we needed.* Then she said, "Amanda, the power of the pen is mightier than the sword." I never forgot that. She taught me something that helped me through the years to come. No screaming, [no] cursing, not even facial gestures that would take her power away, just by speaking properly and using the proper vocabulary.

*'I married at 16.'*

My parents found out that I was pregnant and they said, "Oh no, you're getting married." So, I married at 16. Had my daughter. I was so happy that I did have her. Things didn't work out for me and her dad. We remained good friends. While I was pregnant, we moved to Whittier, CA. It was a former Quaker town. I was probably the second family of color on our block, at least that's how it felt. Predominantly Caucasian community. It was very segregated; racism was definitely deep. My daughter, however, had blue eyes and blonde hair; she was

half-Irish from her Dad's side. I looked like her nanny. Doors would open... I'd be able to sit and get served. I didn't mind at all, but those were the rules that I had to play [by]. Part of it was not to take it serious. I had been in harder places that taught me that it wasn't as bad as I thought it to be. At that age, it was a way of coping per se.

I had three amazing children. Each one was very special and loved. Each had their own father and they were good fathers. They pretty much took care of them due to my addictions, except the youngest baby daughter. Along my journeys, everything was a learning process, even when violence was part of it. I have four grown children and their spouses, 13 beautiful grandchildren and a great grandchild soon to come.

*'The addiction consumed me.'*

I couldn't stop. I tried, but I couldn't stop. The addiction eventually consumed me. I had to make a choice. I couldn't stop using drugs. I knew I wasn't going to bring my children with me. I'd rather hurt or die than take them with me. There weren't services at the time for recovery and mothers... . The best thing for me to seek out was jail. When I went to jail, I'd clean up. Mother was always there. She'd always reach out and say, "You can change. You can make something out of your life." Eventually, those words did come through but it took such a long time and more trauma, more pain, not only for myself but [for] my children [who] suffered as well. And, I paid for every bit of it. That was a debt that I did owe.

*'I didn't know how to be a mother.'*

[In] 1991, after I got out of prison, my prayer was *I need my children. I'm going to get my children back. I don't know how, but I'm going to do it.* They were already teenagers; my oldest daughter was in her '20s, on her own working. I didn't know how to be a mother but I learned. Higher education was mandated. I went through parenting classes. I went to school, I got certified, I worked and I raised my boys the best I could. A single mom attempting to do what was right.

All of them are married now. All of them have children. They are the best parents anybody can be blessed with. I look at them and I say to myself, *I must*

*have done something right finally. But it was a lot of hard work to be a mom. It takes consistency.* The easy way for me would have been to walk away, go back to what I'm familiar with. But I promised my mom that I was going to do it *for me*, my children and her. She got to see me clean. She crossed over and I began walking a spiritual life that helped me navigate healing and forgiveness and [make] amends that was crucial to one's healing. To this day I am a very grateful human being.

*'Giving back is a journey not made for wimps.'*

Living continuously in trauma, you don't have much confidence in yourself, let alone a system that could care less about you. Having to learn how to navigate a system that is set for you to fail. To be able to step behind that and say, *I'm going to do it, I don't care what they tell me*, that self determination is the most powerful tool, for me at least. I've advocated for so many. It's not about money, it's about saving a life. One life brings many more. I found my voice and say, *don't give up, keep pushing forward.*

I had to put into practice what I did for myself. I started a nonprofit organization that focused on moving forward, *Adelante*, in 2003. We worked with former prisoners, advocating for fathers to get their children. Some did get their children back, some are still raising them and others did not. I'd tell them, *The power of the pen is mightier than the sword.* Write it down, document, study, go back to school. Go this way, go that way... . Good mentors are always needed. If I hadn't had good mentors, I would have lost my children, as well as myself.

I always say, *If you're going to teach somebody, truly want to be effective, it is to have someone with the same commonality.* Not to dismiss a professor, or someone with a PhD, but how much more effective a former prisoner with a PhD. I'm going to listen to that person, because they know where I'm coming from. It's very simple. It doesn't take a scientist to figure that out.

In 2003, we brought down recidivism in Huntington Park in the parole office. We started what they call an orientation. As soon as they'd [a former prisoner] get out, we'd hold a meeting. Once a month, they'd get clothes, a food voucher. They'd get mentorship and services. I want to say there were maybe nine service providers, all of that in a little hub in Huntington Park. But a lot of them couldn't meet the requirements for domestic violence prevention or

anger management or whatever. We were former prisoners and a security risk even though we were off parole. The state heard about that and they shut it down. It was horrible. I was the only one left standing. That was for me, the saddest, saddest day. That's when I started *Adelante*.

*'Those kids wanted to go to college.'*

What we did out of Cal State is put out a call out for anybody who wants to attend the university. Anybody. I'd work with them for about a year, prep them for the testing. We got about maybe 80 to 100 kids from all over. A lot of those kids wanted to go to college, wanted to change their lives, do something special. This was in '90-something. They told us that we could not get them off the California gang database, because it would contaminate the database. We wanted students de-listed; they wanted to get off parole.

At that time a few of us sat at a table with law enforcement, the captains. It took us maybe two months to do the work. They did get one person out...that was my son. He was the only one out of all those kids who had no contact with police at all; he met all the criteria. I heard it's changed but [back] then we had to really fight hard to try to keep those kids in school. Some of them made it. A lot of them didn't. But those are the things that kept me pushing.

*'A broken system can be repaired.'*

I want to say there's been a lot of change; a broken system can be repaired. Sometimes you have to keep doing what you have to do, just keep working at the back end, to make it work. These little souls really want to make it. Sometimes there's just not enough programs to help them through, unfortunately.

Policymakers need to not be afraid to go inside the communities and listen to the people if you really want to change a broken system. So many people think they're going to lose their job by taking a risk. No, there are so many ways you can touch a young person, even an older person, by giving them an opportunity for change. I'd like to see policy makers take the youth, boys and girls into consideration and really hear them out, if you're going to put [in place] a policy that's going to be effective for them, their future, or the next generation. A lot of these policies are so cut and dry non-effective and still

producing high recidivism. There are effective ways to bring recidivism down by working together and listening not only to the faith based, nonprofits but the people themselves. The parents and the kids...this whole core group of people have so much to give if you would hear them out.

*'The mothers have a voice and nobody's listening.'*

Elders and mothers, fathers, gatekeepers that have a voice and nobody's listening. I feel like there are so many wonderful people out there that have been effective and can make a difference, if they have an opportunity to sit at a table and are given respect and that ear. Not only to hear but to become a stakeholder in the process.

You'll see a lot of men in the [violence] prevention [field]. That doesn't mean that women can't do it. There are so many other women out there that aren't given an opportunity to be heard.

Money is another [factor]. I've always made it a point not to chase the money. It helps and it keeps you limited if you don't have it, but it shouldn't dictate who you are.

*'Art and music can resonate.'*

Another way change happens is through art and music. If it wasn't for music and art in my life, I wouldn't be the person I am today. It is a positive coping tool. Art and music...they're hand in hand. I have to give props to music and art because they're the most beautiful thing in the world. [It is] amazing how both cross all barriers and boundaries. It doesn't matter if you're Chinese, Black, Brown...it resonates. If it's meaningful, it'll resonate.



## Anonymous

I'm a resident of Long Beach, California for 26 years originally from Detroit, Michigan. I identify as a female. I never came out because I never was male... you know what I mean? I was always hyper-effeminate. I don't identify as transgender.

In 1994, I was a street worker. They call it "survival sex" now. I was heavy into a cross-addiction to crack cocaine and heroin. I've done recovery with substances and also sex recovery from being hypersexual.

*'I just played dead.'*

Somewhere in July of '94, I had an encounter with a young man who I'd known for almost a year. He was a drug dealer. He was a really young guy [that] I became intimately involved with. I never disclosed my personal business to him; I just assumed that he knew me. Everyone in that clique knew me; I'd known them all for years. When he haphazardly found out, he tried to mug me. One-on-one, he tried to fight me, him on me.

I thought I had the best of him, but before I knew it, there were four or five [guys] that came out of nowhere. They threw me [down], they beat me. They tied a rope around my feet and the other end of the rope at the back of a car and drove speeding down an alley, dragging me behind. They tied me to a tree, stripped my top off and burnt my breasts. I'd been up for maybe nine days prior to that, with the heroin and the drugs...[so] I played dead. I remember them checking my pulse to see if I was still alive, so I just kept playing dead.

Ultimately, they threw me behind a garbage dumpster where someone had gotten evicted. There was a couch and sofa there. They put the sofa on top of me and where the city had trimmed the trees, they took all of the shrubbery and put that on top of the couch. So, there I was. When I came to, I remembered it felt like somebody was laying on top of me...really, really heavy. I managed to push it off. I learned later it was the sofa. I stood up [and] all the shrubbery and everything fell off of me. I'm like, *oh, God. Where am I? Where am I?*

One of my friends who was also a sex worker and a dope fiend like me, came through the alley and screamed "What happened?" I was like, "I need help." She ran one way and I kept going toward the lights. I collapsed at an

adult bookstore that was right around the corner from where they left me. The police came and took me to the emergency room.

I remember the doctor was very caring. She kept coming every 15 minutes for the whole 24 hours. She kept asking me my name, the date, what was my mother's name, who was the president... everything. I had to see a burn specialist because my left breast was completely burned. A few weeks after I went to the burn specialist for the last time, I went home.

On August 1, 1994, my grandmother picked me up and asked me if I wanted to go with her. I didn't know where she was going. I said, *okay*. We ended up at the airport. She handed me a ticket and said, "Your mother's waiting in California for you." What could I do? I got on the plane and came here to Long Beach. My mother and my brother picked me up.

I still didn't have enough of the drugs and the sex work—I was addicted to sex. I didn't learn that until after recovery. In October '95, in prison, I received an AIDS diagnosis. My CD-4 [T-cell count] at that time was 100. My viral load was almost 100,000. The doctor told me, "I'm going to recommend we put you on medicine." From that date to this one, my life has changed.

*'God intervened in my life.'*

I did two years in prison for possession of cocaine. When I got out, I went to a drug treatment center and entered their transitional living [program]. One of the stipulations of living there was that you had to live sober, you couldn't do anything. They did random [drug] testing. This was really, really something new. I'm going to say, *"God intervened in my life."*

I got into the Twelve Steps of recovery, which is when I learned about the disease of addiction that I suffered from. That led me to get connected with healthcare providers to learn about AIDS. I've transitioned. I've had a few jobs that enabled me to get a better understanding and concept of who I was and the part that I played in every situation that happened to me, which is part of self-acceptance. That's what they talk about.

*'If you want something different, do different.'*

I didn't really know what I wanted; I was done with what I'd been doing. They tell me if you want something different, do something different. That's been my

motto since December 12, 1997. I just keep doing something different and God keeps stepping in and says: *If you do your best, I'll do the rest.*

I started connecting with peer educators, treatment advocates and one thing led to another. I've had a bunch of jobs. Eventually, I became a peer treatment advocate, working for an HIV advocacy project for a long time, doing risk and harm reduction alternatives for cisgender women and trans women in different treatment centers throughout Los Angeles County. I started as a community health worker for a reentry program. It's to assist anyone with a history of incarceration to acclimate back into society, to plug them into any resource that's available to alleviate the barriers that would otherwise stop people. I know how challenging it can be to try to get out of prison. I work with a bunch of amazing people. I'm also part of a transgender health program. It's wonderful being in a position to help other people coming out to acclimate back into life.

*'Hire more trans people.'*

A lot of agencies say that they are LGBT-friendly or inclusive. When you get there, you see the L (lesbian) and the G (gay) and possibly the B (bisexual) but you rarely see the T (transgender). If you are inclusive to trans-identified people, we need to say *representation*. The first thing I'd say to policy makers is to hire more trans people, because we're here. Make us more visible, because we're here. This isn't something that just started. When other trans-identified people see people like me...now working in the workforce, being productive... that gives us something to aspire to, other than what you see depicted in movies. In movies, we're always a prostitute, a dope user...it's always something negative and contrary, as opposed to productive and positive.

*'You are not a mistake.'*

My whole get-down, if you will, is empowerment: to be proud of who you are. My ideal is to empower other women like myself to be proud, to stand tall in who you are, to disclose who you are. You talk about Black Lives Matter. Black *Trans* Lives Matter. We all know, without a doubt, that the people who are killing Black trans women are Black men. I don't have to tell him my HIV status, but I can tell him I wasn't born physically female and then let him decide if he

wants to go further. My philosophy is, *who am I to deny a man the right of choice?* When you don't tell them, like I told you in my past, it can harm you. *Disclose.*

I would also encourage empowerment: you are who you are...you're not a mistake. God made me this way because that was how He saw fit. I'm proud to say that I'm an African-American woman living a transgender experience. Does that make sense? My biggest plight, coming up and coming out, was to make the outside match the inside—to remove the *M* (male) from my ID to an *F* (female). I did that.

*'Transgender women do recover.'*

I say to providers at these agencies, let the world know transgender women *do* recover. We *do* become productive members of society. At 59 years old... Jesus Christ...I never thought that I'd have the kind of life that I'm engaging in now and it's absolutely wonderful. I spoke with my dad a couple of weeks ago. I'm 59 and my dad has never told me that he's proud of me. My dad and I have always had an estranged type of relationship because of my lifestyle choices. Two weeks ago, he said, "I am so proud of you." I started crying. I'm getting worked up now. Thank God for my mother. God rest her soul, she never, ever, ever set me to the side. She was my number one supporter. I always say, after I got sober, she was my biggest enabler as well. Thank God for my mom.

*'I'm one who got away.'*

I think of all the trans women that get killed. We did our presentation on [the] Transgender Day of Remembrance. I participated in the planning committee this year because I feel like I'm one who got away. *I got away*. They left me for dead, but God had a different plan. It's so interesting that those four guys are doing life in prison without the possibility of parole. Karma does not discriminate.

It's been a really long haul, but I thank God every day that I wake up, instead of coming to. That I go to sleep instead of passing out. You know? That I can get up and do things that I couldn't do in my addiction, like wash my face and brush my teeth. Simple things that we so often take for granted. Now life has been very, very rewarding.

## Bryan Magana

I was raised by a single mom, alone with her and my sister. We always lived in LA. She was really strict and always at work, but she wanted the best for us. I used to think her discipline was heavy handed and outdated considering I didn't do too badly at school. Even though I was above average, she always wanted more—the best and higher from me. Being the only male, I couldn't slack off. I felt I had a role to fill. Frustrated, I'd go at it with her. I started leaving my house at the age of 13-14 and take off. I've always been an artist, drawing since I was a kid, so to me, it was about exploring, adventure and learning. You learn from everything. I've always been curious.

My family didn't have strong family ties to culture and traditions, even on the Mexican side. My parents always fought. I guess my mom's brothers and sisters were upset with her for leaving at 23. She was the second oldest and left her younger brothers and sisters behind. They were upset that she always worked and did good for herself. Supposedly you're going to learn unity and understanding from your family, whether you want to or not. My grandma would say that children are like empty glasses of cups. They're going to get filled up with something, good or bad.

We lived in Bell Gardens and in the '90s, there was a lot of gang violence. There were drugs, violence. I was a little boy inside the restaurant looking out the window. I would get sent blocks down the street to the market to buy stuff and I would see these people during the day and think about how I'm going to deal with them when I get older. I was worried about how I would protect myself, my mom and sister's interests too. They'd have us lock the doors once the sun went down because we thought all the wild people would start coming out and fill the streets.

Every time we moved, my mom would try to send me to a better school, even though we still lived in the ghetto areas, full of gangs and violence. I couldn't escape it as a kid; I accepted this was the structure of things. When I started leaving my house at 14, I ended up in juvenile (detention) a lot up until I was 18, when I was sent to prison, once.

*'She was the product of parents that were gang members.'*

I went to the streets to run and rebel. At the age of 18, I met someone. She was

very pretty and very smart. I thought, *this is the girl I want to be with*. She was a little more street savvy than me. She was the product of parents that were gang members and drug addicts and the other stuff that goes with that. Meanwhile, I was a product of a parent that was too disciplined. The runaway teenager that was hanging out with people like her parents. She hated those kinds of people because her parents didn't look out for her as well as they should have. They were unable to create a home for her and they exposed her to a lot of things. She parented them; she bossed around her mom and had responsibility to care for her little brothers and sisters. Her mom had a few children from different men.

We had a strong attraction to each other. But she was underage and it would have been statutory rape. Then I was turning 19 and she was turning 18. As we became more involved, I could see that she was worried about her family and little brothers and sisters, while at the same time making plans with me. Life wasn't going the way she made it seem. It started to get bad pretty fast. She was always acting differently behind closed doors. In front of people, she'd be super nice and so lovable—even exaggerated. Behind closed doors, anything would set her off and she'd want to get physical with me, which was new to me. I didn't understand that. I thought that any woman would want to have a good man *knowing how many Mexicans wouldn't stick around*. If she had a good man, maybe she wouldn't have to suffer or go through so much. I wanted to be good, because I felt like that's what my mom needed. As far as relationships, I'm the type of person that if I get into a relationship, I'm just going to deal with that person. (But) she thought I was flirting and became very insecure. Every time I talked to anybody about anything, she thought I was doing something or cheating.

*'She'd get violent behind closed doors.'*

I'd moved in with her and her family. It seemed like she got total control of me there. When she acted up at her family's house, I felt insecure being in another person's family and they were all in gangs. After the first year, I even tried to leave and was trying to get my own place. When I went down to grab my bags, she socked me in the face, out of nowhere. She talked and fought like a man. She'd physically attack me. I didn't know how to deal with that. I forced my way out and got in my car and went down the block. She comes out and says she

wants to talk. Once she got in the car, she got violent again. And that was her way; she'd always get violent behind closed doors.

I went back home and called my first ex and told her, "You know what? I just want to be there for my daughter, you know? Can we be friends and talk?" Later on that week, she knocks on my door while my first ex was visiting. She told me she was pregnant. I was trying to break up with her because she's crazy and violent and she's probably going to want to fight every time I leave the toilet seat up or something. This went on for years, breaking up and getting back together; it was just a roller coaster. I couldn't stay away from her because she had my kid and eventually ended up with another.

During the times we weren't together, she'd take my child and move in with her mom even though it was that kind of environment that she'd been complaining to me about. Yet when she had me to herself, she'd turn things into that very same environment on her own. We ended up having three kids, every three years. And we went through everything...social services...police...you name it...so many different situations.

I decided eventually that even if she had my kids, I had to do what was necessary to get myself on my own two feet, so that if my kids ever got taken away from her, they would have somewhere to land. Sure enough, that's what happened. For the first half of my children's lives, we'd break up on and off, but the kids stayed with her. She fought me in front of the kids. She brainwashed them, manipulated them and, it turns out, physically hit them with a stick to get them to doubt me, hate me, not want to be around me. She played games with our visits. When things wouldn't go right, she'd blame it on me and tell the kids all kinds of stuff. When things would go right, she took all the credit.

We were only able to live with each other for about a year-and-a-half and then we'd split up for about year, a year-and-a-half. Every three years, we had a child. We had the first boy, then a second boy. When I gave her a chance and got back with her again with the second son, it got uglier. I'd already taken her to family court and had custody of the kids. She got social services involved to take away the kids from me.

My kids were confused. The first one is B. Jr. He never took her side, but stayed in the middle; he just didn't react. My second son was really just like her. I guess they don't want to not believe her. That means abandoning their mom and they don't want to abandon her.

At court in children's services, she'd start crying on the stand like it was

me doing the violent stuff to her. She was the defendant in court. She even showed a picture of herself when she had our first child, which was her with a busted eye vessel from the labor. She said that I'd thrown something and it hit her in the eye. But that picture was from when she had just delivered my son. I remember the doctor even said it. She was a master manipulator and master liar.

It got to the point where I even called the police. They ended up seeing a pattern of her calling them and her calls to social services. They even arrested her a couple of times. They arrested me, too, because they were seeing it as mutual combat. In my case, I was always getting her off of me. With her, it was like she would get frustrated and want to just attack me. After we'd gone through that up to my second son, I gave her one more chance. That's when we ended up pregnant with my daughter, my baby. At that point, I said to myself, *I need to cut this off*. I ended up not being there for my daughter's birth and didn't see my daughter until she started walking because she (mom) played a lot of games with visitation. I said to myself that the only way for me to be there for the children was to take her to court and I did.

*'She blamed everything on me.'*

I started establishing my time with the kids through the court. I educated myself and figured out how to advocate either with the law, children's services, classes. I've been doing AA classes for a long time. When we went to court, she blamed everything on me, thinking that I wasn't going to say anything to defend myself because I'd been involved with gangs and when you're involved with gangs, you're not supposed to talk. She knew how to play both sides. She learned to talk to social services as a youth taken away from her mom. She knew how to play the victim role.

I felt that as long as I was there for my kids half the time, they would at least be all right, because what I understood is that, as long as you have one good parent, the child will learn. That was my aim, my focus. Right before I got 50/50 custody, she managed to use my middle child to get me arrested. I had to go to court. The judge gave me parenting classes. I had two positive progress reports by the time we went to family court. I began with 50/50 custody and moved up. It was really hard because I had a 15-year-old that was a freshman and the two little ones.

*'My daughter had bruises on her body.'*

Right after I got 50/50 custody, I noticed bruises on my daughter's body, five bruises this big, like a 50-cent piece, in a pattern. It did not look right. Her brother jumped in and said, "Oh, she fell off her bike." I thought to myself, *that's not right*. My daughter was nine years old at the time. Mom said it was okay for her to stay over. As I'm washing clothes she tells me, "Dad, I need to talk to you." She began to tell me all the details of how her mom had been hitting her with a stick and that's how she had those five bruises on her arm, trying to cover her behind. I told her, "We have to tell somebody so that someone can keep an eye on her so that she doesn't do this again on your next visit. But for now, you don't have to go back. You're going to stay with me and little by little, you're going to start visiting her again."

We went to the police station and at first, they didn't want to believe me. Even at court, they were like, "How do we know you're not making this up?" I said, "Sir, I know I've been to jail one time, but I'm the only person in my family that has ever been to jail. My family does not have a criminal history and I've never been taken away from my mom. Please look at our record." I told him I do have a family case but I have 50/50 custody. "Look up my family's history and her parents' history and their social services history. It will all be right there. You guys are the police, you guys should be knowing this already. I'm just telling you what my child told me. She's right here in the car."

The officer started talking to my daughter. He came back surprised, with big eyes. He said, "You know what? She told me a lot more things than you did. Other incidents. We got to do something about it." They took pictures of her bruises and arrested the mom. She was in jail for a couple of weeks, then bailed out and fought her child abuse case for two years, until she came to some kind of agreement. She didn't see the kids for two years. Even after she was convicted, she pleaded guilty to a lesser charge.

*'Traditionally, the system is looking at men not doing things right.'*

I keep meticulous journals. I have dates: whenever it came to me having a visit, whenever I am picking them up, or whatever. I was always there on time, early, with backup plans. I had everything set up. I knew that was how it had to be. Traditionally the system is looking at the men not doing things right. If I was

going to have to show that I was responsible and she wasn't, well, then I was going to have to show that I was super responsible. That's what I did. That's how I did it.

She still didn't really see the kids; she even left the state, but kept calling social services and the police to come to my house, even though she was the abusive one. She still gets the kids.

My advice to someone in a similar situation is for them to get away. You have to cut off full communication with that person. You have to literally pry yourself and no matter how much you doubt your own thinking, how low your self-esteem, how much ugly or bad you feel about yourself...it doesn't matter. You do not have to put up with someone that's using and abusing you, manipulating you, or taking advantage of you in any way. Once you give them a little bit of what they want, they'll discard you and they'll start gaslighting you. They'll throw you away and devalue you again. It messes with your own thinking inside and you second guess yourself. You give them the benefit of the doubt, then you're giving them back the control.

I realized that once I cut her off completely. She tried to do all these things to try to get me back and I wouldn't give in.

To policy makers, I say listen to more stories and then find a pattern and see if there are policies that address these issues. In my case, social services would say, "well, we keep getting the calls, but there's no evidence (of violence by dad). Your kids don't seem to be afraid of you. We're looking at you through the cameras and your kids are all over you, hugging and sitting on your lap and stuff. So, it doesn't make sense."

If only they looked up her mom's name and her dad's name, they would have got the whole story. She's a product of the gangs and the drugs from the '70s, '80s and '90s. She's a child of the gang members that were drug addicts who lost their kids.

The street is the street and I'm not going to bring the street to my house. I'm not going to let myself lose my morals, my values and my principles. I may be in the street because I wanted to know what's up with the street, but I'm going to protect my heart and home.



## Pamela Crenshaw

I am Pamela Crenshaw. I was born in Long Beach. I got married very young and raised my children in Cerritos. I live in permanent supportive housing in Hollywood. I've been here almost 13 years, in a studio. I always say 'housewife to homeless' and kind of like *the Orange County housewife with two kids and a nice house*. I was in and out of domestic violence relationships. I had a lot of physical damage done to me.

*'I never really thought control was part of the abuse.'*

I'm an only child. My real father, who I had never met, was an alcoholic. My mother was a square. She was the good Christian woman. I love her. She passed away.

When I was young, I kind of looked like a model. I look back at the pictures and I'm like, *oh my God. I wish I could look like that now*. When I was in 11th grade, I became pregnant with my son and got married. By the time I was 18, I had two kids and no formal education. I had very low self-esteem even though I was very pretty and always very smart in an artistic way. He got on the fire department and made a lot of money. We lived a very nice lifestyle. We traveled the United States and had a great life in that respect, but then the violence started. He had a horrible jealousy.

He started becoming very physically and verbally abusive. It wasn't every day. I had [a] broken tailbone, black eyes...but I was afraid of financial insecurity. I stayed and endured the abuse and jealousy. I never really looked back and thought that control was actually a part of abuse and it is. He was accusing me when I wasn't doing anything [but] he was cheating on me and that's abuse in my book, too. I couldn't do much. This went on for almost 14 years.

*'I started drinking because I was so scared.'*

There was a point when he'd threatened to kill me if I divorced him or if he saw another man in my house. I started drinking because I was so scared. I'd taken some courses in college [and] wanted to be an interior designer. I worked at a women's health club as an aerobics instructor. I have the decorating and personal trainer thing, but I couldn't do anything with it because he was so

controlling. When I did get up the nerve to leave, I wasn't really prepared mentally or financially. But he had another woman in his car... . I moved into the condo and got a job as a sales rep.

It was very rough, very scary, very emotional. We sold the house and my husband was pretty much still in control. He gave me some money. I kept the condo—we had a rental—and the car. We had joint custody. I think my kids were 10 and 12 or 12 and 14. It was very emotionally draining to have two children.

I'm very creative and I got to do classes and expand my creativity with crafts and different things. As far as getting out there to get a job, I wasn't prepared to go out into the world, but I did, as a sales rep. I had all intentions of being a good mom. I had been drinking a lot to kill the pain. I had an eating disorder that I covered up for so long. It started off as anorexic [then] I was bulimic.

*'We call it the 'Jenny Crack' diet.'*

I lived in the condo for a while and ended up getting married to the next husband. He wasn't really abusive. The drinking was bad, but then started years of drug addiction. I was in beauty college, doing nails. I met this girl. She gave me some cocaine—a little line of powder cocaine—and it made me not eat. I found the magic. We call it the 'Jenny Crack' diet. I got addicted to cocaine. That's where my downfall really was.

At that time, I'd sent the kids to live with their father because I didn't want to drag them through the system. My kids have never been to court. I figured they had a better chance with him than they did with me. And they did. Their dad was very wealthy and I wanted them to have a good education. We raised our kids in Cerritos, which was a great school district.

*'They called me Skid Row Barbie.'*

The only time I ever went to Los Angeles was to buy gold. I was selling gold to the firefighters' wives—necklaces and charms. I'd go to the jewelry district, buy my items and sell them. I'd take the kids to have lunch or dinner at their dad's fire station in Los Angeles. I was living in Cerritos at the time, but we did a lot of luncheons on the Queen Mary and the Princess Louise and fashion shows

and different things. I'd moved back home after my second divorce.

I never had heard of Skid Row; I had no clue what it was. I got in trouble for something you don't get in trouble for anymore, a little dime rock of cocaine. I got on probation. I never had a record. I went to jail for a few days, which was very embarrassing to my family. My kids took my mom to live with them. My mother was always helping me. I was in her house and it was bad...it was really bad. One day I got a phone call and a guy said, "Why don't you come up here? Out here in Skid Row." I did. I went to the detox center in LA. It was a treatment center.

After that, they didn't have anywhere for me to go. I kind of wandered. I had unemployment, so I had a bit of money and a little left from the sale of my condo. I ended up going back to the detox facility. I stayed there nine months. My counselor loved me. They called me Skid Row Barbie because I knew how to go get clothes and [was] kind of bougie. So here I am [being] bougie in Skid Row. We'd go to the store and get clothes. I wore a size two. I got all the good stuff...myself and another lady named Pam. We made it fun. Everything I do, I try to make it fun and bring humor and laughter into the situation.

After that, I relapsed again. There was no harm reduction back then. You did two dirty tests, you're out. They packed my bags. That's when I became homeless. I was in a domestic violence relationship there, too. And of course, I got married again...I had this thing about needing to marry. I felt bad living together.

*'He hit me so hard so many times.'*

My husband was really a nice guy when he wasn't high. He was a former child actor, very talented. I met him in rehab. We had some fun times, but most of them weren't good. He abused me so bad. He hit me so hard so many times [that] I had to get brain scans to make sure I didn't have any tumors. But when you're in that drug situation and you're out there and you're used to having a family and a home and now no one's around... I kind of latched onto him.

So, we're homeless. Of course, he cheated on me and did a lot of bad things. I came out to West Hollywood. I'm now living in a studio down the street from where I used to sleep. We used to recycle cans and bottles. He taught me how to do that. That led me down further. He got picked up on a warrant for not reporting and I was by myself, very scared. I needed to get some help. I went to

mental health services in Los Angeles and saw a sign for a shelter. I called them and got into a shelter. They helped me. I had a cell phone. I got an apartment in downtown LA and I was able to stay there for about three years.

*'It'll be 15 years clean and sober in March.'*

I got evicted for something I didn't do. I got kicked out, but it was the best thing that ever happened to me. I started recycling to get some money. I had to pay for a room at the shelter, because it was \$15 a night.

I knew I was done. I'm a Christian. I got on my knees and prayed to God. I said, "I can't do this anymore. The addiction's bigger than me, but you're not. Can you please help me?" I haven't used since. I got sober the next day. March 18, 2006 was my last drink and my last hit of cocaine. It'll be 15 years clean and sober in March.

I decided to spend the time to get my family back, which would've been icing on the cake. I prayed. I said, "God, you know what? I want to live right." All I ever really wanted in my life was what they call the American Dream... a husband that loved me, that didn't cheat on me... with a nice house and to raise my kids. I never got that. I had to go the hard route but I learned a lot along the way.

I went back to college. I got into a sober living place. My mom helped me at the time [and] I did what I needed to do. Then my mother came down with terminal cancer. I was able to take care of her sober and that's when the mending started. My daughter's 48. My son's 50. I'm 67. I don't feel that age at all. I guess because I grew up with my kids.

*'I've come full circle.'*

[At the shelter] I was treated very badly by a couple of the staff. They didn't like me; they don't like smart people. I really experienced reverse racism. I did have a couple people that God put in my life that really helped me. I got my housing here in Hollywood. I went back to work with a casting agency, doing background work. From there, one thing led to another. I started doing some audience work and I really had a blast. I met a lot of wonderful people.

One of my friends lived next door to me. I was on my way to a show at the Gower Studios two blocks away and he said, "Why don't you come by? It's

my birthday. Just see the apartment.” I think I brought him a little something. I stopped by and said, *this is where I’m going to live*. It was amazing because I used to recycle and live in a parking lot right down the street from where I actually have my apartment. He’s still here, I’m still here. Talk about a full circle. It’s been a blessing.

*‘I’m using my voice to try to help others.’*

I got hurt in 2013 from an old injury. I got sepsis and almost died. I think that’s one of the reasons I’m here. I ended up losing my knee after a few years and they had to put a new one in. I had back-to-back surgeries after the illness. My counselor at the time asked if I wanted to go through an advocacy program. That was 2015. I got hooked up with the program for a year and I’m still with the tenants’ rights group.

After, she asked me if I’d like to go to a homeless services organization. I participated. From there I got on a lived experience advisory board. I’ve been with them six years. In 2019, I joined a domestic violence homeless coalition through Measure H. I then got appointed to a DV Alliance and I’m also working with USC (University of Southern California).

My journey from housewife to homeless and back was a rough one, but I survived four marriages, a lot of trauma. I’m advocating for better, safer permanent supportive housing. I’m using my voice as long as I have it to try to help others and try to end this. We all should be safe in our homes, whether paying \$100 a month or \$5,000 a month. Nobody needs to be a victim of domestic violence. Any kind of violence that anyone has to experience of any kind is not right.

My daughter bought me a car four months ago and that completely changed my life. I’m able to do things for others and branch out a little bit, have lots of irons in lots of fires. So that’s where I am, still advocating.

*‘It doesn’t matter if you’re rich or poor. Get help.’*

I would definitely suggest that they reach out to a lot of the resources. Reach out, call the domestic violence hotline, then hook up with services. I’m with the DV Alliance. I spoke with my ally this morning. There’s a lot of new things going on in the domestic violence field, the call centers, [ways to] get hooked

up with a good service provider. We didn’t have that; there wasn’t much out there. It wasn’t advertised on television: *If you’re in a domestic violence relationship, call this number*. We were more afraid. It doesn’t matter if you’re rich or you’re poor. *Get help*.

I don’t tell anybody what to do. My job is [to] teach someone where the resources are and that’s it. They have to make their own decision. But *plan*. That’s another thing: *plan*. You have to go to school and get yourself an education. If you can’t leave right now, make a goal of planning [so that] when you do leave, you’re not going to be homeless. Look up getting jobs or different job references. You got to plan.

I didn’t. I left and had grandiose ideas. Never, ever thought I’d turn into being an alcoholic and an addict...never in a million years. I was the least likely to ever be voted to do that. I was truly a supermom. It can happen to anyone, happened to me. I was one of the fortunate ones to return and still live through it.

*‘Trauma is everywhere, in many forms.’*

I would want policy makers and practitioners to start treating us like we’re human beings that had some trauma. Trauma is everywhere. Trauma comes in many forms. People need to stop thinking of trauma as a disease. It’s something that’s happening to people everywhere as we speak. I’m not a victim—I’m a survivor. So, learn to treat us like you would your kids. Stop looking at us as if we’re not educated or we’re financially crippled. We’re people that had normal lives—some of us. But we’re being beaten or controlled or humiliated and we’re not being treated fairly.

When you’re in a domestic violence relationship, whether you get out or don’t, the kids need help. Kids are experiencing mom and dad fighting, getting hit. A lot of the kids hold that inside. There’s a high suicide and high drug addiction rate for children of domestic violence. There’s also a high rate of domestic violence when they grow up, because hurt people hurt people. I’d like to see more awareness for children out there and more programs for kids of domestic violence homes.

My story isn’t one with a long lineage of kids that followed in my footsteps. No. My son’s a firefighter and my daughter is amazing. She’s a photographer and works for a healthcare provider and she’s doing very well. My kids turned

out great. They utilized my experiences for the greater good to stay off of drugs. I have seven grandkids and a step-grandson, so eight total. They're amazing. My granddaughter's going for a master's degree. My grandson bought his own home at 28 years old. They're great. In fact, my grandson even wrote a story about why he doesn't do drugs because of his grandma. I'm so happy that they learned from my story.



## Larae Cantley

My journey has been very colorful. I was born in the '80s. During that time in South LA, there was a lot of crime, a lot of violence, a lot of police activity, a lot of high-surveillance...a lot of families impacted by the unjust legal system. In the '80s, the fight for life was obscured by the crack epidemic, guns and drugs strategically flooded the community. Addiction ran rampant, families were destroyed and the war on drugs was unleashed, resulting in a lot of broken homes. A lot of families were doing what they could to protect and provide for their families. A lot of people in my community were dealing with the injustice of the criminal system.

My dad, being a member of a gang, made it very clear that there weren't a lot of options available for him. The opportunity for selling drugs and gang activity was easily accessible. That opened doors for a lot of colorful activities in my childhood. I remember being a small child, seeing my dad being dropped off by the police, battered, bruised and bleeding and him basically going in and out of it and the police telling us to make sure that we keep him in for the night. Later, I found out that the police were strategically utilizing their relationship with my dad to do their work, "moving drugs and killing dreams" [in] the community. Sometimes that relationship looked like the police beating my dad up, taking his money and his drugs and having him stay in for the night; other times that looked like him going away to jail and our family having to figure out what to do next.

When I was a small child living in Compton with my mom and dad and brother and sister, we'd spent a good week being in the home without our parents. I think one parent thought the other parent was home. Me, my brother and sister all lived life like our parents were still home. That didn't send off any red flags. We went to school; we did the normal routine.

Being a part of the drug and gang lifestyle brought a lot of mental stress and unhealthy relationships. The behaviors that come with unhealthy relationships were seen as normal—the fights, the parties, the funerals...a lot of chaos, a lot of confusion.

*'I'm going to chop her head off.'*

One time, when my mom returned, my dad returned. He wanted to talk to her.

He took her out for a walk and when they returned, my mom was full of blood.

It was a really hard moment for all of us. He sat her down in a chair in front of us at the kitchen table, told us to sit down and get ready to eat dinner. He's like, "eat your burgers. I want to tell you what's happening. What's happening here is your mom is going to sit in this chair and I'm going to chop her head off." He had the hugest knife in the house. I stand up and say, "How do you expect us to eat while you're doing this to our mom?" My dad came over to me and placed the knife on my cheek and asked me if I wanted to be where my grandmother was. My dad's mom, my grandma, had passed not long before this happened. In fear, I shut down. I was [also] upset that no one protected me, nobody spoke up for me. Everybody was afraid and in such shock.

*'Asking for help was going against everything that we knew to be normal.'*

Asking for help was going against everything that we knew to be normal. Everything in me was like, *this is not normal*. We were taught that you don't talk about what happens in here. *What happens here, stays here*. You don't even talk about it with the people that did it to you. *Just shut up. Pretend like it never happened*. Then there's the religious aspect of growing up with this idea that if you pray about it and you have faith, it just magically is fixed. If you have to access any other help, then something is wrong with you. *I'm going against the loyalty of what I've been taught. I don't think I'm going to be accepted by my family. I'm not truly accepted by the community. I'm going against the loyalty of the gang*.

*'I didn't care to be a fighter.'*

My brother, my sister and myself were constantly reminded of our duty to take care of each other. I didn't really care to be a fighter. But with my dad having a reputation, giving us the tools to be able to fight or defend ourselves was a must! *Stand up for ourselves!*

One day at a playground [when] I was very small, there were some children playing and throwing sand. I knew that if I had sand in my hair and went in the house, I'd get in a whole 'nother world of trouble. I'd asked the children to stop throwing the sand. Their aggressive response made my siblings come over. They got into this quarrel with the children and *boy, boy, boy*, were they upset

with me. They told my dad that they'd had to fight some other children because of what I'd started and [that] I didn't participate in the fight.

My dad got a folding chair and placed it in the middle of the courtyard of the projects and invited all the children to come and take free licks. They get to hit you, kick you, slap, punch—whatever they wanted to do. I could not do anything back to them. I just had to sit there in the folding chair. The idea was that my dad was training me to be mad enough to fight. After my dad yelled *stop!* all the children went away. I felt the heat in my face, the saltiness of blood in my mouth, the shame, the hurts...all these emotions trying to settle in this small child. I was heartbroken that the guy that I'm in love with—my dad—had allowed people to hurt me. He looks me in the face and says, "Are you mad enough to fight now?" Of course, I responded, "Yes."

*"Are you mad enough to fight now?" Of course, I responded, "Yes."*

That anger led to dangerous times. When people would do things, my dad would knock on their door, tell the adults to *step aside, don't do anything*. He'd tell their children to come outside and basically sic me on their children, like a pit bull. I'd fight. I took that idea into a lot of areas of my life whenever I didn't feel safe. I'd react in irrational ways, the red screen would cover my eyes and I'd fight, wanting to make sure that I felt safe afterwards. That way of living led me to a constant battle with myself and I struggled with suicidal thoughts. I realized later, after living 20 years battling suicidal ideas, that I'd been living a way that doesn't align with my true self, with my loving core being.

Once I acknowledged my self-defeating, inner assassin, I didn't have to battle suicidal thoughts. I started to work through all the hurt that needed to be healed, which has had a lot to do with my social justice work today. Unfortunately, I encountered a lot more violence in that process [of recovery].

*'I married my abuser of choice.'*

I married my abuser of choice. I say 'of choice' because there was a lot of abuse at the hands of others before I married this person. We actually got together thinking we'd heal each other after both of us experienced our brothers being murdered in the community. There was something special about me and my ex-husband having that similar hurt. Just being very young and thinking, *okay,*

*let's get together, get married, have children... .*

There was a lot of dysfunction there. A lot of police called...a lot of hospitalizations. I was placed in a mental institution twice, once after my brother was murdered and once while in that abusive relationship. I was hospitalized after having my arm being almost severed off, having to get 48 stitches and having my leg broken. That was a really hard, hard time.

I think back to when I first went into the mental institution. They said I was a functional bipolar. They signed me out with a prescription. All I needed to do was to meet with a therapist. This is me under 18, still a child. I still have to go back to the home that enforces the idea that we do not talk about what we deal with. There was no way I was talking about anything. I sat there in front of the therapist and she asked me questions and I looked at her like, *I don't know*. My mind could only think of what I deal with back at home and *how are you going to try to tear my family apart? Who's going to go to jail for this? What's going to happen if I tell you anything?* So, I didn't talk.

*'Art kept us alive.'*

Unfortunately, if our children didn't firsthand witness the violence, they felt the impact of the residue. Whether it be me left alone and having to tend to my own wounds and the emotional imbalances and having to still parent them...or them being in an unbalanced environment where we couldn't do normal things like go to the doctor regularly or have random playdates.

Luckily, we had a connection to art; it was our saving grace without us ever knowing. I've always been really connected to the power and joy of writing and I always enjoy colors. That was one thing that I think naturally stuck with me throughout life. I didn't know that it was a healing practice. I'd lay a sheet [down] in the middle of the living room and have the children paint and color. That's what kept us with some sort of sanity—that's what kept us alive. Today, I intentionally take time for us to express ourselves creatively.

*'I navigated homelessness.'*

Leaving that abusive relationship was a hard goal to achieve, but in doing so, my children and I navigated homelessness. I think of the law of attraction. We depended upon other unhealthy people. Most of those in my circle suffered

from mental health issues, high stress and the connection to imbalance. We have this small network of people who are already marginalized and greatly impacted by systemic racism and all the barriers put in place. It's very difficult to see another way of life.

That led to my first arrest. I was trying to protect myself from being beaten by a 2x4 and the police were called. When they arrived, they dragged me down the concrete driveway, pepper-sprayed me, did their famous knee-in-your-back-handcuff you, put you in the car. I was arrested for assault with a deadly weapon and attempted murder. I remember sitting in the back of that car. The officer's driving and they were making jokes about me, being sarcastic the whole ride there. They took me to the men's jail in Inglewood; I spent Friday till Monday. I wasn't able to shower because it was the men's jail. I didn't get a phone call. Then it was time to be taken to the courtroom. They shackle my hands and my feet and I'm like, *whoa, okay, this is way different*. I get to the courthouse and I'm sitting in the holding cell for hours and hours. Finally, the judge doesn't even want to see me.

I asked to be released from the courthouse, which was so humiliating because I still had on these clothes that were ripped during the encounter. The whole situation was very humiliating. That Monday my daughter had started her first day of school. She told her teacher, "My mom would've been here, but she went to jail." That's the way I met her teacher on Tuesday morning. When I applied for a job as a community rep at the school, I was denied access. They didn't approve of me being in the schools with the children because of that arrest, even though it was thrown out.

*'Where do I find this saving grace?'*

After that I had lot more unhealthy relationships; ups and downs, trying to figure out, *where do I find this saving grace for me and my children to finally have some sort of a normal life?* I didn't see that. I had a plan to sign my rights over as a parent—to give my children away—and to commit myself to the mental institution. To live there, stop eating and stop speaking and waste away...that was my plan. That was my ultimate suicide plan. Gratefully, it didn't work. In 2012, I got access to our future via housing. I'd finally come up on a list that I signed up on in 1998. That's where our healing journey began.

Unfortunately, it was through my oldest son. He was in the restroom and

slid his phone under the door. I picked it up to see the text on the screen. It reads that he thinks of suicide constantly. With that, I reached out for help. In reaching out, they asked about his story and I had to give history on things that he'd seen, he'd been exposed to, our journey. That started for me to get domestic violence services, mental health services, family therapy and the children to have access to individual therapy.

*'Tell everything and anything that you feel is keeping you bound. Tell it all.'*

There have been a few moments in my life where I went on mute and I didn't quite understand why. Due to therapy, I've learned that I go on mute because the conversations inside my head are much louder than what I feel like I can get out of my mouth. I think about that as I share this story here, because it comes down to me doing something entirely different and telling my children, "You have a therapist and I want you to tell them everything you need to tell them so that you could be free. Don't worry about what happens to me. Don't worry about what happens to the family. Tell everything and anything that you feel is keeping you bound. Tell it all."

I'd like that to be the message that people, especially children, are receiving. That's what brings me to this work as a social justice activist and bringing folks' voices from the marginalized population. You get the power to talk about what you need to talk about, so that you could help the way that programs and services really will help you.

*'It's time to teach about how policy impacts communities.'*

We could change so much if we understood the way that policies have created barriers for people like my dad that have impacted a whole family. It's time to really take a look at how the punishment of people who have been oppressed has not worked and look into a model of how to restore people. To care for humanity so that they don't have to do things that put them in survival mode. I feel like policy makers and government have a lot to do with that.

I didn't feel like policy had anything to do with me. I had to insert myself into this world to begin to understand it. We should be teaching communities, teaching our children, teaching people that are most impacted about what policy is, how it's impacting their lives and how they can utilize their voice to

create policy that will allow our communities to be safe. I think that so many people in our community have no connection to how policy is impacting their lives. That is dominant white culture! It's so oppressive.

It's time to invest in the healing and to let the community lead the healing—pay the people to heal. I want them to know they're enforcing policies that are causing harm in our community. They need to come and take a look.

*'We need funding for culturally-specific services.'*

We need funding for culturally-specific services, funding people in the community to do the work of the healing of the community, so that they're not pushed out to live in survival mode. Let them be incentivized to heal—to heal each other.

I have a son, Melvin. I tell him that he needs to do this. In 2017, he was shot in front of our home because of the random idea that someone is being put in the 'hood and they need to go out and earn their [gang] stripes. This is after mom's been doing social justice work...the community has been uplifted due to things that I've [done]. I've gone down to Sacramento, to Washington, D.C.

This child's constantly having to navigate a community that's either pushing him out because he's not joining the gang or he's being seen as a target, based on the fact that the police see Black males as targets. He feels unprotected. What are the choices for him? He's living with this PTSD. No one's really veering into what it looks like to be him.

*'Support models of radical restorative justice.'*

Policy makers need to know: it's always time to do what's right. Create policy to heal the harms of systemic racism and capitalism. The way to do that is to support models of radical restorative justice, of healing funds and mutual aids. Funding that addresses the need for mental, social and emotional health and builds knowledge and skills that contribute to longstanding healing that's necessary due to historical systemic harms. Due to my connection to healing and liberating initiatives, I know that violence is preventable when we co-create moments or spaces that exercises our collective greatness and illuminates our brilliance within our communities and networks. Then we become the difference we need!!



## David Lara

My name is David Lara. I currently live in Highland Park, a section that's relatively close to downtown Los Angeles, yet has a kind of small-town feel. It's mostly Latino, but it's becoming gentrified like a lot of areas. I've got deep roots here, although I was born to a family of farm workers in Salinas, CA. I was around six years old when we made our way down to Los Angeles.

The crux of my story is that I'm a gay man. I have identified as gay ever since I was around five years old. I probably first put a label on myself when I was 12.

It scared the hell out of me and I suffered with self-loathing my entire childhood. Society at that time made it that way. It was illegal to be gay so I felt like a criminal because of laws governing homosexuals lives or they labeled you insane or you were a pervert. My mother was a wonderful lady, she was caught in the circumstances of the times, the '40s and the '50s, where women were chattel and all those issues we know about those times. She was unable to protect me.

The thing she was unable to protect me from was my father. He was a violent and evil man. He began to realize that I was different around the age of seven or eight and he started beating me constantly.

*'My father tried to murder me.'*

I was made to work as a child in construction, painting [and] demolition, this was his side business to earn extra money. He'd drive me to worksites and leave me there until eight or nine at night, sometimes without food. This affected me and I was never successful in school; I blamed myself for failing. But now I know, I was never given a chance.

At 12, my father tried to murder me. I was on a construction site and I'd done something wrong. He picked up a large 3-inch pipe and hit me with it up side of my head. He was going to take another blow at me but the woman, whose house we were working on, saw what he was doing and stopped him. He got into our truck and drove away, while the woman called the police and an ambulance.

In those days, the law did not do anything about a man who beat his wife or children. But that was the end of my mother's fear of him and she kicked him

out of our house. As he walked out the door for the last time, I sat in our living room alone. He stopped at the open front door, turned around and said, "I never loved you. I never loved any of you. I know what you are, David and I hate you."

Our life improved, in a way, but my mother was left alone with no support. They didn't enforce any kind of monetary assistance to divorced couples, so we were very poor. There were times when we didn't eat very well. But at least I wasn't being beaten and I began to be a little bit happy in school making friends and picking myself up.

Unfortunately, my mother became depressed, clinically obese and an alcoholic. I remember going through the house, looking for empty bottles of vodka that she was drinking. I'd hide them in the neighbor's trash so that our trash can wasn't overflowing with empty booze bottles. She died when I was 17 of congestive heart failure. She just went and my brother and I were left alone.

*'I joined the Navy to avoid the Vietnam War.'*

I wasn't going to go to foster care because of my age. My father came and took my little brother away. I was failing school and a friendly teacher helped me file legal papers to get me declared an adult. I was emancipated and it was 1965 and there was a draft. My only choice was to join the military. Because of the Vietnam War I thought joining the Navy would protect me from being in actual combat. When I was in high school, I volunteered as a candy striper at Los Angeles General Hospital. In fact I was the first male candy striper ever. So while at boot camp one of the questions they [ask is] had you ever done volunteer work. When I mentioned what I'd done at the hospital, they said, "well, you should be a hospital corpsman then." That's a medic, not a doctor—a medical assistant, not a nurse. What I didn't know was that the Marines are actually part of the Navy and they use Navy corpsman as field medics in war. So, I went to a hospital corps school in San Diego and received two weeks training at Camp Pendleton in basic field medicine practices. My first duty was a hospital ship off the coast of Vietnam, the USS Repose, AH16.

*'I was 18; I had to kill.'*

I ended up spending my first three weeks traveling through Vietnam looking

for my ship which was sailing somewhere off the coast taking on casualties of war. Communications were not advanced in those days and it took me those weeks to catch up with my ship. But in the meantime the wounded needed attention and I spent time at an aid station in the demilitarized zone called Dong Ha.

The second day in the country, I was involved in a situation where incoming rockets were falling all around and I had to run for my life. That was when I realized my plan for joining the Navy was backfiring miserably. I took choppers and weird little planes to hop around South Vietnam in search of my ship. Which is how I ended up in Dong Ha. My job was to sterilize surgery tools, while nightly rocket attacks and firefights outside the wire occurred. In fact, some of the enemy even got into the compound. So one night a North Vietnamese came and blew up one of the patient wards. I don't know if I want to tell you this, but I had to kill him. I am 18-years-old by this time. In-country three weeks and I had to kill someone.

Finally, I made it aboard my ship and while it's not hell like being in-country, we did get a lot of wounded. I and my shipmates had to deal with the horror of war wounded and dying...dying, that was the hardest. It was real tough. I didn't realize it, but I kind of shut down my brain. The shutting down that my brain took on to deal with what I saw and did in Vietnam would follow me for a long time.

But an event happened that would change the rest of my life; I only resolved the trauma it caused in 2013.

That event occurred on the USS Forrestal, an aircraft carrier operating in the waters off North Vietnam. A rocket misfired off one of the waiting aircraft prepping for a bombing run. This caused a chain reaction of explosions. Our ship went to the Gulf of Tonkin to offer assistance to the burning Forrestal. I was picked to be part of an eight-person team to go aboard and help the wounded. When we got there, the ship was still burning. The head corpsman, said, "We've already gotten all the wounded off...we need you to help find the dead." And so that's what I and that team did. And to make sure that these boys got home, we collected information to identify them. Most of the bodies were burned beyond recognition, we'd have to get the jaws open and plot the teeth because there was no DNA in those days. Dental identification was the standard in those days.

The events of that day would haunt me for the rest of my life.

### *'We formed The Group.'*

There were three guys aboard the ship and three guys that I'd met at Dong Ha who became my war buddies. And we were all gay...two Marines, four Navy. We would meet up at China Beach in Danang...we'd do blood drives. And we managed to meet in foreign cities of Asia for R&R. We called ourselves *The Group* after a novel of the time. In fact, there's a movie [by that name]; the story is of a bunch of Vassar girls that form a group following them through life. One happens to be a lesbian. We loved it because gay people were seldom depicted in literature.

One memorable time on R&R (rest and relaxation) happened when *The Group* came together in Singapore. We went to an area called Burgis Street, where transgender and drag queens served drinks at white tables set up in the middle of the street that was boogie street. These queens sang and danced and entertained men and women from the military that were all getting away from war, if for just a short time. It was the most amazing place on the planet. We'd be together as gay men able to talk. We wanted to create an ethos—a culture—for ourselves. What you're hearing about is the beginning of the modern-day gay rights movement. It had started actually during World War II, when men from all over the world were thrown together in war. Gays were able to find each other...Kansas City corn boys were able to find out that there was a world out there of other men like themselves. This process of gay culture really solidified itself in the 1960s when another war brought more men and women together that happened to be gay. Of course the military began to discharge us. Remember it was a crime to be gay. The Department of Defense would send us to Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay for processing. This made San Francisco the mecca for the LGBT world in the '70s and '80s. They kicked us out into the streets of San Francisco and we stayed.

### *'It was a witch hunt.'*

New Year's, 1966 in Hong Kong, I got caught making out with a Marine. My buddies from boot camp and corps school were at the bar when they came upon me and my friend. They caught me, took me back to the ship and beat me up. As they beat me they shouted... "*you faggot you're a homo. Are you homo?*" These men that I was working with and had been alongside through hell, hated

me for who I am. Thankfully, they didn't turn me in.

At the end of my tour in Vietnam I left. As I left, one of the men that I'd kind of fallen in love with, a man I wanted to have a life with, a man that was part of *The Group* died in combat.

I began to struggle with my identity and the war experiences. I did not do well with my struggle. I drank. I drank a lot of alcohol.

In war, you need everybody around you to survive. So while the military knew we gays existed in the ranks, they didn't care. But once you got back, the witch hunts would begin. You were hunted constantly. They would bring us before court martial and say, "*you lied on on your military application when you didn't tell us you were gay*". *We were accused of being criminal or diagnosed as being crazy or [they would] brand us as pervert...degenerate.*

I actually made it four years before the witch hunt finally caught up with me. I was in Washington, D.C. and in Quantico, a Virginia Marine Corps base. I didn't get caught with anybody or anything overt, but all it took was one accusation and that was it. They came after me. I was frightened. I attempted suicide. I didn't think I deserved to live; I mean, I really didn't. The world, the way it was...I thought I was worthless. I spent nine weeks in a mental hospital in Bethesda, Maryland and was finally kicked out.

I received a bad paper discharge, less than honorable discharge. I was lucky, some gays got dishonorable discharges and prison time.

I tried to get a job with the City of Los Angeles. After four years in the Navy, I was better educated than if I had graduated from high school. But in those days, they would check the status of your discharge; they said they couldn't hire me because I had that 'character flaw' (being gay). So I got a job as a janitor with Pacific Bell. I cleaned toilets, dusted the tables and emptied trash cans.

Eventually I worked my way up in the phone company. I only worked as a janitor for six months, when I applied for a job that was normally done by women. I became a Pacific Bell customer representative and from there worked my way up to a relatively high manager position. I also got control of my alcohol use but still had hidden undiagnosed PTSD.

*'I'm part of gay rights movement.'*

Some of the guys from Vietnam were with me in the D.C. area. We continued

to see each other and be together. Everywhere I went, I created a group. I went up to New York a few times. I wasn't there for the riots, but I was going to the Stonewall Inn. So, yeah, I'm part of the gay rights movement.

Around nine years after being discharged from the Navy I got a promotion. I was working for AT&T and got to go where I really always wanted to go to live, San Francisco. In this mix, I got over the fact that I didn't like myself very much as a gay man. In the '70s, there were several doctors in Los Angeles and San Francisco, psychiatrists...psychologists, that had created a system of bringing gay men together in groups to talk. These groups helped gay men to undo the damage society had done to us. It took a lot of work, but thousands went through these programs to unwind the damage.

In the '80s, AIDS came along. I became a soldier in a different war. San Francisco was ground zero for the pandemic. I decided that I was not going to sit still. I wanted to take action. The government was ignoring HIV. So I became a member of Act Up (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). It was a paramilitary organization. We broke up into groups to become experts in medical research protocols. Mine was women's HIV issues; women were being ignored as far as any kind of medical trials or study.

I was rich enough that I could go to demonstrations, go to New York and participate in actions like die-ins in the middle of the street with the AIDS Action group in New York City. I went to D.C. several times and joined the Names Project, a different AIDS group where people created quilt pieces commemorating loved ones who'd died of AIDS. These pieces were stitched together to make large sections resembling a giant quilt. The first time we took it (the Names Project quilt) to D.C., it covered an area from the Lincoln Memorial to the Washington Memorial. Another time in the early '90s, it was so large it went from the Lincoln Memorial almost to the Capitol building. We'd called ourselves the Ice Cream Kids because we wore all white: white shoes, pants, shirt and painter's caps. There were hundreds of us. It was our finest hour in the history of LGBT people.

But I would also put on my leather jacket and my Doc Martens and my tight Levi's and head out with ACT-UP to do militant type demonstrations, like chaining ourselves to the FDA building in Washington, D.C. One time, the police came in and beat us with truncheons while on horseback. Some of us were stepped on by those horses. We took the ashes of our dead friends and threw them over the fence of the White House. We were real mad. I'm HIV (positive);

I thought for sure I was going to die.

In 2008, I came down here (to LA) to help my step-brother and his wife because they were in need of help financially. But also, to heal. You see, my partner of 13 years had ended our relationship. One reason was my PTSD and the problems that it brought to our relationship. The Veterans Administration started a program to help people with PTSD. With a gay doctor there, I went through a process called a prolonged exposure in which you relive a horrific event until it dissolves into just a horrible memory. You learn to live with the trauma, like my experience with the USS Forrestal fire and the deaths. I had to deal with that to get control of my PTSD. He also believed in mindfulness meditation which I use now to calm those memories from Vietnam and because of the injustices I experienced with the military.

*'I got honorably discharged, 50 years later.'*

I still had a bad discharge. So I went to the Veterans agency provided by the City of Los Angeles for some help. And a woman, the assistant director there, said to me, "Dave, why don't you try and get your discharge upgraded?" I agreed to accept their help. They got a really high-powered lawyer group in downtown LA to represent me. After two years, the paperwork came back. And on June 3, 2019, I got honorably discharged from the US Navy, 50 years after leaving the service. I was lucky, because I was able to get my benefits for the PTSD I suffered from because of my service in the Navy.

I'm not that involved with the gay community as much anymore; I'm too old. I'm very much involved in the Veterans' organizations here in Los Angeles and part of the American Legion.

There's still a long way to go with regard to gay rights or respect for LGBT people. I'm part of a writer's group of Veterans and connected to Hollywood and have been on television and on news programs as a spokesman for LGBT service people. I'm also writing and wrote a small memoir about my time in the Navy called Zippo Boys.

What I want to do is make sure that the Iraqi and Afghanistan vets, who have trauma like mine because of war, be they straight or gay, that we hold these people for the rest of their lives, because they're going to be in real trouble later in life. There's so many suicides now and I know in the future too. By being part of those veterans groups, I make sure that they see me, an old

man and I tell my story: *Yes it's hard, but you can get to the end. Yeah, there is a way of doing it...there is hope. In the end I am doing fine. Don't try to do it on your own though. Get help. You cannot do it on your own.*

One last thing I will say to them: *get involved in something.* Join military groups that support you as a Veteran. If you're gay, join and volunteer at something within the community. Give your time and support and you will receive that in return.



Promote a shared understanding of the root causes of violence including the connection between racism, historical oppression and violence; an understanding of trauma; the connections among multiple forms of violence; and the resources available to prevent violence.

## Flor Liu (Sp)

No sé por dónde empezar. Vivo en San Pedro en un shelter. He estado viviendo en el shelter durante unos siete meses. El shelter no es lo que dicen que es. No es. Me he sentido muy discriminada... incluso por mi propia trabajadora social. No me han apoyado. Somos seres humanos; somos personas que hemos vivido violencia doméstica, abuso sexual y humillación todo este tiempo. A las dos o tres de la mañana, despierto llorando sin saber con quién hablar. No soy la única que sufre violencia sexual en el shelter. Hay más personas que están pasando por lo mismo. Necesito que alguien escuche mi angustia. Mi corazón está lleno, mi pecho está lleno de aire. No puedo respirar y estoy ahí, hasta que lloro y lloro.

En 2013 me pasó algo realmente difícil en Texas. Fui violada por el coyote (un traficante de personas). ¡Fui violada! No quiero volver a pasar por eso. No quiero que nadie me toque o me falte el respeto. Pero he sufrido, he sufrido mucho. Desde 2015, he lidiado con la violencia doméstica en el condado de Los Ángeles, con mi esposo con quien vivía. Me trató muy mal. Él me golpeaba. El me quitaba el dinero que ganaba en mi trabajo. Me maltrataba e hizo sufrir mucho a mis hijos. Es muy difícil compartir esto ahora mismo, pero viví cosas muy difíciles: golpes, me quebró la nariz; llegó al punto de estar bien tomado que me quitó la ropa y me echó a la calle. Fue entonces cuando decidí dejarlo, en 2018.

Me cuesta entender por qué estuve con él tanto tiempo. Aceptaba todo lo que él me decía. Llegué al punto en que ya no sentía los golpes. Su maltrato era como cariño para mí. La forma en que me trató fue algo normal para mí. Iba a mi trabajo y me decían: “Flor, ¿qué te pasó?” Me veían golpeada y lo que les decía era: “Me golpeé, me caí. Oh, me pegué en el baño “. Sigo sufriendo con eso, porque hay noches en las que todavía pienso que me despierto junto a él, que está a mi lado y me dice que soy una vieja acabada, que no puedo hacer nada, que no sirvo para nada. Todavía pienso en eso. No puedo sanar. Todavía me cuesta tener una vida normal y que mis hijos se recuperen del trauma. Han sufrido mucho. Y todavía lo hayo difícil.

*‘Sufrió abuso sexual por parte de un empleado del refugio.’*

En Mayo 2020 llegué a Texas a otro shelter. Estuve un tiempo en la iglesia

católica (refugio) pidiendo ayuda a las monjas. Las hermanas me ayudaron. De ahí viajé aquí a Los Ángeles, a un lugar donde pensé que iba a estar mejor, donde podría olvidar mis traumas y olvidarme de todo. Quería dejar todo atrás. Llegué al refugio para recibir terapia.

Ahí pasé abuso sexual con un trabajador. Mi experiencia sucedió el 22 de octubre y no se ha hecho nada por mí; no ha habido ayuda para mí. Entró en mi unidad, me abrazó y me tocó los senos. Hablé. Le pedí ayuda a la supervisora. Ella sabía que había pasado por la violencia doméstica, que ha sido humillada. Me han tratado mal en mi país y aquí en los Estados Unidos. Le dije a mi terapeuta; Le dije a los trabajadores sociales. No me escucharon cuando les pedí ayuda. Sentí que me ignoraban, me humillaban. Me sentía de menos porque no me ayudaban.

Lo único que nos han dicho es que lo que hizo ese hombre es normal, que es muy cariñoso. Otra persona llamada Jaqueline también pasó por lo mismo dentro del shelter hace tres semanas. Ella también fue a pedir ayuda y también fue discriminada. La persona que dirige el shelter le dijo lo mismo: que el hombre lo hizo porque estaba estresado. Nos están manoseando como si nada.

*‘¿Por qué esperar a que nos violen?’*

A nosotros nos dicen: “Oh, tienen que venir moradas, tienen que venir golpeadas o tienen que pasar por algo poder hablar y denunciar ¿Por qué esperar eso? ¿Por qué esperar a que nos violen, que nos encuentren tiradas en la calle? ¿Por qué esperar eso para poner una denuncia? Nadie tiene derecho a tocarnos si no lo permitimos. Nadie va a venir a tocarnos, y menos a nuestros pechos, ni a ofendernos con sus palabras, como aquel hombre que me decía cosas. No le di ninguna razón para hacer eso; me faltó el respeto, me humilló, como todo lo que me hacía el shelter. Me sentí como una hormiga, como si no fuera nada. Me sentí humillada; no me apoyaron. Hablé de lo que ese hombre me hizo y no me apoyaron. Veía a ese hombre entrar y agachaba mi cabeza. Tenía miedo, mucho miedo de verlo, porque el seguía viéndome, seguía buscándome. Y todavía tengo miedo de que me haga daño. Estoy ... peor que cuando vivía la violencia de mi exesposo.

Había mucha gente que me apoyaba: los (representantes) de derechos humanos, otros hogares familiares [que] se están involucrando en lo que pasó y en lo que está pasando en el shelter. Exigimos que el hombre fuera despedido,

pero el shelter no quería despedirlo. Pero ayer nos dijeron que lo habían despedido. Siento que es mentira, porque su esposa trabajaba allí. Tengo miedo porque la mujer sigue ahí y vive con ese hombre. Ella puede darle información sobre nosotros, sobre Jaqueline y yo, y sobre lo que el hombre nos hizo. Temo por mí. Temo porque hay muchas mujeres muertas (abusadas o asesinadas por violencia doméstica) que no pueden hablar ahora.

*‘He buscado apoyo en todas partes.’*

Lo único que me dijeron es que me voy a recibir terapia. No me lo dado. Solo tengo una terapeuta y yo necesito ayuda. Ya no quiero tomar pastillas para la ansiedad o la depresión. Siento que cuando tomo una pastilla, estoy ida. Me da mucho sueño y yo ya no quiero tomar pastillas. Quiero una vida normal. Quiero dejar todo atrás. Tengo dos hijos por los que luchar para [que] pueda redimirme con ellos. Por eso últimamente he tenido muchas alergias nerviosas. Tengo alergias muy graves todos los días, pero el médico dice que es por ansiedad.

Busco ayuda para poder dejar todo atrás, mis pensamientos. Se me olvidan cosas, se me olvidan fechas. No puedo hablar con nadie porque me pongo a llorar. Siento que mi vida ha cambiado por todo lo que he pasado. No soy una persona normal. Siento ... no puedo ... no puedo hacer las cosas que hacía cuando era niña, cuando era feliz, cuando jugaba, cuando todo era hermoso para mí. Quiero ser una persona como antes. Yo sé que va a ser difícil, pero superaré esto.

Quiero estudiar, quiero trabajar, quiero salir, ser independiente. No me han apoyado para nada en el shelter. Pedí ayuda para ayudarme a estudiar. Salí a buscar apoyo en otro lugar; He estado tocando puertas. He encontrado personas que me han apoyado aquí en San Pedro, donde me inscribí para aprender inglés. Quiero estudiar mecánica, cosmetología. Quiero aprender muchas cosas con las que el shelter no me ha ayudado. Me he sentido muy discriminada porque todas las muchachas están ahí por la mismo y las han apoyado con escuela, con trabajo. Me dicen que no cuando se trata de trabajo porque no tengo Seguro Social. Dicen que no pueden ayudarme con la escuela porque no sé hablar inglés. No pueden ayudar con el cuidado de mi hijo porque no tengo trabajo o que no puedo aplicar para el cuidado de mi hijo. He estado buscando quién me ayuda para poder aplicar para el cuidado de mi hijo en otros lados, como, por ejemplo, el centro comunitario local que me ha

ayudado a solicitar el cuidado de niños para poder empezar a trabajar. [Pero] no recibí la ayuda que pensé que me iba a dar el shelter. No sé por qué es eso. Fui discriminada por mi idioma y por ser indocumentado.

*‘Las mujeres ya no pueden permanecer en silencio como yo lo hice.’*

Gracias por escucharme y ponernos un poco más de atención a lo que he pasado. Somos personas; hemos sido muy, muy lastimadas. Hemos pasado por mucho. Hemos pasado por la violencia doméstica a abuso sexual, luego a la discriminación, seguida de la humillación. Siento que esto es demasiado, hemos pasado por demasiado. Esto no es como perder un par de zapatos, o algo ... En este momento siento más desahogada. Me siento más tranquila sabiendo que hay personas que se preocupan por mí como ser humano. Que Dios les conceda que me escuchen; que las mujeres ya no callen como yo estaba callada. Que salgan, que hablen, que digan lo que están sufriendo, lo que están pasando, que no nos quedemos calladas. Porque la muerte puede sobrevenir, como sucede con muchas personas, cuando se quedan calladas. Tenemos que expresar todo lo que nos está pasando con nuestras parejas, todo lo que nos está dañando. Necesitamos hablar.

Necesitamos que nos ayuden, escucharnos. ¿Qué pueden mejorar? Cuando denuncie con policía, tomó tanto tiempo que no sabíamos lo que iba a pasar, el investigador aún no se ha contactado conmigo. No esperen hasta que nos maten. Sea más receptivo, pongan más atención a lo que estamos pasando. La policía debería ser un poco más rápida, para que lo que estamos pasando no le pase a nadie más. Los shelters deben de poner más atención a lo que hemos pasado [y] dar más terapia o más seguridad en el lugar donde vivimos. ¿Qué otra cosa? Ayuda a los niños. Sé que apoyan mucho a los niños aquí [en los Estados Unidos].

*‘Consiga ayuda para los hombres para que aprendan a valorarnos.’*

También ayudas para los hombres, para que aprendan a valorarnos. Para que sepan que también somos mujeres sensibles. No podemos soportar los golpes de ellos; sus golpes son más duros y no podemos responder con la misma fuerza [física]. Debería haber más pláticas para ellos, para que también puedan saber que somos seres humanos sensibles que también sufrimos verbalmente;

sus palabras duelen mucho.

Estoy aquí usando mi voz porque quiero que esto termine, no solo por mí. Ayúdenme a acabar con la violencia para que no haiga más violencia sexual. Que se acabe para todos, sean mujeres, hombres, quien estén pasando por lo mismo. Por favor ayúdenos.

## Flor Liu (En)

I don't know where to start. I live in a domestic shelter. I've been living in the shelter for about seven months. The shelter isn't what they say it is...it's not. I've felt very discriminated [against]...even by my own social worker. They have not supported me. We are human beings; we are people who have lived through domestic violence, sexual abuse and humiliation this entire time. At two or three in the morning, I wake up crying without knowing who to talk to. I am not the only one experiencing sexual violence in the shelter. There are more people that are going through the same thing. I need someone to hear my anguish. My heart is filled...my chest is filled...with air. I can't breathe and I'm there, until I cry and cry.

*'His abuse felt like love to me.'*

In 2013 something really difficult happened to me in Texas. I was raped by the coyote (a human trafficker) ...I was raped! I don't want to go through that again; I don't want anybody to touch me or disrespect me. But I've suffered a lot. Since 2015, I've dealt with domestic violence in Los Angeles County, with my husband with whom I lived. He abused me and treated me very badly...he hit me. He'd take the money I earned from my job. He made my children suffer a lot. It's very hard to share this right now, but I lived through very difficult things: beatings... he broke my nose...he got to the point of being so drunk, he took off my clothes and threw me out into the street. That's when I decided to leave him, in 2018.

I find it hard to understand why I was with him for so long. I accepted everything he said to me. I got to the point where I no longer felt the beatings; the way he treated me became normalcy. His abuse felt like love. I'd go to work and they'd say to me, "Flor, what happened to you?" They saw me all beaten up. What I'd say to them was, "I fell. Oh, I hit myself in the bathroom." I'm still suffering with it, because there are nights that I still think I'm waking up next to him and he tells me that I'm an old washed-up woman, that I can't do anything, I'm useless. I can't heal. I still have a hard time having a normal life and for my children to recover from the trauma.

*'I experienced sexual abuse from a shelter employee.'*

In May 2020, I arrived in Texas to another shelter. I was in the Catholic church for a while. The sisters helped me. From there, I traveled here to Los Angeles, to a place where I thought I was going to be better, where I'd forget my traumas. I wanted to leave everything behind. I got to a domestic violence shelter to get therapy.

That's where I experienced sexual abuse from an employee of the shelter. My experience happened on October 22 and nothing has been done for me—there's been no help. He got into my unit, hugged me and touched my breasts. I spoke up; I asked for help from the supervisor. She knew that I'd experienced domestic violence, that I've been humiliated. I've been treated badly in my country and here in the United States. I told my therapist; I told the social workers. I felt that they ignored me...humiliated me. I felt small because they didn't help me.

The only thing [that] they've told us is that what that man did is normal—that the man is very affectionate. Another person named J. also went through the same thing inside the shelter three weeks ago. She went to ask for help and was also discriminated against. The person who runs the shelter told her the same thing...that the man did it because he was stressed out. They're groping us like it's nothing.

*'Why wait for them to rape us?'*

They tell us: "Oh, you have to come bruised...you have to come all beaten up or something has to happen to be able to press charges." Why wait for that to report it? Why wait for them to rape us or to be found dead on the street? Why wait for that to report it? No one has the right to touch us if we don't allow it, least of all our breasts or offend us with their words like that man who said things to me. I didn't give him any reason for doing that; he disrespected me, humiliated me, like everything the shelter did to me. I felt like an ant, like I was nothing.

I talked about what that man did to me and they didn't support me. I'd watch that man still come in and I'd look down. I was afraid, very afraid to see him, because he kept seeing me, he kept looking for me. I'm still afraid he'll hurt me. I'm worse off than when I was living with the violence from my ex-husband.

We demanded that the man be removed and [the shelter] didn't want to get rid of him. There were a lot of people supporting me: human rights [representatives], other family shelters [that] are getting involved in what happened and what's going on in that shelter. Yesterday they told us he'd been fired. I feel it's a lie, because his wife was working there. I'm afraid because the woman is still there and lives with that man. She can give him information about us—about J. and me—and what the man did to us. I fear for me. I fear because there are many dead women (abused or killed by domestic violence) who can't speak up right now.

*'I've gone out looking for support everywhere.'*

The only thing they told me is that I'm going to get therapy. They didn't provide it to me. I have one therapist and I need help. I don't want to take pills for anxiety or depression anymore. I feel that when I take a pill, I'm kind of out of it or it makes me really sleepy. I don't want to be popping pills. I want a normal life. I want to leave everything behind. I have two children to fight for so [that] I can redeem myself with them. That's why I've had a lot of nervous allergies lately. I get really bad allergies every day; the doctor says it's from anxiety. I forget things, I forget dates. I can't talk to anyone because I start crying.

I'm not a normal person. I feel like I can't do the things I did when I was a child, when I was happy, when I played, when everything was beautiful to me. I want to be a person like I was before. I feel my life has changed because of everything I've been through. I know that it's going to be difficult for me but I'm going to get through this. I want to study, I want to work, I want to go out, be independent.

I asked for assistance to please help me study. They haven't supported me at all in the shelter. I've gone looking for support elsewhere; I've been knocking on doors. I've found people who've supported me. I signed up to learn English. I want to study mechanics, cosmetology...I want to learn many things.

I've felt very discriminated [against] because they've supported the other girls with schooling, with work. They say no to me when it comes to work because I don't have a social security [number]. They say that they can't help me with school because I don't know how to speak English. They can't help me with childcare because I don't have a job or I can't apply for care for my child. I've been looking for someone to help me to apply for childcare elsewhere, so

I can start working. I was discriminated against because of my language and being undocumented.

*'Women can no longer be silent like I was silent.'*

Thank you for paying attention to me, to what I've been through. We are people; we've been very, very badly hurt. We've gone from domestic violence to sexual abuse, then discrimination, followed by humiliation. I feel like this is too much...we've been through too much. This isn't like losing a pair of shoes or something... .

At this moment I feel like I got more things off my chest. I feel calmer knowing that there are people who do care about me as a human being. May God grant that they listen to me...that women [will] no longer be silent like I was silent. Let them get out, speak up, share their suffering, what they are going through. Because death may follow like it does for many people when they stay quiet. We have to express everything that's happening to us with our partners, everything that's hurting us. We need you to help us, listen to us.

What can they improve? Be more responsive, pay more attention to what we're going through. The police should be a bit quicker, so that what we're going through doesn't happen to anyone else. Don't wait until they kill us. When I filed the police report, it took so long that we didn't know what was going to happen, the investigator still hasn't contacted me. Shelters should pay more attention, provide more therapy and more security where we're living.

What else? Help the children. I know they support the children a lot here.

*'Get help for men so they learn to value us.'*

Also, get help for men, so that they learn to value us. There should be more talks for them, so that they can know that we're sensitive human beings who suffer verbally too—their words hurt a lot. We can't take a beating from them; their blows are harder...we can't respond with the same [physical] strength.

I'm here using my voice because I want this to end, not just for me. Help me end the violence so there is no more sexual violence. Let it end for everyone, be it women, men, whoever is going through the same thing. Please help us.



## von curtis

My name's Taylor von curtis Stephens. I prefer to be called von curtis. My preferred pronouns are they, them. [I'm] nonbinary. I'm Black, too. I was born male but the gender associated with masculinity is also implicitly violent. I began to disassociate myself from that kind of particular way of being and took on nonbinary names.

I prefer von curtis or just von as a way to disassociate myself from acute particularities of slavery. Taylor, like every single one of my names, is actually a passed-down lineage from our would-be slave masters: there's the Taylors, the Stephens, the Copelands... . The lineage is oftentimes wrapped up in pillaging and rape. On the Copeland side, I think my great-grand[mother], at some point in time, was raped by her slave master and kept part of the name—Copeland—but then a sector [branch] of the family became Curtis. They're all pretty much signifiers of America's past.

I was born in the Inland Empire, spent probably half my adolescence[there] and then [in] San Bernardino County and then Redlands. I moved to Los Angeles for a bit, [then] back to Redlands and then to Desert Hot Springs. That was my adolescence. In my adult life, I've lived in Carson [and] a few different places in Orange County. Landed for couple years in Fullerton and then briefly to Georgia then came back and have lived in Los Angeles again. Spent a lot of time in K-Town [Korea Town] too. Right now, I'm in South Central.

### *'Double Consciousness.'*

I'm going to share three instances of violence associated with racism. I'm telling these stories as an effort to defund the police and also to abolish the prison-industrial complex. Full transparency—that's why I'm telling these stories. The first two I share often and often times in the presence of other Black men. One of them I've never told. These three experiences all happened five years apart. I've been confronted with a multiplicity of forms of violence associated with racism.

Ever since I can remember, there's always been this kind of looming threat to my existence and to my sociality. Being of a darker complexion and living in the United States affords one a particular perception—Du Bois called it *double consciousness*. Every man in my family has had dangerous excursions with

the police, every last one of them. It's such a traumatic thing in Black familial systems that it's not spoken. We don't speak about these occasions in the family. They're known but they're not spoken.

Oftentimes these stories become exposed as a point of camaraderie with other Black folks. It's the initiation; it's how you get your Black card. I also think that has a lot to do with the familial structure and then the patriarchal structure of America. Then Blackness being an inverse, but also a microcosm of the mainstream social understanding. My relationships with Black men kind of revolved around a collective trauma and the collective trauma of being completely stripped of agency. That's usually what happens when you encounter police. The first thing that happens is [that] you're kind of stripped away from your body and subject to becoming a statistic, a thing, an object... another tool in the scope and the machinery of white supremacy. With police, it's the most outright violence. Anyways, these are constant. These are battle scars of living life as a Black male.

### *'Where are you going?'*

The first time I was accosted by the police I was in Carson, California. Carson's super close to Compton, [which is] pretty notorious for its gang violence. When I went to Compton, it was quite the opposite; it was almost a middle-class, Black, working-class suburb. Carson was its shitty step-sibling that housed Dominguez Hills, the school I went to [as an] undergraduate. It was an okay school; I had a good time there. Carson and Compton were heavily-policed areas because of Compton's reputation. That's not to say that there weren't gangsters around, but you don't need other gangsters, especially ones that are aligned with white supremacy, patrolling other gangsters. It just a volatile situation.

I was on campus walking to go meet my girlfriend at the time and I'm probably 20 years old at this point. I was a Black skater kid. I was probably wearing some baggy jeans, maybe a red members-only jacket and a button-up and some poly beads and accouterments, so on, so forth. Some skater shoes, probably Adidas. Maybe my hair was past my shoulders at the time and locked up. I stopped cutting my hair probably by the age of 14, 15.

I was walking towards the parking lot about to hop on my skateboard when the cops rolled through and they do that classic *whoop, whoop* type

thing. I don't slow down. I'm doing what I do, but then they kind of slowly roll up and ask me, "Where are you going?" This is kind of one of my first, real moments of being randomly confronted by the police. My response was, "I'm going over there." I pointed in some obtuse direction. That was obviously the wrong answer. They stopped, got out the car real violently, shut the door. One of the cops ran up to me, really aggressively and quickly and grabbed my skateboard and threw it. Already kind of suggesting me as a threat. I was like, "Okay, you threw my skateboard."

I'm on [the] college campus right now. They asked me if I go to school here. I was like, "Well, obviously I go to school here." They asked me for my ID, so I showed them my ID. They confiscated my wallet and everything, then started handcuffing me [for] no reason, no nothing. I was kind of confused at that point in time. They started putting me in the back seat of the car, ready to take me down to the police station...I probably would've ended up in prison that night for no f\*\*king reason.

*'I got my n\*\*ger wake-up call.'*

To this day I still don't know why they stopped me other than being Black. This is that your timeless card was called. This is what Paul Mooney refers to as the *n\*\*ger wake-up call*. So, my first n\*\*gger wake-up call was being shoved into a back of a police truck for no apparent reason. While they were speeding down the street, one of the cops got a call and they were talking whatever strange cop jargon on the phone. Then they stopped and opened up the doors and uncuffed me and let me loose. They drove off. That was my first experience being accosted by the cops, but obviously, these leave impenetrable psychological scars.

I got back into my dorm room and I immediately told my flatmate at the time. As I was telling him, anger started to surface in a way...a kind of a rage that was dangerous. My good friend at the time was trying to talk me down. Basically, how to speak to an enraged Black kid in such a way so that they don't harm themselves...talking me down off of a cliff, basically. That was helpful to have him around.

I got really angry, really raised. I remember at one point kind of breaking off and just sprinting, then being exhausted. I remember calling my grandfather. At that time, he was a pretty well-known preacher in South Central. My

grandfather has had multiple encounters with the police and been thrown in jail for protesting. He asked me what the cops wanted from me. I told him they didn't want anything. They just asked for my ID. Even when I showed them that I was a student, it didn't matter. My grandfather said, "Yeah, you did the right thing. They wanted to make you mad so they can take you away." I was thinking at the time, *they're taking me away anyways, without me being mad, without me being anything*. I think my grandfather was trying to reassure me that you're *alive*. So, *if you're alive, then you did something right*. In a way he was right. But what was stripped from me was any sense of dignity and [a] re-centering of inexplicable vulnerability. So, I got my n\*\*ger wake-up call. I usually get a n\*\*ger wake-up call every five years. I'm actually due for one.

*'They hung nooses in every racialized color.'*

The second one [incident] was as bewildering but not as dangerous because I wasn't by myself. I was accosted by the police in Orange County where I was living, in Fullerton. I transferred from Dominguez Hills to Cal State Fullerton. I was talking to my dad about Orange County and he brought up the 'Orange Curtain', which is this social theoretical idea that as soon as you cross into Orange County, you cross into the threshold of white supremacy. You can actually feel your body in a setting that is so adherent to white supremacy—it's a palpable thing.

My first day of school, the campus was under inspection because, earlier that morning, they'd hung nooses on the "Black tree" which is where the BSU [Black Student Union—but not only the BSU, the ASU [African Student Union] and other minority racialized groups on campus—would gather and eat lunch. They'd hung nooses along the tree in every racialized color.

I'd just gotten a job in the library and was sitting with some coworkers. One said something along the lines of, "Well, how do we know who put the nooses there anyways? It could have been anybody...it could have been one of the minority groups." [I remember thinking] *it doesn't matter who the f\*\*k put them there. The point is that they're there. The fact that they're there is a problem that stems beyond the campus, but to further exacerbate the problem is that the campus did every effort to hide this, which they did. They squashed the story*. I guess now it lives in this recording. So, yeah, I felt the Orange Curtain.

*'Living in Orange Country was a violent experience.'*

The three years I spent in Fullerton I was probably my angriest person. I was constantly enraged and exasperated. The violence there is so casual and embedded in the structures of everything. Just living in Orange County was a violent experience for me, but one also filled with beauty in excess, because Orange County is a very beautiful place, especially Laguna Beach and places in Anaheim. It's a gorgeous f\*\*king place.

One of those days I was with a group of friends. They were all of Mexican descent; two could pass for white. There was two women, one male and myself. We were going on an outing to have some fun as kids do. I was either 24, 25... maybe younger. I was in the backseat. We're about to hit the freeway when a cop car kind of rolls up on us. What was funny is that my friends in the car were joking about being pulled over by a cop just for having a Black person in the car. The joke very quickly became real—in an absurd way.

The cop flagged us down, told us to pull over, got out of the car, walked up to the driver's side and didn't ask anything to the driver. Then he tells me to roll down my window and present my license and registration. He looks at my ID, then proceeds to ask the most bizarre questions. Looks at everyone in the car and asks, "Are you all right?" Asked me if I'm selling [drugs]. Then asks the driver again, "Are you okay? Is everything all right? Why do you have this person in your car?" Everyone was giving blank-face responses. The cop smiles, then gets back in his car and drives off.

Again, my response to that was fury. It kind of f\*\*ked up the day. We sat in this kind of pitiful silence together, processing the absurdity of the situation, but also the fact that this is so casual and common. Also, the helplessness of the situation. Then we went home.

*'Can you do the moonwalk?'*

Fast forward five years later. I'm back in Los Angeles, for the past five years, on and off, in K-Town [Korea Town]. I'd been making an arduous commute to my grad school which was in Santa Clarita, another kind of heavy cop county place that used to be a Black neighborhood. One of my professors was retiring and everyone in the fine arts department were celebrating. It's six o'clock and we're all hanging out, spinning some music. This is part of my art practice. Just having

a normal outing filled with love.

I decided to wait about six to five hours and drive home because I'm paranoid and I don't trust the cops and I also don't like driving. It's three to four o'clock in the morning at this point in time. Me and my wife decide to drive home. It's rainy and super cloudy outside. I'm kind of a shitty driver so I'm driving slower than usual on the freeway. I notice a car behind me basically with no lights on, trailing me for five or six miles. After passing North Hollywood, they turn on their lights. I realized it's the cops. They signal us to pull over.

These two, young cops came up and did all the things that cops do. They flash that f\*\*king light in your face and ask you random questions. They wanted me to get out, walk the line to do the sobriety test. I was like, "Fine. I'll do the sobriety test." It's raining...it's f\*\*king cold outside. It wasn't a sobriety test...it was a humiliation test. They asked me to do all kinds of random ass shit. It wasn't the natural, *walk forward and touch your f\*\*king nose, heel or toe*. It was way more absurd, *stand on one foot, twirl around and walk backwards*. *Can you do the moonwalk? I bet you can do the moonwalk*.

My hair at this point in time is waist length locks and buttoned-up t-shirt, probably some sort of sports coat blazer, checkered. Some very slick Italian loafers, jewelry. Gold and silver sprinkled throughout. Slacks, probably a nice belt. I'd looked dandy, especially coming from a party commemorating one of my professors. Not how you want to go to prison.

I felt like, okay, *I've passed the humiliation test*. But they were like, "Well, no. Actually, we're going to have to take you in." And there's nothing you can do. I asked them, "Well, do you have to? Really, what's the point? Why?" Their response was, "Well, we already called it in. You're going to prison." I'm like, "F\*\*k this." They proceed to handcuff me. My spouse was probably freaking out.

I was handcuffed and placed in the passenger seat with no seatbelt. The other cop sat behind me, mafia-style. He then proceeds to drive like an insane person to the prison downtown. The whole entire time they were treating me real buddy, buddy, which is really disconcerting. I thought I was going to die on the drive there. Then they walked me into jail.

One of the cops kept talking about my hair and my shoes, going on and on about, "Hey, might have to cut your hair. Yeah, but good thing you're wearing those shoes because there's no laces on there. They'll probably let you keep your shoes." And I was just like, *the f\*\*k*. They forced me to take a breathalyzer

test. They wanted to take my blood. And I was like, “F\*\*k no. Just put me in the f\*\*king prison now. You’re not sticking a needle in me.” And they were like, “Oh, okay, fine. You’re going to go to the drunk tank then.”

*‘I stepped out of body.’*

I went to the drunk tank. There was me and about six other people. Every last one of them were Brown, Black or some sort of Latino. Two were in there for domestic abuse. One because they’re a wino or drunk and crazy. Another was a meth head, no teeth. The other person was this white, old school skater, in there for being drunk and disorderly. The drunk tank is all cement and a big ass, f\*\*king heavy door with a slot. There’s no bars. It really looks like a place you could put insane people.

Somehow the guards are always angry. Prison also smells horrific. The guards treat you as trash immediately: angry, aggressive, always physically abusive... . Two guards came in and picked us up, shoved us into a f\*\*king elevator, slammed the elevator up. The only difference between the drunk tank and this second version of jail was our cots. There was a food slot, caked up with old, festering, mildewing food [with] a strange yellow, white glaze of death. It was twenty of us in this space.

The last two times [getting stopped by cops], a particular kind of rage crept over my psyche. This time, I completely stepped outside of my body for the next 8 to 10 to 12 hours I was there. I got my phone call and two hours later they were taking me out. As I’m going out, one of the prison inmates asked me, “Why are you there?” I shrugged my shoulders and I said, “Because I’m Black.” Then they all laughed.

I stumbled out into the daylight, right onto [the] downtown street. I’m super f\*\*king disoriented. I’m walking down the street and then I see my people coming to get me. I get into the car and I immediately started crying. I completely break down. Oddly enough, before all this, I’d been preparing to do a performance at the Underground Museum for Prison Abolition. It was the culmination of a lot of my grad work. I hopped into the car and my people drove me home. Four or five hours later, I’m heading to the Underground Museum to do this kind of really draining performance that went unfathomably well.

It’s this really intense performance where I’m putting on a scarecrow mask,

tying my own noose around the scarecrow mask, stepping into these frames where I collapsed and [am] brought back to life by this music that shifts from a really intense blues. Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington blues, soul, to James Baldwin talking about art to a song by Flying Lotus. It shifts in each frame. The scarecrow mask is adorned with all these kinds of Blackface caricaturists. That was five hours later. Five hours earlier I was in prison.

*‘Tell your story, whatever that may be.’*

I don’t have any advice for people in similar situations. Like I said, I think it’s a really common thing that happens to Black folks. I think it’s an inevitable thing. Back to the reference with Paul Mooney. It’s like, *oh, you just had your n\*\*ger wake-up call*. Black folks commiserate with each other about these things all the time. I would say to continue the conversation. Tell your story, whatever that may be. Even try to share that story outside of people who may or may not have access to that kind of trauma. Maybe kind of step outside of your Blackness and tell that story, because this is definitely systemic—my story is not unusual.

*‘Defund the police.’*

I think police and the prison-industrial complex and the militarization of the police have exponentially turned Black folks into an endangered species, especially Black folks who are outliers in their own Black communities. I’m here to speak towards the defunding the police and abolishing the prison system. I truly think the prison system is an old vestige of slavery that’s been refined and operates with very clinical expertise, locking away immigrants and Black folks at a dangerously alarming rate, with no recourse for the people who they’re destroying. When I say *defund the police*, I mean the money could be used in different ways that can help communities by creating a better educational infrastructure. When I say *prison abolition*, I mean, treat the people in prison like human beings, just start there. I’m not asking for a lot. It’s like *f\*\*k prisons, that shit is evil*. I think doing one step, which is [to] treat the people in there like they’re humans, is enough to abolish the prison structure. It’s definitely a form of slavery, for sure.



## Anonymous

I live in what I call Jewville, which is Pico-Robertson. It's a Jewish neighborhood in Los Angeles. I moved to that community when my older child was about a year old. I'm originally from the East Coast. I'm a professional clown. I came to this world to bring joy to people and make people laugh. There was a period in my life when making other people laugh was really what kept me alive. It was also challenging to do because of the things that I was dealing with in my personal life. I didn't realize that what I was experiencing was domestic violence. I thought it was just like any typical dysfunctional marriage.

I met my ex in Budapest, where our family is from. My ex had anger management issues from the time when we were married. He had always said he was going to get therapy and he never did. He would self-medicate with marijuana to help him "calm his nerves." The only problem is when he had no pot to smoke; he'd get even angrier. My older son used to tell his dad, "You need to control your anger, daddy." My ex would promise our older son and me that he would go get anger management therapy, which he never did.

I grew up with grandparents who fought a lot. My mother and father divorced after I was born, so I didn't see many healthy relationships growing up. I thought what I was experiencing at home was kind of normal. When I'd go out into the community and ask for help, they also treated it as expected. After my ex hit me and I finally went to get help from a domestic violence center, that's when I found out my "marital troubles" weren't normal. I was a victim of domestic violence.

### *'Why does he do that?'*

In 2016, we went to Budapest to visit family. We got a beautiful apartment that my uncle had given us. I thought, *okay, now we're on a wonderful vacation. It should be pleasant. There's no reason for him to yell.* Every morning when we woke up, I'd say something to him like, "Hey, good morning." And he'd respond with, "Shut the f\*\*k up. Don't talk to me until I have my breakfast." I thought, *wow, we're on our vacation. We haven't had a vacation in years. This is not costing us anything. Why would you even talk to me like that?* That's how we spent our entire vacation.

We tried to get together with our families for a nice Sabbath dinner. His

religious family noticed that he was yelling and making me cry, week after week. One day, his brother-in-law locked him in a car and told him to cut it out and said, "Your behavior is ridiculous. You have an amazing wife. She's fulfilling all of her motherly obligations. What are you doing?" I thought that would help. I asked his sister; I said, "Hey, can you help us? Do you have any recommendations?" I asked my ex, "Can we go to a marriage counselor or something?"

His sister recommended a marriage counselor, her friend, P. E. He spoke to this marriage counselor first by himself. When I arrived, I told her how our summer had been, the incidents. At the end of our session, she said to him, "You are verbally and emotionally abusive." His jaw dropped. He was in shock. I think he was expecting her to tell me what a terrible mother or wife, person, human being I was.

She said to him, "I'm going to give you a book. It's called, *Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men*. I want you to read this book." He agreed. He read maybe two chapters of this book.

### *'I tried to turn pain into comedy.'*

Back in LA, things were getting worse. I said that I wanted a divorce, that I couldn't handle it anymore. I was becoming extremely depressed; I was barely eating. I had no motivation. I didn't want to be on this planet anymore. The only time I felt any kind of happiness was when I got to go out to a comedy club to tell jokes. I tried to turn all that pain into something that could bring me some relief. Hearing other people laugh gave me the energy to keep going. Comedy 100% became my therapy. Later on, I tried talking about the physical abuse on stage and the audience did not find it funny for obvious reasons. The pain was too raw; the audience could feel it. I was too embarrassed to tell anybody in our community that we had gone to a marriage counselor. I thought that there's a stigma that comes with being married to an abusive man. I didn't want to ruin his reputation in the community.

One Sunday afternoon [in 2018], I'm in the kitchen making my breakfast. I put my toast in the oven and he said, "Don't put the oven at a high temperature because you always burn the toast." He puts the oven on low and I put the stove back on high. He got furious. He went to rip my hair out but he ended up hitting me on the side of my head, at my right ear. My ear rang for three days.

After he hit me, I finally went to get help from a therapist at a Jewish family support center.

I thought that this marriage was still fixable—that he was fixable.

*‘I don’t know if can support myself.’*

When I called legal aid and told her that he’d hit me, she said, “You have to go report it to the police.” The police told me, “Ma’am, we’re going to have to go arrest him right now, just letting you know.” He was at home with my kids and I thought, *oh my God, that would be so traumatic for my children to see their father getting arrested.* Then I thought, *oh my God, if I have him arrested, then what? How am I going to support myself on the very little that I make? I don’t have the skill set.* There were so many unknowns. *If they arrest him, that’s it, my life is over.* So, I told the police, “You know what, scratch that. I really can’t handle all of this right now.”

I didn’t file the police report right away. I said, “If I wait a certain amount of time, can I make a report without you arresting my husband?” They said, “Yeah.” I went back a few weeks later and I filed. I played it down, but I did file the report. Just to be safe, I did take my kids to one of my friends’ houses and explained what was going on.

They didn’t arrest my ex and things were getting worse. At one point, I turned our dining room into a separate bedroom for myself. That was my safe space. He wasn’t allowed to cross this safe space. I had a curtain that I’d pull closed; he was not allowed to go into that space.

*‘I was praying, just let me die.’*

At one point, I went to see a rabbi’s wife, who I respected. I confided in her. She said to me, “You can’t stay with this man. This kind of behavior, this violence towards women, is passed down from generation to generation, from father to son. You don’t want your boys to learn this from their father.” But I didn’t listen to her because I thought that if one day he gets therapy, that he’ll change. That would be the best for the children, because children who grow up in homes with a father and a mother fare better. I didn’t listen to her.

The therapist kept saying, “You have to leave this relationship.” One day he said, “You can’t stay with him because your children are going to learn this

behavior from watching their father. Is he a good father if he says and does the kind of things that he does to you in front of the children?” That was when I had that *aha* realization...like, *maybe he’s not a good father.* He said, “I want you to read this book. It’s called, *Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men.* I said, “Oh my God, I have that book! Two years ago, we went to see a marriage counselor in Budapest.” He goes, “Well, why would she tell him to read this book? The author Lundy Bancroft didn’t write this book for abusive men. He wrote it for the women who are in abusive relationships.” I remember hysterically crying as I flipped every single page. Lundy Bancroft, word for word, explained the psychological terror that I had been experiencing for years but didn’t have the understanding of what it was. I didn’t know anything about narcissism or abuse. I just had all the preconceived notions. I thought an abused woman is a weak woman. An abused woman probably did something to deserve the abuse.

*‘He started a smear campaign against me.’*

It was Yom Kippur of 2018. The day of atonement. I was in the synagogue with my mom and my ex was at home resting in bed because he doesn’t do very well with the Yom Kippur fasts. My mom said to me, “All the fathers are in synagogue showing a good example for their kids. Your husband’s the only husband who’s not here. Tell him to come.” So, I went home and told him. He got right into my face, bright red, screamed, “You stupid f\*\*king bitch, get the f\*\*k out of my face.” I just looked at him and I thought, *wow, on Yom Kippur, the day of atonement.* I said, “You know what? As far as I’m concerned, this marriage is now officially over.” I walked over to our shelf where our Jewish marriage contract was; it’s called the *ketubah*. I ripped that ketubah up into a million pieces. I said, “This is my official way of saying that, here on earth and in the heavens, this marriage is officially done. Don’t ever touch me or come near me again.”

When I started telling him that I wanted a divorce, he started a smear campaign against me. He told his sister that I’m schizophrenic and I’m mentally ill, whatever you can imagine to ruin my reputation. At one point, I did become severely depressed, but he didn’t tell people why. At that point, I had legal aid to help with this divorce process. I wanted to do mediation. “Let’s just split everything 50-50.” At first, he agreed, but then he kept saying, “No. If you

divorce me, I'm going to make sure you never see the kids, (get) child support or alimony.”

A few months later, I reached out to a local rabbi that I thought was very compassionate. I told him, “I'm trying to split from my husband and it's been complicated. I was wondering if you wouldn't mind helping us.” My husband went into a fit of rage in front of this rabbi. He was screaming. “You're a terrible mother. You're abandoning your children and your family.” I said, “No, I'm not abandoning my children. I need to get out of this marriage.” He said, “Well, my father hated my mother, but they stayed together for the sake of the children. My grandfather hated my grandmother, but they stayed together. If we're not getting along, we still stay together for the sake of the children.” I was in shock because we'd been married for almost 18 years and I never knew this. He always portrayed his grandparents as this loving couple. It's like you don't even know who you're married to. It's terrifying.

At this point my life was so dark that I was praying to God every day; I was like, *please give me cancer. Let me just die.* That was my mantra, every single day. I was absolutely miserable.

#### *‘Financial Abuse.’*

We had this understanding that I would take care of the kids [and] he would handle the bills. It was one thing that I was happy to give him control over. He kept saying, “Things are too expensive. We can't afford this.” That used to scare me because I didn't know anything about financial literacy. We got our tax return. My cousin told me, “...he cashed out your tax return money...he doesn't plan on telling you about it...he was putting it away in case he needed it.” Well, one day I looked at the closet in the bedroom, I noticed this big brown paper bag. I looked inside; it was hundreds of dollars-worth of marijuana. I saw this strange-looking wallet. Lo and behold, I saw \$5,000 in cash. I thought, *oh my God, here's the money that he was hiding.*

I decided to use that money to pay our credit card bills.. One night, he called me...I could hear the children hysterically crying in the background. He said, “You effing bitch, come back right now. You stole my money.” I said, “This is *our* money that needs to go to pay our credit card bills.” He said, “No, this is *my* money... If you don't come back, I have a pair of scissors. I'm going to cut every single outfit of yours in the closet. I'm also going to report my car stolen.

The police are going to arrest you. Come back or I'll kill you.”

I was terrified because I was driving his car, which my mom helped him buy. I snuck back to the garage and I switched the vehicles out and took my car. I left and I stayed with my new friend. She was a very understanding, loving, supportive friend. She lived very far away from the Jewish community and there were no judgments. That was so refreshing.

#### *‘I had to file a restraining order.’*

After this incident with the tax return money, I went down to the police station to file a restraining order. They said, “That's something you have to do at a courthouse. By now, it's four p.m. and there's no way I can go to the courthouse. I go back home. I'm with my children, making dinner and I get a knock at the door. Two policemen ask me to come out. They say, “Your husband reported you for child abuse.” I say, “What are you talking about? What do you mean to arrest me?” I had to sit down; my head was spinning. Then the officer spoke to my kids and realized that there wasn't a situation that warranted arresting me. I was terrified, distraught. The idea my ex would put my children in a situation where, *what if I had been arrested and taken away?*

After I filed this restraining order, he immediately got a lawyer. May this woman burn in hell. My lips to God's ears. She is an Orthodox Jewish woman who is highly respected in the community. She immediately filed for divorce and called my legal aid. They threatened me: if I don't drop this restraining order, they'll file for divorce and not let me take my children to the East Coast for the summer. We had been looking forward to this all year. That broke my heart. I said to the legal aid [agency], “We don't have money for camp. What are my options?” She said, “Well, we get a stay-away order instead. It's like a restraining order.” I agreed. Had somebody said to me that the stay-away order was worth about as much as toilet paper I would not have been so quick to drop that restraining order. He violated every single thing in that stay-away order. The good thing is that I did go to the East Coast for two months and the kids did have an incredible time. That I'm happy about.

#### *‘Women in religious communities lack support.’*

When I got back from the summer, I found out that he'd told the entire Jewish

community all these lies about me. That hurt me so badly. I don't ever want to be a part of a religious community ever again. Years later, I've learned this type of smear campaign and lack of support for women in religious communities isn't unique to only the Jewish community and is called religious abuse.

There was no repercussion for him violating the stay-away order. He was ordered to pay child support and alimony...he didn't. He stayed true to his word. Child support services weren't even able to find him and garnish his wages. For almost a year, he didn't pay any child support or alimony. He stalked me through the neighbors. I didn't even know what coercive control was until recently. I tried to get a new restraining order, but my legal aid dropped out a day or two before my trial. And my ex's lawyer lied through her teeth...she kept making excuses for him, even though she knew he'd violated everything in the stay-away order.

*'What's working.'*

Moving forward, one of the things that helped me is educating myself, joining various groups, hearing other women's stories. I hated the DV therapy in person; I didn't want my face to be seen. Ever since COVID, we can call into group therapy sessions; that's been life-changing for me. I love that. I've also joined a group helping victims of intimate partner abuse who suffered financial abuse. They're amazing. We meet every week. Everything that's on their plan is a hundred percent what we survivors need to get past this, everything from banking reform to stopping these men from using the court systems, to getting the protection that we need. This new coercive control bill that Senator Rubio passed is excellent, I think. I hope that judges will enforce it. Please read the policies they are working on.

I'm hopeful that one day things will change. I hope that one day family courts will allow trials by jury. That would help protect us—mothers—from abusive men. We rely on a single judge in family court and they're often biased or (too) tired to care about the details. A jury would be helpful to see all the evidence we have to prove they're abusive and not fit parents. I implore you to check out the work done by <https://www.womenscoalitioninternational.org/>. I think their work would help us—survivors—a great deal.

## Anonymous

I live in LA. We were immigrants to this country, from El Salvador. My mom worked two jobs. She went and got me from El Salvador when I was three; I hadn't seen my mom since she left me when I was three months [old]. At the time of my assault, I was four.

Her younger brother had just gotten here from El Salvador. My mom would leave me in his care while she went to work and we'd play around; he was really friendly. I remember one day we were playing pillow fights and I remember him hitting me hard. I started to cry and then he started to comfort me, say he was sorry. I can still close my eyes and remember him sexually assaulting me. After it happened, I remember taking a shower, I remember seeing a lot of blood.

I was scared of saying something; I didn't know it was wrong. I remember being quiet during that time in my life. My mom would always ask me what was wrong with me and I was like, *nothing*. I was rebellious. My mom was like, "Why are you so rebellious?" I don't know why I was rebellious, if it was because of the sexual assault or my mom leaving me at a very young age. I really didn't know my mom either, but I remember doing those things...being so mad.

*'I never said anything.'*

Then it happened again. I was around seven years old when I was sexually assaulted by my cousin. I remember another cousin always hugging me. I was being assaulted by a lot of family members. I was really feminine; I'm transgender now. When I was young, guys would always be like, "Why do you look like a girl? Why are you so girly?" I didn't know it was wrong. I was still developing and getting to know myself and why I liked guys and why I was different and bullied in school because I was feminine. I never said anything until I was 13. I remember crying to my sister one day when I told her that I'd been sexually assaulted.

I didn't want to tell my mom; my mom didn't understand me. When I turned 14, I told her what had happened and also that I was gay. By that time, my uncle had already gotten deported so there was nothing to do then. I didn't tell her about my other assault because I didn't know it was wrong.

*'The only thing I knew was sex to survive.'*

At 15, I ran away from home and ended up in Hollywood. I met a lot of young kids that had experienced the same things that I went through. I remember going to this club called Arena...you'd see all these young gay kids. I found people that are just like me. I started doing sex work.

Sexual assault was always something that could happen. I didn't know it was sexual assault because I was so young, but now I realize it. I was 15, 16 years old...older guys would pick me up. Now I see the wrong done, but at the time, I didn't see it as wrong. That was a way of survival because in my house nobody understood me. In the streets, people had experienced the same things I was going through.

I did sex work for all my teenage years. I saw it as *these men cared for me*. Then maybe around 17, 18, I started dressing up in women's clothing. That's when I noticed something changed and was different with my gay friends. I felt more feminine...I started transitioning.

I faced a lot of violence when I was out on the streets. I'd try to get jobs but I was so feminine, I wouldn't get hired. I'd put in applications where my other friends that were straight would get hired. The only thing I knew was sex to survive.

*'I was raped several times.'*

Violence was every day of my teenage years. When I'd go out, violence was always around me. I remember guys coming and beating up me and my friends. I started accepting it. We'd get violence from the police; the police would treat us really badly. I was raped several times. When we'd report stuff, they'd be like, "Well, you guys are out here...you guys are looking for it." There was never support from nobody. I remember there was an older gay man [with] a van on the streets and he'd give out coffee, condoms, bus tokens and connect us to different resources [such as] LGBT agencies. That's where I learned about condom usage and HIV. It was sexual, but I was exposed to something safe.

*'I saw life straight in the eye.'*

I remember one of the most violent attacks that really changed my life and

made me look for something other than sex work at the time. I remember going out to a club and afterwards I'd always go buy food, like at a truck stop. I was crossing the street with my friend and these guys started misgendering us. Out of nowhere, they park[ed] and start[ed] chasing me and my friend. It was maybe four guys. I'm running for my dear life because these guys had bats. I didn't know where to go. If I went to the street that was darker maybe they'd find me easier. So I ran into the freeway, trying to run away from them.

I remember crossing four or five lanes on the freeway and speeding up because they were still following me. When I got to the other side a cab driver opened his door. He was able to tell me, *come in you'll be fine*. He said *lay down* and I laid down. Then I saw the truck coming in back of us but thank God, they didn't see where I went. That really changed me because I saw life straight in the eye. I knew that they had bats...I was young...there was no way I was going to be able to resist that.

I stopped working in the streets and was really traumatized. I didn't want to eat so I called my mom. "Mom, I need to come home." I didn't tell her why. I told her I was struggling because there was no way of making money to pay my bills. I went back home.

One day I went to visit my friend in Hollywood and this van passed by. This lady was doing outreach. She told me she had job opportunities. I was like, "Yeah, I'm interested." She connected me to this organization. I was able to get a job at a coffee shop.

*'It hurts deep down inside.'*

I've been in Hollywood since 1995. I could tell you something yearly that happened to me. Maybe I'd still get attacked even if I wasn't on the streets working. I was getting harassed on the bus. I started thinking it was because of my gender identity, that people were not accepting. It's really hard because as a person, when you feel you're not valued because of who you are, it hurts deep inside. Knowing that someone can judge you by the way you look, without knowing where you come from and what you do, the good things that you do for others.

I have so many stories that I've faced on the streets... being drugged, being chased...the stories keep going. I've seen friends run over just for being trans, bleeding on the streets. I've seen my friends get killed. They've been on

the news; they've been burned alive. I'd expect this in my home country (El Salvador) because that's where we fled. But for trans people living in the LA area? It's a warzone here, dealing with people that don't understand who we are.

*'Employment has kept me safe.'*

Thank God, I haven't faced any violence the past seven years. Having the opportunities from agencies that fight for us to have employment has kept me safe. I'm blessed that I'm able to work at an agency where we are a center for violence prevention for trans people, to teach others and talk about my experience of how we keep fighting. I work in the community and support trans people facing this violence daily. The only support for trans people is sometimes sex work. I have privilege now, to have a car and not use public transportation [and] not to be violently attacked. My roommate does use public transportation and she gets assaulted on a daily basis.

*'Change policies so they can benefit us.'*

When I was growing up, I didn't have resources; they were limited. I had faith and now I'm here and able to provide assistance. There's hope. We'll see the light at the end of the tunnel. But without those programs, I wouldn't be where I'm at. Now we have agencies, we have programs that help us. We need support [and] to receive opportunities to succeed in life: housing opportunities, more resources and employment. There's more to do, but there are places that will help you; there are resources now.

We [also] need policies that protect transgender [and] nonbinary people. So, policy makers, change policies so that they benefit us, instead of degrade us or incarcerate us, for being who we are and for the lifestyles that we choose. Instead of condemning and punishing us for survival sex, give us resources where we can get jobs and be successful.

## Alicia Rhoden

I got married when I was about 14 years old. I was a daughter of a Pentecostal minister and I wanted to get away from home. I came from a very large family in Kalamazoo, Michigan. My parents knew how to use the belts and the stick. They were sometimes very cold and didn't know how to give hugs—my mom didn't.

I need to say, part of the oppression I experienced stemmed from the church. For many years I let religion rule me. I thought that it was important to live what God said. The rules were very strict. I was told by my father that if you listen to secular music, I'd get beaten. If you wore your dress too short, you got beaten. If you wore makeup, you were beaten, because that was against God.

When I was 14, I met this beautiful man—very handsome, very muscular. He was much older than me. He told me, “You're pretty. You got it going on.” He was educated and I thought he was something special. At first, he made me feel wonderfully alive. He made me think I was special and that I was the only one. Being so young and wanting to get out of there, I lost who I was. See, back then the church did not tell you that domestic violence was bad. We were taught, *you stay there. You do not leave that man. If he beats you, you must have done something. You need to pray about it. You live with that man and don't get a divorce or you're going to hell.* I couldn't really say much to my parents because my father, being a minister, would say that the Bible said, *you stay with your husband, no matter what.* They didn't give you any counseling. They never said that was wrong. They kept saying, “The Bible says it's all right to be beaten. You have no say.” I believed that.

Back then my self-esteem was not great. I was looking for acceptance, somebody to say, *you're important, you can make it.* I hadn't learned how to do that myself yet. After maybe two years he started fighting me, hitting me, saying, “You're ugly. You're a b\*\*ch. You'll never be nobody.” Saying, “What can you do for me?” I couldn't understand at first why he was doing that. I tried to change, but you can't always change for another person. I started dressing differently, I started fixing his meals differently. I thought that would work. But I was still the b\*\*ch.

I ended up having two twin daughters by him and even [then] the abuse did not stop. Now, he was careful that they didn't see it, but I know they heard

it. I see it because of the violence that erupted in their lives years later—it was because of the violence they heard.

*'You've got a sissy disease.'*

One day I went to a doctor's appointment and received some tests. The doctor told me, “Number one, you're not coming in this door no more unless you come in the back door, because you've got a sissy disease or gay disease. You mess up my practice.” I remember the doctor saying, “You're going to die. Call your parents. There's no medication. You're just going to be dead. You must be a drug addict. You must be gay. You did something in life to get this disease.”

I did not understand because I was young and I was not gay. I was certain this man was wrong. I couldn't talk to my parents. I went home and asked my husband, “What is the gay disease?” He started laughing and said, “You know I like men more than I like you; that's the way it is. I only married you because my parents wanted to change me. I don't like your kind. You don't swing a d\*ck like I want.” Me being young, I didn't understand that. I thought maybe it's because I'm ugly or because I'm not helping him.

I decided since we had children, I needed to stay. *Maybe he'll change or maybe he'll stop doing what he does and then I'll be the one that he wants.* He kept being hateful. I was called names every day: “You stupid b\*\*ch. You have nothing to offer me but death. One day I'm going to leave you and those children and you'll be by yourself.”

*'They would leave my meals outside the door.'*

It had gotten so bad that I went to the domestic violence shelter in Kalamazoo to get help. Back then, in the early '80s, they didn't have counseling or survivor groups. All they could offer you was a bus ticket. They put me on a bus with my two little girls and I ended up in Los Angeles, California. I was to go to a shelter for people who had domestic violence issues. When they found out that I had this disease, they said, “We can't put you around other people. You'll give them the disease. Your children can't go around or play with anybody.” They said, “You know you can't stay in a domestic abuse shelter, because that's not for people like you. I mean, you've been beaten, but probably you got this because you were doing something you had no business doing. You're not a good

mother.”

They put me in a little separate cottage and got me to the welfare department as soon as possible. They actually said they were worried about losing their funding. They’d bring me my meals with a knock on the door and leave it outside so they didn’t have to touch me. They threw away my silverware and my cooking pot. They didn’t want to be around me. When I went to [seek] social services I was questioned if I was going to give my kids that disease. *How did you get it?* They said I was not fit. They took my kids aside and asked them questions like, *had I tried to give this disease to them? Had I bitten them? Do you know what your mother has?* To me that was very disrespectful, but being a woman from another state, I didn’t know the resources here.

*‘There was only fear.’*

I ended up getting a referral to an HIV shelter. Back in the ‘80s, ‘90s, into 2000s... you’d go [there] if you were dying from AIDS. You’d have your children there with you. You were provided a room, you’d get a meal and they’d teach you about planning your life because you were going to die. Most everybody I knew in that shelter died. At that time there was no hope. There was only fear.

A lot of our children were angry. Our children who went to school nearby were fearful because they were known as *those AIDS kids that came out of that AIDS place*. The school was afraid of all of us. When the social worker took us to pick up our children from school, she’d tell the principal, “You know, their mama got AIDS.”

My husband ended up coming to Los Angeles. He was sick with AIDS. Being the good wife. I said, *I got to take care of him. I have our children. I cannot let his children see their dad dying like that*. He went into a hospice weighing 30 pounds. This was not the cute Black man that I thought, with the muscles. He couldn’t even clean himself and needed help to go to the toilet. I remember seeing him every day because I thought that it was important that my kids needed to see him too. I remember going there on the night he was dying and saying, “Did you ever love me?” He looked at me and said, “I love the hell out of my children, but b\*\*ch, you were never loved. You are going to go to hell.” Being so young... in my ‘20s...I was very hurt and angry.

To be honest, I told God, *let him die this night*. That night he died of seizures. I remember some people in the hospice saying, “She’s just like him.

She’s going to end up in that same bed and she’s going to die too.”

*‘Those kids are sin.’*

I was in the shelter for a long time. Then I got so sick all I did was throw up; I couldn’t eat. I also had a stroke. It was to the point that my children needed to go into foster care. My parents said they didn’t want to help because they thought I’d sinned and those kids are sin. I remember my father said “I’m not taking that b\*\*ch’s kids. They’re not going to embarrass my church.” I went into hospice in Los Angeles. It was very frightening. I was young and couldn’t communicate well with my kids. My kids were in and out of foster care and people wanted to split them up. Before I left the HIV shelter, they made sure I got Social Security because they thought I was going to be dead anyway and my kids needed somewhere to live. A family member took them because she knew I got a little bit of Social Security. She got my check.

*‘I’m going to die with you too.’*

Soon I noticed my children started to change. I found out my family member began to prostitute them for money. Now my mind said, *even though she had my blank check, the b\*\*ch is going to pay*. My children were messed up. They were put back in foster care, back and forth, back and forth. They wanted to stay in the hospice with me. They’d run away, hide in the closet in the hospice.

One day my youngest twin said, “Mom, if you decide you’re going to die, I’m going to die with you too, because I can’t be without you. And by the way, I’m pregnant. I’m going to kill my baby.” Now my mind said, *She’s too young. I can’t let her die*.

I decided I was going to live. I decided, *I need to get an apartment*. They were talking about Section 8. Because I had AIDS, I was able to get my first Section 8. It was special to me because me and my children had a home.

*‘I learned to love myself.’*

I needed a chance to be who I am. I’m a very stubborn Black woman and so I decided to get an education. I first went to community college, got an Associate degree. Then I ended up going to Nyack College and got my Master’s [degree]

in social work. I'm now a social worker. I work with the mothers who were told that they're nobody, because I was nobody back then. I teach domestic violence groups now to the batterer and the survivors. I believe there can be change in that batterer and I believe that women who've been beaten need love and have to learn to rebuild their lives. It's not easy. It took me many years to learn...to be on Section 8...to work...to get an education... . I feel that I'm somebody; I'm empowered now. I'm a grandmother of seven. Both my daughters have become something special.

I've learned through my trauma and my abuse that it was part of my journey. And you know what? I really didn't know what God was until I learned to love myself. I've learned that the church can hinder you sometimes. Pastors don't understand how to talk to a woman who's being beaten. It's not something that's taught in seminary school. I know because I became a minister. I wanted to help men and women. I wanted them to see that God was a God of love.

*'If you have to leave, leave.'*

I want to tell women who are mothers that sometimes we think that our children will be hurt if we take them away from their fathers. I thought I was breaking up the family; I thought they needed a daddy. In actuality, I was teaching them violence. I taught them how to fight. Both my twins who are 39 now went through domestic violence, just like me. They both said to me when I told them to get out of it, "Well, mom, he only does it every now and then. And he loves me and I got kids and I just can't." And I'd say, "If you have to leave, leave. They're still the father of your children, but he doesn't need to be around your children when he's hitting and fighting—he actually needs help. You need to understand that you can be their mother without him and you can work." Because some moms say, "I'll starve. I don't have any skills. I can't do anything if I don't have his money." It's okay to get welfare until you can get better or Social Security. But have a goal and have a dream. Know that you're an empowered woman, not a victim. You can get educated. You can work.

I'd also say, if you're thinking about getting back in a relationship after domestic violence, learn to heal yourself first. You cannot get into a relationship if you have broken pieces. Learn to love yourself, get to know who you are and say, *I'm okay*. If you have children, spend more time with them. Know one

day those broken pieces will be fixed. It does not happen quickly. You do need therapy, because you've gone through trauma. But as you work on yourself, it becomes a story where you can help each other, help others. Know it's part of your journey and you can heal.

I would say to the woman, "Let your children know that they did not cause this. Let them know that you still love them. Let them know their dad still loves them. Do not talk bad to them about their dads." He's still their dad. Because that causes trauma too. Children will love both parents either way. I learned [that] a long time ago when my husband would beat me and take my children. I'd call the welfare and the law and say, "He's taken my children." Those children wanted to stay because they loved their dad.

*'Help women and children to stay together.'*

I would like to change how the court system treats a woman who's been battered. When there's a domestic violence issue, sometimes the woman is arrested, even though she was beaten. Because you were beaten, you're just seen as a bad mother. Sometimes the courts order the child welfare system to take the kids. They will look at your record and see if you were beaten before. That needs to change. There need to be workers trained in the child welfare and court system to help the woman and children stay together.

The policy makers have to look at the men that get beaten too. I get clients every day...they get beaten by women. Women do batter. I also feel that there needs to be a locked shelter for men with their children.

*'Cut back on the red tape.'*

We need to look at how long it takes to house a woman who's been in a domestic violence shelter. Sometimes, when a woman can't find a home, she'll go back to the thing she's comfortable with. I know that there are certain waiting periods in domestic violence shelters. If you have a worker helping the woman, there needs to be a quicker period of time where she gets Section 8 [housing]—in three to six months. Cut back on the red tape. Social services needs to be fast when the woman gets her money, her food stamps, her check... they need to be ready to move.

I know they have a thing where they tell the woman she sometimes has to

work, but maybe she's not ready to work yet. Maybe she needs to go to school. Maybe she needs therapy. Maybe she needs to bond with her children. Let her do that. Don't rush her into that survival trauma.

*'The child is feeling what the mother is feeling.'*

There need to be services for those children. The mom needs to be a part of that therapy because that child is hurting, that mom is hurting. A one-stop location where the woman is getting all the services that she needs would be good.

Teenagers need help too. They're in dating situations and some of them have already started to batter. LGBTQ+ organizations do a lot of groups for kids that are battered. Domestic violence education has to start in elementary, junior high [and] high school, in a way that's understood for their age. That child is feeling what that mother's feeling when she's being beaten. Groups for the elderly who are being abused in domestic violence would be good too.

I also hope [that] when a woman presents to a doctor that she's been beaten, that that doctor understands. He's not chastising her like, "Oh my God, why didn't you do this?" You need to be supported safely. You need to get a social worker that can help you, because sometimes we fear the doctor's going to call the police. We fear our children are going to be taken.

*'There should be mandatory training for every pastor.'*

I think there needs to be an understanding in the church, especially the Black church. Churches need domestic violence groups. Pastors don't understand how to talk to a woman who's being beaten. It's not something that's taught in seminary school. In the church you're told, *just pray about it*. Well, how are you going to pray about it if you can't even talk to your pastor? I believe, after a while, when you've been beaten so much, you wonder, *is there a God?* I know. I became a minister because I wanted to help men and women. I wanted them to see that God was a God of *love*.



## Indigenous Mother

I was born in a small community hospital in East Los Angeles on East Olympic Boulevard, just a few miles from where I grew up. For me, East Los Angeles was home and had a very small town feel. I was always aware of the potential for danger almost intuitively, but also by design. My parents were a trucker and a homemaker and they would never condone violence. I never felt completely safe there, often walking to school or even just around the block and encountering predators. This led to me wearing long-sleeve [shirts] and baggy clothes to deter them as I became an adolescent.

The evening before my first day of school as a first grader, I remember my father standing in our living room, teaching me how to defend myself and how to hold a fist. He gave me confidence as I walked to school just a block away. I never got into a fight in my life, at least not one where I couldn't fight back.

*'It was important to know we were Apache.'*

I really didn't have an identity growing up. In elementary school, I discovered that I was different from others in my class. I knew I wasn't Mexican. I thought I was American, but the kids said I wasn't. I remember one day during recess, a group of classmates sat in a circle. Someone asked, "What are you?" Each person went around and answered. "Americans," said the white kids. "Mexicans," said the Mexican kids. I didn't answer.

The next question would stay with me the rest of my life: "If you could change one thing about yourself, what would that be?" It was 1979 in the city of Montebello, by [the] handball court. Every child answered in a revealing way. Most said they wanted their brown eyes to be blue or have blond hair or lighter skin. I said I liked my brown hair and wanted to be taller. This was my first introduction to racism, [at] just six years old. Other than that, race wasn't really talked about in our home.

In my early 20s, my grandmother said she had a vision of her own death; she needed to share something with me. It was important for me to know that we were Apache, that her father Key was born on a reservation in New Mexico, lived in a teepee, even lived in a teepee as a child. She died a couple weeks later. I came to discover that my father's grandmother was also Apache, from Arizona. I finally knew who I was. Life made a little more sense after that.

*'I was not prepared to understand a sociopath.'*

By my 30s, I had completed vocational school, some college. I'd volunteered as a rape advocate in the hospital. I also started participating in traditional ceremonies and worked professionally and was a successful executive assistant until I met my ex. I'd been at a friend's house and he kept bothering me. His friend kept telling me how great a guy he was. I finally gave in and went on a date, breaking a rule I had at the time [of] not dating guys from Orange County because it seemed we never agreed politically.

In 2008, we started a relationship. We were in love, it wasn't chance. We spent so much time together; we even began a business together. I became pregnant [in] 2010. That's when the physical abuse began. Until that point, it was mostly emotional abuse. I remember the first time he locked me in a closet after I disagreed with him on something. I was pregnant. He physically assaulted me, pushed a wooden bar on top of me and I cried out in pain and shock. Then he pushed me and pulled me into the small closet locked it—it was punishment. There were even others around—his friends—but no one came to help. I felt alone, helpless and confused.

I didn't understand how I got to this place in my life. I didn't know what I was going to do. I knew that being locked in this closet was the least of my problems. I was trained in domestic violence. I was a professional, had a job, a business, a car, rented a nice two-bedroom house in Alhambra. There I was, pregnant and in a violent relationship. I was respected by my peers, had close loving friendships, but how could I tell them what I got myself into? I felt deeply ashamed especially after I had been so in love. *Maybe things would change... how could they get worse? I'm sure he'll apologize. I mean, he must have a heart...* . This was the sentiment that kept me in this vicious cycle of abuse. I had our baby, 8 pounds, 16 ounces in] 2010. But things got even worse. He'd lock me out of our home, play cat-and-mouse with our baby, keep me from him.

*'I had Stockholm Syndrome.'*

I wasn't prepared in any way, shape or form of understanding that [there] are people [who] are sociopaths; they're incapable of empathy and there is no cure. He'd hit me, push me, spit on me, empty drinks on me. He threw furniture at me, broke my things and even pushed me out of moving cars. He kidnapped

me, lied to me, forced me to have sex in public, be filmed, tied up. He didn't allow me medical care when I needed it. He kept me from friends and family. I'd been confident, beautiful, healthy, successful, [and] joyful before him. He boasted that he broke me.

He discovered a new way to abuse me. He would try to force me to leave our son in dangerous situations. He'd leave with our son and not come back for days or weeks, not telling me where our child was.

I could say at that point, I had Stockholm Syndrome, at least what I knew of it. I'd always forgive him. I was in so much pain—bruised, battered—but I only saw my life with him in it. The violence was to be my existence. It took seven years of abuse to come to this realization. A friend of a friend who knew the violence I was experiencing in our relationship reached out to me. She, too, was a victim of domestic abuse and violence. She was then a survivor.

*'My family are white supremacists.'*

My ex was white, [of] German descent. One day in bed, he says, "We need to raise our son white. We need to raise him in my culture, not yours, because it's superior. Your family is in poverty; mine isn't." I said, "How so? They work hard; they're honest, kind and respectful. They show love towards each other, [while] yours often lied to you." I knew his father would buy and sell EBT cards from drug addicts so they could buy more drugs...things like that. I pointed that out, thinking I could reason with him. We're disagreeing about how we raise our child Native American. My ex said something that would ultimately end our relationship for good but it sparked an even worse form of violence. He said, "You know my family are white supremacists; they're racists and you failed to convince them that your race is good."

He told me that he'd told his mother that he finally told me the truth. She came to visit me for the first time and confirmed that. She said, "I'm racist. My husband is racist, my mother and my father were racist. My husband's parents were racist. All we want is for our son to be with a normal, white Anglo-Saxon woman." I was shocked. I can't even say the N word because my family never allowed me to say those things. After that conversation, I understood the phrase *Black Lives Matter*.

*'I was frozen.'*

When my ex would cheat on me, his family knew about it. They often ignored me when I was talking. His family would often encourage me not to call the police, saying that *smart girls don't call the police*. They told me *just be silent* when he hit me or yelled at me; *do nothing*. They would tell him to take our son and never return.

One time my ex kidnapped and assaulted me and took me to his parent's home in Orange County. He left me in the car with my son, [then] aged one and a half. I wasn't allowed out of the car. I couldn't move, I was frozen, curled up in a ball with my face swollen. I was frozen in fear and I felt empty, numb. I sat in the car for a few hours. It started to get dark when my ex's mother came over and told me to come inside, so I did. I slept in the same bed with my ex and did whatever he wanted me to do. I told my ex's mother and my son's grandmother and they did nothing. They blamed me; they said it was my fault. I was afraid.

*'They saw me as a criminal.'*

I think it was 2015. My life didn't matter. They saw me as a criminal, [a] liar and someone who had tainted their family bloodline. My ex's mother and my son's white grandmother tried to convince me to give my son up for adoption. She tried to tell me he had autism. I knew better. Then began the parental alienation and abduction. [In] 2016, I tried to put an end to the withholding of my son who was four, after I saw a photo of him on Facebook crying, posted by a friend of my ex's family.

One day his grandmother agreed to drive my son back home to me because she wanted to go to the hair salon. She told me that my ex had left our son with local prostitutes to babysit and our son, aged four, had been exhibiting sexual behavior. He'd undress himself with the dolls in the bathroom in the middle of the night. She discovered this a few times. She blamed me irrationally saying, "Maybe you were the one molesting him." I felt worthless as a parent, but I gathered the strength and got a deadbolt for our door.

*'I regret I ever let him go.'*

He called a family services agency. He called law enforcement. He called my

landlord and threatened him so he'd kick me out, but he didn't. He harassed my landlord, neighbors and anyone who'd listened to him. The sheriff came to do a welfare check. They told me that my ex told them I'd kidnapped my son and was beating him and had delusions, that I was crazy and not fit to care for our son. When they arrived, my son was happily playing with his neighbor, healthy, [with] no signs of abuse. The next day, a family agency investigator interviewed me and my son. They said the same thing, that my ex claimed I was on drugs. I took a test; it was negative and the case was not opened. It was clear that he was making false allegations.

My son told me he overheard a neighbor saying his daddy wanted to take him from me. He burst into tears, in such a deep sobbing for a four-and-a-half-year old. I held him and told him, "I will protect you. I will not let that happen." I was naïve.

My ex and I had a notarized agreement that he'd visit with our child just for two days. He said his mother wanted to see him and they [had] planned a birthday party for my son, who'd be five. Before they left, I told my son, "You are coming back." I taught him how to pray and to invoke angels, how they were like superheroes. *You can call them for protection.* He was so excited. I got to [the] park in Altadena where we were to meet and exchange for the visit. I could hear my son as he was walking away with his father talking about angels. But my son was never to come back. I discovered my ex had transferred him out of school in Pasadena to Santa Monica. I wouldn't see or talk to my son for another year. I can't help but cry when I think of those days. All I could think about, *where was he, was he okay?* It wasn't until my second court date that I saw him.

*'I naively believed the judge would hear me.'*

I didn't go to the first court date; I was frozen in fear. My ex had kept in contact with me, threatened my life, making sure that I knew he was willing to go to jail to keep me from telling the truth. I tried to get legal help and reached out to an agency. But in my despair, I couldn't put it all together. The judge gave us joint custody.

My ex filed for full custody in Santa Monica. Eleven months had passed. When he was ready to serve me the papers, he called and said he'd decided to bring our son for a visit and court documents, too. When we met, I didn't see

my son. I screamed at him and said, "How dare you trick me?!"

The court date came, I was better prepared. When I arrived at the courthouse, I got in line and a few minutes later, heard a voice that sounded just like my son's voice. It was my son, now almost six, playing on an iPad. He looked at me with a confused look. I picked him up and held him until we got inside the courthouse. He'd later tell me that he didn't know who I was at first. He said his daddy had told him that I died. He apologized to me. He said, "Mommy, please forgive me that I had to forget about you because it hurt my whole body to think of you. I'm so sorry." That devastated me. I did my best to nurture him.

The judge gave us joint custody, but the physical custody [was] with my ex because that's where he was living for those months. I had phone calls and weekend visits. My son was very traumatized. He'd say over and over, "I'm a bad boy. I'm a bad boy." He'd tell me that his heart is empty. I nurtured him. I said, "Don't give up. My son, there's hope." I'd tell him about the civil rights movement and spirituality. He acknowledged his Native American name Moon Wolf. But a dark cloud followed him.

*'It was such a miracle.'*

That's where my son is good. He came back to me. It was such a miracle but I was focused on getting him back. I called it mommy bootcamp. Every day, I taught him about proper behavior, respect. My son says to me, "Mommy, you're the best mommy in the universe. [But] there's one thing I'm mad at you for." He was about six-and-a-half when he told me this: "You let my daddy take me. He locked me in a dark room. He hurt me, did bad things to me. He taught me to do bad things to him." I said, "Baby love, I'm sorry, I didn't know how to get you back...I will do better." He said, "Mommy, promise me that if my daddy tries to take me again, you will say 'No'. Promise me, you'll fight like a wild animal." I said, "I promise. You're safe now. Mommy will protect you; your daddy will never take you again."

We had 11 months of healing. He learned how to read, write, even meditate. Until one day, his father did come back and I said *no!* But he lifted him up and took him. I couldn't stop him. I called law enforcement; I showed them my order. They said it was expired...there was nothing I could do. I felt helpless.

Unbeknownst to me, he'd taken pictures of my son standing on trash near

our home. Without interviewing me, they detained my son. They gave him [the father] full custody. He continued to abuse him, even locked him in a room in Pasadena. I tried to tell them everything; it was really hard. They knew I was an Indian. They designated him [an] Indian child, but that didn't matter in the courtroom—they ignored it.

We're all naïve of the way racism shapes the violence in our communities. I know it's very hard for some people to hear [it] when I say it and I mean it. I know it's true—the courts are very racist. Family courts are racist. Native Americans have this thing called 'one heart and two hearts.' The two-hearted people have, like, this evil in them. Maybe racist people are all-two hearted.

*'My son was being violent.'*

During the case, my son began molesting kids in his school. He began being violent. There were three independent child-mandated reports of child abuse and the agency did nothing. I still had visitation and joint custody, but my ex would withhold him from me because my son started asking me for help from his father's abuse.

I took him to the police so he could tell them. [But] the police blamed me, said I was making it up, I was trying to cause conflict. I begged them. I said, "No, that's not the case, please help him." The agency investigated. They ignored my son's testimony that his father was locking him in a dark room and then hurting him; they tried to say he has autism. They did a DNA test without permission—the perfectly normal boy. [Then] they closed the case and gave him full custody. He continued to withhold him [my son] from me.

Recently, during the pandemic, he violated a court order. He took him to a secluded cabin in the Sequoia National Forest. A mandated reporter had reported him for child abuse because my son looked very emaciated when he got back and was medicated; she was mandated to do that. I had her testify in court [but] the judge denied her testimony, saying I probably convinced her, because it said in my child welfare file that I'm very convincing. Currently my son is out of state with his father; he's supposed to come this holiday for visit. He told me that he will not be coming. This is called domestic violence by proxy.

That's the end of my story. I realized that there was nothing I could do to help my son. I didn't know it could be impossible until the very end, when it's

impossible. I feel it. I read the welfare code, I read the courts, I knew that I had rights because I had custody of my child. We're in Los Angeles, in a modern city, universities around us. But you walk into child welfare organizations. When law enforcement first came, they could have offered me some type of support, recognizing from their experience that I didn't know what was happening. They should know to say, "Hey 'Indigenous mother', you may need legal help in the future because we've seen this before. We know what's going to happen." They could have helped, but they didn't. There could have been help at every level in the courtroom.

I do have attention deficit disorder (ADD). It mostly comes out when I'm stressed. They'd say that ADD was a mental illness and I [should] cope with it. But my lawyer said, "No, it's not a mental illness." They weren't aware of that and they were very biased. They said that my child was an Indian child, but they denied him the protection of that designation. When I went to the court with a move-away order, the judge didn't read my documents. I had, like, 80 exhibits: assessments, police reports, everything. He appointed a minor counsel who didn't read them. She threw them back at me, said they weren't sanitized. I stood there and all I could see were my ancestors. All I could think of was all the children that were taken from their families. I saw it very vividly.

*'I'm going to continue fighting.'*

I'm very grateful to be able to fight, to share my story; it's not ended yet. I'm resilient. As many times as my ex tried to kill me, I'm not going to die; I'm going to continue [fighting]. I really understand that saying '*what doesn't kill you, makes you stronger*' and I've gotten very strong. I continued to fight because my ancestors were not allowed [to]; they were slaughtered. I taught my son how to say that he's resilient, he's my little Apache warrior. He's part German too. I have to remind myself that God protects him and he's just like me—he'll be okay. I have to keep doing that.

I met this lady in Sacramento. She invited me and a handful of, as I say, determined and relentless women who've experienced family service agencies and courts and all of this racism, to be on a subcommittee. We came up with a demand letter. We're working on policy reform. We worked out everything that needs to be changed for children to have safety, because, right now, every day, a child is somewhere locked in a closet, in their room, trying to not feel the pain.

## Healing Informed and Equitable Systems and Policies

Develop healing informed and equitable systems that address the needs of individuals and families who are exposed to violence, including survivors and perpetrators, and foster conditions that advance the well-being and empowerment of all county residents.

## LaTanya Ward

I'm from Souf Central with an 'F', LA...the West Side. Jungles, California to be exact—Baldwin Village. I'm not looked upon as the norm where I come from. What they value in my area is violence. However, today I'm willing to throw the 'hood rep that I worked so hard for on the crap table and bet on the healing and reconnection of myself and my people—African American descendants of slaves. I don't participate in, nor am I involved in, those settings anymore, other than to check in with my loved ones.

I don't even want to start a conversation on violence saying I come from a background of gangbanging, because the violence starts long before you join a gang...just existing in certain communities and being Black. Whether you participate in it or not, you experience it. I can't ever remember not navigating violence. Starting from when I was a baby...I can remember my mother fighting...through elementary school, pre-teens, junior high and into high school and young adulthood to now. There are too many stories of violence to name. I've got more dead friends than I've got living.

I like to tell people from my background to question everything. I question everything. That's what sent me down the Alice in Wonderland rabbit hole of developing, building my capacity and then being able to turn myself into the type of person that can create spaces for other people to introduce themselves to themselves. It started with the very thing that used to get me in trouble, which is giving pushback to authority and bucking the system.

*'Step out of adopted beliefs.'*

Black folks are deprived of the knowledge, learnings and development one would get from varied life experiences. There's a belief that we're all so free but we know that systemic oppression has people not being free mentally. When the Black Panthers were talking about, 'the revolution will not be televised,' they were saying that it won't be televised because it's in your mind. Revolution is the awakening of your mind from the exposure [to the] same things. Black folks are deprived of the knowledge, learnings and development one would get from varied life experiences.

I would tell anyone from anywhere that, but especially speaking to my people—Black people and people from a background of gangbanging—*venture*

*out. Expose yourself to alternate things and experiences. Step out of adopted beliefs that rule our lives.* It's not even something necessarily extravagant but just having more options to explore. Things like yoga, alternative methods of healing, experimental things, playful or fun activities and shit like that. It's to provoke the thoughts that do that waking up. I promote that a lot.

I believe that's a huge part of our oppression as Black people: we're trained to stay in our place. A figurative, "invisible" redlining, so to speak. We all know what that means, even with "successful" Black folks. George Floyd, Sandra Bland, Travon Martin, Breanna Taylor and a slew of others know what it means. Whatever respect I'd built from old actions and ways of being, I manipulate in a positive way to use for good now. I'll promote people to get outside of their comfort zone.

*'I was traumatized and I didn't know.'*

I experienced so many traumatic events that alerted me, woke me up... . It can also become a norm. When you think it's a norm, you can picture anyone in an obituary. Someone who is super near and dear to you can die in a way you weren't prepared for. I have literally learned this in the hardest of ways. I had a friend, G., who I was really close to from my neighborhood and in 2016, she got killed on La Brea. She got shot multiple times. My cousin L. got killed when I was about 19 and she was about 21—on La Brea as well, oddly enough. I can name a couple of people's passing that affected me knowing now what trauma is and can look like. It looks and shows up differently for different people. Knowing this, I can look back on the timeline of my life and see that I was traumatized then but I didn't know.

With G., I was beginning to question everything. I went to school for community planning and economic development. I was learning about systems and institutions, trying to figure out how I could learn this to double back and talk to my homies about what was going on in our communities. I was the poster child of a gangbanging female trying to figure out how to translate this so I could do something good. It's like discovering fire. I wanted to say, *Eureka, eureka! Look what I've found!* I wanted to tell my homies, *Hey, this is what these motherf\*\*kers are up to! We think this shit is all our idea, but no, it's by design! It's the collateral damage of this and that...and gentrification!* I was trying to learn and share the shit that we in the hood knew was foul our whole lives. We

been knowing that this shit was wrong.

I would take her (G.) with me to my community planning classes. She was becoming more and more interested in it. We were growing together in a way different than when we were younger and outside gallivanting and running amok and f\*\*king our community up. She was a mom and a good one. One night she went out and she never came home and that's normal, but it shouldn't be. For me, it wasn't just our loss of her, it was where I was in my life when it happened. We were so close and building something with each other. I had gone to school for hypnotherapy and learned about behavior modification and how our brains receive information and how trauma affects us on a level that is just wild. I was learning how to apply that to my life and my people, blended with what I was learning about how systems operate. It hurt me in a way that informed some big decisions. I didn't realize it at the time, but in increments, it changed me. Her death and having gone through all the things I mentioned, gave me some lessons.

*'Don't straddle the fence.'*

My friend A. had gotten killed one week before her (G.). We were both really close to him. He got killed on March the 6 and she got killed on March the 13<sup>th</sup>. It was raining cats and dogs both days which added a whole ambiance to those days and created a crazy spiritual awakening in my life. The other losses that I took sent me in a rage, but this literally made me respect how precious life is. Respect that death is promised. It's a way to live your life better, improve the quality of it.

I remember having a dream about her (G.). She was dead and I was talking to her and holding her two-year-old daughter. I handed her to her mom and started crying and told her, "Can't you ask God to give you another chance?" She low-key laughed at me and said, "You're so silly—I can't get another chance. Just please look after my kids." She said, "You know that shit that you're doing...going to school for that community work? Do that shit for real. Make sure you don't stop." And I replied, "Shit, I don't know." Wow... .

Biggest lesson was that I can't straddle the fence. I can't f\*\*k around in the streets and half-ass do good and dabble and dabble like that...I've got to pick a side. I went to school full-time and graduated from studies in community planning.

*'With gangbanging, it's a lose-lose.'*

There was this white lady while I was in federal prison. Her name was M.; I believe that she was Assata Shakur's<sup>1</sup> co-defendant. She walked with a limp because I think she got shot with an AK by the feds when they were robbing banks. She was a really calm older lady that used to teach Pilates in prison. I took her class even though I didn't know what the f\*\*k Pilates was because we don't have Pilates where I come from.

I was arguing with somebody on the weight (gym) pile. After this exchange she asked me, "You seem pretty intelligent, from my interactions with you. You gangbang, so why do you participate in something that you stand to lose everything and gain nothing from? With gangbanging, it's a lose-lose. You don't gain anything and you stand to lose everything that you got."

That was my first time really questioning and got me thinking. That led me to studying community planning and theories of mind and ideas driven by a human need to feel significant. They've got us locked out of all of these f\*\*king systems and opportunities as Black people. We created our own world of gangbanging where we can be "somebodies"...[and] satisfy a human need to feel connected and significant. I've got this gang moniker that people know and celebrate which feeds a human need. I get to be Big F\*\*k Off—that's my gang name—and get to be important. It sent me down a path to find things out so I could tell people in a way that they can receive it, because they're not going to hear no white person tell them about that or a person of any color that they can't relate to.

We're remnants of a civil rights movements. We'll go and stand on a corner wearing all red [gang colors], where we know that people wearing all blue are looking for those people to kill them, because we get to be important.

*'Create problems worth your life.'*

I took this class called ELA—Emerging Leaders Academy. One of the people led an exercise. He asked us to complain about problems and shit. People were giving crazy issues that they had—reasons why they were late—and he sat there and listened. Every problem that people said, he was like, "Oh, that's not a big enough problem. Give me bigger problems." People were naming their

problems—things you’d want compassion for... . He was like, “Yeah, not to be disrespectful, but that’s not a big enough problem either.” He said, “I want y’all to create problems worth your *lives*.”

He kept talking to us about the power of language and the law of attraction. It was so interesting to me, because I come from a place where we don’t have any say in the big scheme of things. Maybe within the world we have created, as gang members, in the gang culture...but in the big scheme of things, we don’t have any say. That’s why we’re over-policed and over-sentenced.

I’m a felon, I’m Black, I’m a woman, I’m a gang member, I’m not rich. I have everyday problems the same as other people—being marginalized, with three felonies... . It’s hard for somebody who’s so underprivileged to recognize and admit their privilege, but I know that compared to some people, I have some privileges. Sometimes I feel like the law of attraction is a f\*\*king privilege. I dance all the time in between these understandings.

I’ve taken on a problem that I feel is worth my life, which is to have these hard conversations like the one we’re having now and create spaces where other people can introduce themselves to themselves. That’s a hard task to do with a culture that teaches the opposite. I worked a large fraction of my life to build this tough image and exterior. Now, I’m willing to put it all on the line and show them other options. I would say, *create problems worth your life*.

I go back and forth between being able to create our own reality and this reality that me and my people live that’s so f\*\*king real it bleeds. Back and forth between that reality that’s handed to us or thrown on us and the ability to create our own realities. The way we are harmed by the police unnecessarily and [by] the transgenerational trauma. Back and forth between our oppression and the power we possess. I still would like to challenge people to create problems worth their lives.

*‘Compassion is the real intelligence.’*

I’m not one to believe in reform. We all know that if you build a house on a rotten ass foundation—it will rot from the bottom up. I often feel as though I’m being patronized. Policymakers can be responsible with their power at the expense of losing that position of power. They can create or support efforts that are going to create things that don’t exist already. A lot of times they will sabotage or abolish systems that they are a part of, when necessary. I don’t

care how learned you are or what type of expert you are...if you don’t have the level of compassion that it’ll take to do something, then you’re not that smart. I believe that compassion is the real intelligence. And they lack it.

I’m going to speak specifically for Black people. I believe that the liberation of Black people is the liberation of all and not just because I happen to be Black. I believe that logically, if I lift something up from the “bottom”, I lift the whole of it. When I think of people of color as the undesirables, Black people are the undesirables of the undesirables. When you go into prison for gangbanging or other criminal activity, the system validates those people as inhuman—Black gang members—the undesirables of the undesirables of the undesirables. So, to assist lifting Black gang members up, that will impact the world.

Whoever’s in a position of power must create something for Black people to be able to compete economically so they have stable footing. Our communities need to be reinforced with resources and support that are as relentless and pervasive as the opposing forces that got us to this position. A position where we are so far behind as Black people than every other race. If they’re oblivious to that, they shouldn’t even be in a position of power.

*‘Center Black people to lead and create solutions.’*

I’m not talking about necessarily a lot of money—but definitely inclusive of money and financial support—because even that, in the scheme of what I’m talking about, is crumbs. I’m talking about something that guides us to know the truth about ourselves, like the I619 Project or any other project to introduce ourselves to ourselves and live full lives. I’m not stupid; you can’t talk over my head and coon me. I’m interested in creating some elevating shit for my people, minus whoever’s not trying to help with that, whether they’re Black or white. If y’all are not trying to create something that’s going to have us be independent, then I don’t even want to hear what the f\*\*k they’re talking about.

That’s what I’m trying to create, with my nonprofit. It’s guided by the belief that we are responsible for one another. I want it to be a social enterprise, a physical thing in the world that shares what I feel I’ve learned, from being in the trenches of the streets to infiltrating institutions and schools and other learnings I can carry to my people. Kind of like other organizations doing gang rehabilitation and serving people re-entering after prison that centers Black people in particular. I appreciate what they do and the brilliance of their

business model and bravery in who they considered in creating it. I believe that if we're talking about things like mass incarceration or other issues that disproportionately affect Black people, then we need more Black people not only centered, but involved, in the program development and leadership roles to create the solutions.

This is why I don't choose to work for any organization, because I don't want to be silenced by whoever the f\*\*k funds the organizations. I like to be able to say the truth and have a real adult conversation with people. A lot of people don't like to do that because we've got a lot of ego. Everybody wants to look like their org is doing the best and perfect work and no one will ever do the perfect work or the best, because it should be a collaborative effort. This thing is too big to even tackle with one org.

I lead these healing circles under a safety initiative supported by city government and lead healing circles, with a renowned Black-centered psychologist at Loyola Marymount University. I promote and facilitate these in my community. Before I was doing it with them, I did it with my homegirls from my gang. I began having a yearly bonfire, a Letting Go, Moving Forward Bonfire but not now, because of COVID. It's a space where Black people can be vulnerable.

Another thing...I want my work to be in collaboration with whoever. I want it to be on a fairytale level of including the input of those most harmed. I don't believe that we need to exclusively include the input of people with lived experience if outsiders can and are willing to contribute; I think that Black folks should primarily be in the positions of power regarding Black issues. We need to put in energy on a level that it was taken from us. I want to work with reentry and system-impacted people. I definitely have an on-purpose focus to work with Black gang members. Anti-Blackness hurts the f\*\*k out of everybody and people don't realize that. Like Nipsey<sup>2</sup> said, "Let's redefine what the streets expect."



2 Former LA Rollin' '60s gang member and rapper Nipsey Hu\$\$le, slain by another rapper in 2019.

## Anthony Jenkins

My name is Anthony Jenkins. I was born right here in Los Angeles. I was in prison 17 years. I've been home about three years and been living in my truck for almost two. When I came home, I went through the programs. They sent me to a place where they said I'd be a year; it turned out to be six months. Then the places they wanted me to go, such as downtown...Skid Row... I really can't do that. Fortunately, I ended up with the truck and I've been doing what I can from there. It hasn't been easy.

People are so much different than they used to be out here. A lot of people are doing things that I don't want to be involved in, so I'm pretty much a loner. I just try to get by every day. I got confused and didn't know which way to go for a minute. You get frustrated and depressed. It's hard to be myself and hold on to it. It's really not easy right now. I do what I can every day. But as I say, *I thank God. My mind is at peace.* I don't wish on nobody what I went through. Now it's just...*just try to get by.* Every day.

*'I would be so frightened.'*

When I was a kid, I was real shy. My stepfather used to beat the hell out of me. There's not much that I can say. I went through it. That had a whole lot of effects on me. My grandparents took me in because when they'd see me, I'd be so frightened. They raised me. I used to be inside myself. Had to pretty much learn the streets by myself being the only kid. I've been through a lot of changes. Beat up...stuff like that... I look at it today...I was very mean, that wasn't good. As I got older and older, my mind started to change, like, *hey, nobody gonna put their hands on me.* All I know was to look for the worst. That's how I basically grew up. That's how I went to prison. I ended up in the streets trying to survive. Started doing things I shouldn't have...robberies and stuff. Something I'm not proud of. Fights...I've really been through it. I've broken all my bones- arms, legs, busted head...all that comes from the streets.

*'You do dumb stuff; you get all the attention.'*

I started picking up weapons. I'm not proud of it. I was trying to survive. Was really caught up for a long time. With me doing all that time, my elders passed

away, then I come back to really nothing. These streets hurt me more than they ever helped me. Being out here, I don't want go through that again. It's everywhere. Sometimes you have to just walk away, go in another direction. And again, you get caught up in places and people try to push on you.

The police and stuff...they want to categorize you. You do dumb stuff, you get all the attention. But you ask for help and nobody tries to help you.

The way it is out here now, that's what you call abuse. Everywhere you go, somebody laying on the ground. To sleep, you gotta go around them. I can't do it. My health, it's not good. I'm not old, but I'm not as young as I used to be. I really felt [it] being away, because my body isn't as strong as it used to be. Like I say, I've had broken bones, I've had my head split all the way open, like a bleeding brain...the streets practically killed me. You go to people's places and you don't want to talk about it. It's just, *hey I'm not gonna be here.*

I sit in my truck. I did all the research and everything that I can to get a roof over my head. I'm still out here, looking for a better life every day. I had somebody tell me one time, "Let somebody love you." I really didn't understand what they were saying, but now I do. *Let somebody love you.* I understand it.

*'I do what I can, the best I can.'*

People get sick out here 'cause they don't know which way to go. You got big old lines. They got these places; they want to pack you in. You got everybody across the county or whatever in one spot. So...frustration amongst everybody.

I see a lot of filth; it's not healthy. I do the best I can for placement and all that. Places will tell you to stop here...I'm already out here, but no, I definitely don't want be up in there. I don't like to really think about it. I focus my mind on something positive to make the day go by. Wash my clothes and change and budget the best way I can to get a good hot meal, get a donut and a cup of coffee. Little snack here and a little snack there.

Sometimes I go to the parks. I go to the malls sometimes. Every now and then, I'll meet somebody and get a shower or something. Here and there, you know. I do what I can, the best I can. It's not easy though. With the new EBT (electronic banking debit card) stuff they give you, I spend more money going in and out the stores. When you go to a burger place or whatever, it kind of goes faster than if you had some place to store stuff. You get stuff, you gotta eat it that day or you might have a day or so. Cold cuts [and] stuff like that don't

work all the time. It runs out and then it's not good. It bothers me, it really does. It kind of gives me an itchy feeling like right now to even speak about it. There's nothing like a hot meal...a good hot breakfast.

*'Feed our own first.'*

You see all these tents...people on the street. I've seen the difference from all the time that I did. It's everywhere, not just in one place. It scares me; it spooks me. What used to be very nice neighborhoods, it's infected with...shoot...that's a pandemic right there. Certain places you can't even walk down the street or drive down the street. It's changed. You can see the change. You got some people out here that can't help themselves. Too many mental people out here. Wheelchairs...people with bags on them and stuff. The dirt...their bodies are just muddy, it's ridiculous. Don't get me wrong, I don't mind helping. But you don't know how sick this person is. Maybe they haven't taken a bath in six months or whatever. You want me to go in there [a street toilet] and try to clean myself up? It smells...that's ridiculous. But, what do they say, *we're the land of the free, huh?* I mean, we feed everybody else; we [need to] feed our own first. *Clean these people up.*

*'It's like we too old.'*

In the time I've been home here, I've adapted to a lot of things a lot better. I talk to people a lot more. I tend to meet positive people to talk [to] who understand me and friends that [have] been in the same situation I've been in. They check on me and ask me, "Hey, how you doing? Don't go that way; it's not like it used to be." I have a lot of respect for them. It's like we too old. It's not easy but I try. I have faith in God. That's the only thing keeping me going, the only one who's really watching over me. That's how I feel and where my heart is at. I thank God that He blessed me; I wasn't an easy person to get along with. I wasn't nice. It's a new time for change. I'm trying to do what's best. I just want be comfortable either way.

*'There's no guidance for the young.'*

They're putting everybody in jail. These kids don't even know what life is about;

they're in jail. We got too many jails out here. Jails are full. All them people gotta be in jail? No. If you give them guidance in jail, you can guide them out here. There's a place for everybody. I know it. I've had experiences out here. I've talked with people. Some people I brighten their day and some people I don't. Some people say thank you and some don't. I'm grateful when people personally come and talk. They can get things out of their system.

You know, there's really nothing to do out here [in the streets]. I'm going to speak for the younger ones. You got them on these computers, technology, stuff like that...that's good. They don't know the outside. Phones, that's new. When I was a kid, we used to go to the parks. We had activities to look forward to on the weekend and also during the week. My grandparents used to make me study. We had afterschool projects. Basically, you had a day-to-day program, guidance. Now, there's no guidance. There are kids that talk to me any kind of way.

Some of the new kids, I try to talk to them. I tell them, "Go to school; this ain't the way to go. You don't want to do like I did." There's been a couple who thank me. Youngsters that I've worked with. They check in on me to see how I'm doing and they got good advice. They sometimes look out for me: a meal, a shirt, a pair of pants. [I'm] surprised that some look up to me like that. Everybody can help everybody some kind of way.

*'They give people food, but give people a little more assistance than just food.'*

When you go up in them places, they tell you what to do all day every day. They give people food, but give people a little more assistance than just food. A little more education, a little more guidance. Something to help you get a job, something to keep you on your feet and keep your mind out of the streets. To keep you out of the negative world. Person-to person-stuff to understand. We could use a lot more assistance than what it is...training, progress, education-wise, job-wise... . There's no telling what you could do.

The way I've been living, it's been hard to keep up with stuff...news stuff. I've spoken with somebody once before and it was very nice. I was surprised at myself. There's a lot to be said [about homeless services]...it could be better. When I shared that time, it wasn't a pandemic. With this pandemic? This pandemic is killing everything. It's not making anything easy at all.

## Anonymous

Judges are profoundly dismissive of abuse claims made by mothers against fathers. During my very first appearance in a Long Beach court—initiated by the abuser two weeks after I gave birth—when I responded to a question from the judge about his abusiveness, she snapped, “Well, you should have thought of that before you had a baby with him!” I remember my lawyer at the time looking straight ahead and acting like she didn’t hear that repugnant rebuke. I remember that older, white female judge not looking at me when she said it. To look in my eyes would have required her to acknowledge my humanity.

*‘Separating children ‘is the great American way.’*

The system is not broken. It’s doing everything that it was designed to do to keep BIPOC<sup>1</sup>, women and children subjugated to the patriarchal, white supremacist structure as written into the Constitution by twelve, white, male landowners, most of whom were slave owners. Separating children from people of color or women is the great American way. The way youth and family service agencies target Black and Latinx families has echoes of bygone times. A through line of child separation runs directly from the unconscionable custom of selling enslaved children on the auction block, to placing Indigenous children with white missionaries to assimilate them, to child separations at the border.

Family court judges act with impunity and without accountability, treating their departments like fiefdoms and litigants like serfs because they’re allowed broad power to make life-altering decisions without oversight, not even from their supervisors. Family law judges aren’t specialized experts that are highly trained in the dynamics that they are adjudicating. Family court is often regarded as a stepping-stone to more high-profile courtrooms like criminal or federal courts in the career trajectory of ambitious attorneys. It’s incomprehensible that many may not give their service on the family court bench the full weight and consideration it requires. I’ve heard of courts that rotate judges in and out of family law every six months!

These are people’s lives that they’re affecting. So often this is lost on egotistical, cavalier, power-tripping judges who make survivors feel belittled, unseen, unheard and dehumanized. They act as if these litigants exist in a

vacuum of their creation and will solely conform to their orders once they leave the courtroom. If judges were truly trained to understand that domestic abuse is about power and control for the abuser, many more children and women’s lives would be spared and fewer children would be shaped by trauma.

*‘Frivolous motions support abuse of process.’*

It’s not lost on me how the politics of race intersect with my treatment and that of other BIPOC by white women in positions of power. In both instances where I had a white, female judge, I feel like they went out of their way to blame and shame me for the acrimony, while ignoring the power imbalance between perpetrator and victim.

The lopsidedness is evident from the amount of litigation initiated by my abuser in my case. A simple review of the sheer number of RFOs (Request for Order), ex partes and other frivolous motions filed by the abuser since he initiated the case supports abuse of process. His rotation in and out of Pro Per (representing yourself in a legal matter without counsel) along with the number of attorneys he’s retained is evidence of his litigation abuse. My supporters saw it, my advocate knew it and other lawyers I spoke with acknowledged it. But every judge I went before would “both sides”—the clear signs of coercive control by the abuser. “Both-sides”-ing an issue is a tactic employed in family court to assist judges in looking impartial, when really all it does is empowers abusers and diminishes survivors who are usually women.

*‘Pro Per in family court is a recipe for disaster.’*

Over the course of the pandemic, while being instructed to stay home, I was given a gift and an opportunity: time and space to heal. Because the courtrooms were operating at a much lower capacity, I was no longer under [the] duress of being called into court anytime the abuser and his umpteenth lawyer pleased.

I am currently represented by a competent, aggressive and trial-savvy—that term in particular is important—litigator after several years of representing myself. Interestingly enough, he’s not a family lawyer—which I believe is an advantage—but he knows his way around a courtroom. While I held my own in Pro Per, representing oneself in family court is a recipe for disaster, especially if

you state you're [a] survivor and accuse the father of abuse.

*'End immunity for judges who fail to protect.'*

The last comment I want to make is that there should be no discussion of ending the practice of qualified immunity for cops without including judges. Judges aren't above reproach. They shouldn't be automatically deemed as smarter, more worthy of respect or infallible. *Reuters* released a report last year on the number of judges nationwide that escaped consequences for their misconduct and corruption.

When a child dies because a judge refused to believe the evidence of abuse and terrorism, they shouldn't be allowed to remain on the bench in the same capacity. Their failure to protect shouldn't be rewarded with anonymity and continued protection of their job status, especially when a protective parent pleaded for the safety of their child. Judges aren't gods. Failing to acknowledge that fact, once they step down off that bench, is normalizing the murder of children at the hands of abusive parents.

### Anonymous

I was born and raised in Los Angeles. I grew up in a nice area with extremely supportive parents and a solid education. There was no trauma in my childhood that I can think of. It wasn't until 13 years ago that I attempted suicide. I am a suicide attempt survivor. I have tried to take my life three times.

Thirteen years ago, I was given a diagnosis of major depressive disorder after both of my parents passed away and my husband ended our marriage. These events happened all in less than two years. I fell into a deep dark depression. I reached the point where I was unable to take care of myself mentally, emotionally and physically. I look back on that time and now realize how traumatizing it was to have so many significant events happen so close together.

It became difficult to take care of my two sons. I was lucky enough to have somebody to help me. They made dinner for them, helped them with homework and took them to school. I was so physically disabled, that I wasn't able to even walk up and down stairs. Nobody knew what was wrong. I felt like such a burden to my kids. I ended up in the hospital.

*'I wasn't treated like a person.'*

One night in 2009, I intentionally overdosed and was taken to the hospital by a friend. Luckily, my kids weren't with me at the time as they were with their father. I was 5150'd, which is a mandatory 72-hour hold and was admitted to a psychiatric hospital for the first time.

In 2012, I had my second attempt. Three days before, I had broken up with my boyfriend I checked myself into a hospital as I felt I was a danger to myself. I was released as all seemed manageable. That night, after returning home alone I began my next attempt. It was six o'clock in the evening, dark and cold, when I arrived at my home. There was nobody there. I turned on the lights, grabbed a glass of wine and began to journal. My journal turned into more thoughts of suicide and I ended up back at the psych unit. It is known that being in a psychiatric hospital can increase your risk of attempting again shortly after release. That was clearly the case for me. That night, a friend had gotten wind that something may have been wrong. The police were notified and arrived at 1:30 am with sirens on and lights flashing in my very quiet neighborhood. They

banged on my door. I was still coherent enough that I could open it. They were very professional, yet extremely unfriendly. They stood in the corner, stared rigidly at me and then proceeded to go through my home looking for evidence of a suicide attempt. It felt so humiliating and like an invasion of my personal life. I wasn't treated like a person. The paramedics showed up and thankfully were very kind. I was put on a gurney, intubated and taken to the emergency room. I don't remember much after I opened the door.

I was in a coma and on life support for three days. I woke up to find my cousin and my close friend by my side. I'd written a suicide note, which my friend had found at my home and read to me. It was very sad. There was a security guard stationed outside my door in the hospital, watching me, making sure I wouldn't cause any problems or be a risk to society. He never spoke. That was humiliating. I tried to take my own life and yet I was a threat to society? He'd just look at me from his chair, in his uniform. It was really an unpleasant situation.

I was then transferred to yet another psychiatric hospital and stayed there for 18 days. I met a wonderful psychiatrist there. I was lucky to be assigned to him. Nobody knew I was in the hospital, no friends, no family, because of the shame. There, I was locked inside. Lockdown. It was inhumane. There was feces on the floor in my shared room, the toilets did not flush, the showers did not work and there were no blankets on the bed. I asked to have the feces cleaned up and no one responded. Nobody knew what was going on in my life. It was a very hard secret to keep. I was then released. I called a cab to take me home alone... again. I felt traumatized and never told anyone until now.

*'It was my secret.'*

I isolated afterwards. I was afraid. I didn't want to see my neighbors as I didn't want to talk to anybody. I just stayed in my home. I was so paralyzingly depressed. I didn't go to the market. I didn't walk into my front yard. I didn't see anybody. I was afraid of what the neighbors would say, given the chaos that happened at my house just three weeks prior. I felt incredibly alone and I felt like I was a criminal. I know that suicide is a violent act against myself. I do realize that nobody did anything to me. It was me doing that to myself. I was angry and sad. I felt I was a burden. I didn't want to be alive. I was so angry that I was alive.

I've been 5150'd four times and I've been in a psychiatric hospital 15 times. That's where I spent so much of my time for about five years. All but four of those times I checked myself in voluntarily. I couldn't find any safer place to be. If I was going to be at home alone I felt I might hurt myself. I had the awareness to say, *Okay, I'll call my psychiatrist now.* I stayed there for however long it took. I couldn't ask my friends for help; I couldn't tell my family. It was my secret. It was awful. There was so much shame.

The last time I was in a psych hospital was four or five years ago. I'm not proud of that. It's embarrassing and a horrible place to be. In the past years, I have learned that I'm not a burden to my children anymore, that I must take care of myself for them and that I am important too. Since that time, I have engaged in therapy with many successes and some very frustrating times. I'm incredibly lucky that I've had that opportunity to receive that care. There are so many people that do not have that access and can't or won't be seen, or they're seen only once a month. That is not enough. That's very, very sad. I wish I could change that. I have no idea how.

*'We need support groups for suicide survivors.'*

Eventually, I joined a support group that I had found online for people who had attempted suicide. It was in that group that I was able to really talk about my thoughts and my feelings. I talked about what I had been through and we shared what suicide meant for all of us... with a clinician present. It was wonderful. The group is open to all needing that level of support. The connections we created were so intense and so nurturing. Through time, I became a peer facilitator for that group of which I still am. What an honor to hear people's stories, to be able to relate, to share my perspective and experience and for us to all grow together. We need more of those groups. There are many groups for people who have lost someone to suicide for bipolar disorder or depression but not for those who have attempted suicide. There are very few of these groups in the United States, perhaps ten. It's so necessary.

I also trained and became a crisis counselor specializing in suicide prevention. I work on a suicide hotline and take chats and texts. That is so rewarding. I feel like, with my experience, I've been given a gift in a sense. I have the heart, openness and empathy to listen to people's stories and to not judge. I can feel their pain. I can't say I completely understand each person because

everybody's story is so different but I can empathize. Part of my journey and my recovery is to give back all the gifts that were given to me. I am so grateful.

I have called the crisis line twice myself. All are trained counselors in suicide prevention. The first time I was scared and hung up. I was afraid that the police would come to my home and the whole thing would start again. The second time, I spoke to a counselor for maybe half an hour. I had my means to kill myself right next to me and I was distraught. I'd been drinking. It was a very unsafe situation, but I was able to talk to somebody who listened to me, assure that I was safe and helped me to find a way to take care of myself for the night. With that call, I was able to safely fall asleep and start another day. I highly recommend utilizing this free resource. It has saved my life and many others.

*'Medication and therapy help me.'*

I take medications that help to stabilize my depression and to help me when I am in a lower spot or when stress comes along that I feel I can't handle. If I fall back into my suicidal thoughts, I have found that tool. It is okay that I take medications. I also receive psychotherapy and I talk to my friends. Most know my story by now. I don't go into great detail, but they know that I have times that I struggle and they're there to support me. I also have two brothers to support me as well.

Recently a friend said to me that they took suicide right off the table: He said, "my decision to live may always be challenged, yet it is a strong commitment". I've taken that to my heart and said, *Okay, maybe I can make that commitment too. I'll try my very best to still live. It may be very, very challenging at times and I may not feel like I could do it, but I'm ready to make that commitment to my children, my family, my friends and to myself.* So, I've learned how to cope with challenges in life better. I've taken away my means of trying to end my life. I don't have that around nor am I going to seek it out. I've learned other ways of coping and sitting through very horrible thoughts and feelings and pain and it's hard. But I'm able to do that.

I'm really lucky that my children weren't taken away from me. They were not with me at any of those times when I had problems. They were always with their father. I'm lucky that he didn't try to separate us. I've been able to raise them and love them only as a mother can. One is off in graduate school and the other lives with me studying and working for a restaurant. The younger

son actually asked me about depression. He had seen a video and wondered if I had ever felt like I wanted to end my life. That's when I told both boys that I had tried to kill myself. They were definitely surprised, but they've been so supportive. I don't necessarily feel like they think they need to take care of me. I think they just understand me a little bit better. So that's something that I am thankful for, opening up to my children so they understand what's going on with me. I understand them so much more as well. As a result, we have a pretty tight connection.

*'Imagining suicide was a way of staying in control.'*

Up until a year ago, I was obsessed with suicide. I thought about it and talked about it all the time. I read about it. I googled it late at night. I pictured it. I imagined all of it. That made me feel really, really good. It was comforting to me, as it was a way of staying in control. It was the same with keeping the means that I might use to hurt myself. It felt like I could be in control of when and how I would die. That was a really strong, comforting feeling. It kind of felt like my all-consuming thoughts of suicide were a bit of an addiction. I needed that to make myself feel good. I've stopped doing that now. I know it is not healthy because it does lead me into that very, very dark place. Alcohol is definitely a contributing factor. I stay away from that as best I can. Alcohol takes me to a dark Google-searching suicide place.

*'Reach out to people for help.'*

There is such a huge stigma around suicide. We need therapy and access for all people. There are certain people that would be willing to be in your life, so reach out to those people and just say *I'm having a hard time*. If you're feeling suicidal say, *hey, you know, I'm having some suicidal thoughts, can you sit with me and just be with me?* Most times the police do not need to become involved. It's finding somebody empathetic and compassionate who can sit with you and help you feel less alone and more connected.

Working with a therapist and psychiatrist can be so helpful. Again, my life was saved by those few professionals. If you find yourself in a huge crisis and you can't call anybody then call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. That number is 800-273-8255. Nowadays there's a 9-1-1 diversion program through

Los Angeles County, so if a 911 call receives a mental health situation and it's not immediately life threatening, they'll be diverted to the Lifeline. You'll be able to talk to a trained counselor who may be able to help de-escalate your situation rather than having the police become involved. That's something very important to know about the crisis line. I can't think more highly of this resource. Even with the experiences that I've had, if I have a problem again, I would surely call them to talk to somebody as I have.

*'We need someone to talk to.'*

I think that my experience waking up from a coma and having a security officer outside my room made me feel awful, like a criminal and a threat to society. I did talk to a local hospital about starting a program of allowing those with a recent attempt to connect with someone in their hospital room, but I was sent away. Maybe our society is not yet ready for that. How about having a volunteer or a specialized nurse or somebody who's trained in suicide prevention to be there when you wake up or when you arrive? That would be much more humane. Someone to say *How are you doing? I know you had a really rough night. It seems you haven't been doing well and I'd like to be with you*. It doesn't have to be a psychiatrist or psychologist, but just a trained volunteer who is a friendly person when you wake up, somebody that can empathize with the situation because it is heartbreaking. Really, the last thing one needs is to feel alone. I felt that many of the nurses that I have encountered with my attempts and suicidality have not been trained in compassion when it comes to suicide...or chose not to empathize. Other illnesses feel different, but not suicidality.



## Oliver Buie

I grew up in the South Bronx in New York City where violence became normalized and a prevalent part of that community. From my experience in the Black community, we are subject to the possibility of violence, especially those considered lower income or who have poverty. As children, we had to be prepared for violence to occur at any moment. You had to learn how to fight, to defend yourself. You also had to learn to make alliances with friends and other people to survive.

I witnessed a lot of things, like people being stabbed or a guy shooting a human being right before my eyes. I've seen people dead. Young Black men die way before their time. I've seen that the Black male has probably been the victim of more violence in America than any other individual. I'm put in harm's way just by being a Black male. It's very important to learn that lesson quickly, because you could very well end up dead. Unfortunately, you've got to be a quick study. You have to be aware of your surroundings. Growing up, I always had to be on guard. If I'm in the streets, I have to be watching who's around me, where I'm going, looking ahead, making sure if someone's behind me, not letting them get too close. Violence was normalized.

We also lived in a community where a great deal of crime took place, so we had to deal with the police often, who tend to be very biased. You can't necessarily put all the blame on them, because they don't know the good kid from the kid that's getting in or causing trouble. Many children, including myself, grew up without their fathers. What happens with the father usually being your chief protector? What do you do when they are no longer there? You've got to find other means to protect yourself. This may result in turning towards a gang for protection, not because that's what you want to do but because of survival.

A lot of people don't know that many people are forced into becoming affiliated with a gang. It's either join the gang or we're going to kill you or kill your family. That's real. You understand? There's a lot of guys that didn't want to join a gang but the pressure was there.

*'Being a cop is not considered cool.'*

As I grew up, thank God I was able to do a little better and move into some

nicer, safer neighborhoods. I was able to leave New York because I had an uncle named Sam who said, "Go West, young man." I joined the Marine Corps. I was stationed at Camp Pendleton for approximately three years. That's how I got to the West Coast. I never imagined myself living here. Growing up in New York, I was able to see where Los Angeles was headed and the opportunity that existed here. We're talking about the early 1980s. The weather was nice and jobs were being created. That's why I chose to stay here.

I was fortunate enough to be hired in law enforcement. I became a deputy sheriff. I joined with the intention of never necessarily staying there. My goal was to start my own business. It's been 24 years since I left law (enforcement) and started my own business. I did enjoy being a sheriff and thought it was an honorable position. I believe that while I was there, I was able to do a lot of good to help individuals. Matter of fact, I had a couple of individuals who came back to me to share how I'd impacted their life in a positive way and so they changed.

One of my goals in life, even as a child, is to help make this world a better place. That's how I live my life. One of the reasons I went into law enforcement was to make a positive difference, not simply because of the money, although that was a very good paying job or career. I would recommend more young men pursue that career. But in my community, being a cop is not cool for many of the kids. I think we need more people that look like me. You can't make the change if you're not there.

*'Making a positive difference.'*

One story that comes to mind is when I was working in the lockup around lunchtime. Part of my duty was to feed people and while I was feeding them, they usually got quiet. You can get their attention. I took the time to simply say to every one of them, "You, gentlemen, are bigger than this and better than this. Each of you can change for the better if you choose to. Each of you are able to make a difference. I hope that you would make a difference from here on in so that I don't have to see you here again. Hopefully, you learned a lesson. When you leave here, look for change and turn your life around because you can do it. There's a better life out there than this."

About two years later, a young man with a traffic ticket comes to the courtroom where I'm working. It is in the afternoon and he says, "I have this

traffic ticket...I want to see if I could see the judge.” I said, “Nah, you can’t see the judge today.” He replies, “But I’m working then and can’t miss work if I want to keep my job.” Then he says, “Listen, you said something to me that changed my life—you probably don’t remember. Two or three years ago, you gave a talk to a bunch of us locked up. Now, I’ve gotten out of jail and I’m working. It’s a construction job; I can’t miss a day of it.”

Well, I couldn’t resist, so I stuck my neck out. I didn’t even get the permission of the judge. I walked that ticket over. I made a choice to put myself in harm’s way. We were able to get him in. That’s just one example of how you can make a positive difference if you choose to. I’m happy that young man turned his life around. I’m hoping he’s still working construction and that he’s doing well. I’m praying for that outcome.

*‘I understand a lot being from the ‘hood.’*

I helped make a difference even [in] some of the police officers’ lives because I was able to share my stories. If they got out of line or it was heading that way, I had the ability to say, “Hold on. Don’t go there,” and other things of that nature. I understand a lot being a boy from the ‘hood’.

Unfortunately, with this recent torture and murder of George Floyd, it brought to light just how evil some cops can be. Let’s not fool ourselves, there are individuals on the police force that don’t mean any good. They’ve gotten on the police force for [the] wrong reasons and abuse their power. On the flip side, I’d like to say that most of the individuals I worked with, that I knew, joined for the right reasons. Law enforcement is not doing a very good job at addressing this issue. The abuses have been played down or discounted by our counterparts in politics and especially by those in power, especially those who are white in power. Many of the things that I’ve had to live through have not been their reality. As a Black male, I’m public enemy no. 1—that’s how it goes here in America.

Sometimes, if they’d stop me *driving while Black*, I’d show them the badge and that would end things. But I know with other African-American males, that would not necessarily be the case. They could end up being harassed, even arrested, when they never should have been stopped in the first place. To this day, I still experience that. Just by being a Black male driving, I’ve been stopped. Recently when there were four of us in a car, the police stopped us in Culver

City. We were stopped for no reason at all, not violating any laws. It can happen anywhere.

*‘Instead of a victim, become a victor.’*

Even though I was a deputy sheriff, I still had fear of the police if I was stopped. Because sometimes, before they get to the car, they don’t always know who you are and you never know how it’s going to go. You don’t know if this is one of those rogue cops—cops that kill African-Americans. Violence is very real.

You’ve got to learn how to conduct yourself. When you’re confronted or approached by law enforcement, it’s very important for you to remain calm, respectful, pay close attention, hands on the wheel. You’ve got to learn certain things just to survive, so you won’t be the next victim of a police shooting. That’s something that we live with as Black males. That’s my reality.

Unfortunately, Black-on-Black crime exists and is disproportionately talked about. We can be victimized by those who look like us as well, so we can experience violence from both sides. We’re caught in the middle of this unfortunate evil that exists in our society.

I’ve been a victim of violence as well. I was working for a financial company and was robbed and almost killed. I was stabbed three times. I’m a miracle because the possibility of surviving being stabbed three times is very slim. So, I’m grateful for life. I know what it is to have been a victim of a very brutal violence, which is not pretty but thank God I’m here. I know the worst of violence. To live to talk about it helps me continue to move forward. Instead of being a victim, become a victor and overcome it and continue to thrive.

Every day, even at my age—and I’m not a young man—I’ve got to be aware, alert and pay attention so hopefully I will not fall prey to some act of violence. I have a lovely daughter and teach her so she won’t become a victim. I have to live with so much in my reality that much of society doesn’t have to live in their reality.

*‘We have to value all lives’*

I remember during the ‘80s, especially the ‘90s, we’d have 1300 people murdered within a year in Los Angeles. We’d see on the news *Gang member murdered* and then people became desensitized. We all have to understand

that it's still somebody's son, somebody's father, somebody's cousin. Even a gang member is a victim of violence. We have to value all lives. Policymakers have to try to become more aware of why violence happened in the first place and understand that many who become victims of violence were truly victims. Every human life is valuable and priceless and precious and needs to be guarded as we move forward if we're really going to try to resolve or improve and prevent violence from happening. Please come to a place where value is the same for every human life, regardless of who they are, who we think they are, or what label we've given them. I think that's very important.

Taking time to do some investigation, to dialogue with individuals, is a move in the right direction. Hopefully, you'll gain some insight from what someone else has to deal with. You become more knowledgeable and hopefully, more sensitive to it. Then I believe we can work together and hopefully, prevent and end violence in all communities.

*'Ask, why are you violent?'*

There's a lot to learn. Don't just look at where a person is [at] and assume—try to find out the *why*. We make a lot of assumptions. *Oh, they joined a gang because they were bad. They joined a gang because that's what they want to do.* There's a lot of people who didn't really have a choice. *Die or join the gang. Kill your family or join the gang.* It's a lot of pressure that you may have to deal with. Also, the gang may be the tough guy; they got the power. Some people join because they want power or look for what they perceive as power. Why are people violent? Everybody's not violent because of the same reasons. Ask the person, "Why are you violent?" Some people don't know why they're violent.

I believe that policy makers need to hear from those who are most vulnerable to violence. Talk and interview some gang members and understand why they may be violent or why they're subject to violence and don't exclude people. At the same time, we've got to stop labeling people as gang members, criminals [and] suspects. I don't think we realize that we end up dehumanizing people by reducing us all to these different titles. Some of these names end up victimizing people as if we now devalue their lives. Teach more about violence in school. We have to make this a part of the curriculum and share different ways in which people become violent. We can work together with others to make this world more peaceful and safer.

## Rene Pryor

My name is Rene Pryor. I was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. I live in downtown Los Angeles. I've experienced violence [for] as long as I can remember, from childhood on up. I grew up in an area that was heavily gang-infested. Violence was always around a number of people that I went to elementary school with. [They] lost their lives, died young. I know people who are still in prison from 30 years ago, young men who gave in to the violence and committed an impulsive act. Here it is, years later, still in prison.

Growing up, that violence was just there; it was just like breathing. You learn to navigate it as best you can and go on with whatever it is you want to do with yourself. I tried to not participate in violence as much as possible growing up, although I did at times become violent. It was basically out of necessity—of making sure that I was kept safe. I consider myself lucky that it wasn't my particular personal experience but part of my existence. If you don't have any other goals or focus, it can really overtake you and land you in some pretty bad places. You have to have some other contrasting kind of vision, other than being influenced by the environment.

*'I've experienced racism from the police.'*

I have a couple of occasions where I've experienced racism from the police. One time, I must've been maybe seven or maybe nine years old. We were coming from a family reunion and my older sister went to drop some other relatives off and was supposed to come pick us up, but didn't return. Someone else dropped us off at home. This was back in the '70s when the Ford Pinto was first introduced, that's what she had. As we're driving down the street, I see my sister's car in a wreck. We get out and my mother was trying to see what was going on. Police pulled up on the scene.

At the time, I didn't understand the things that they (police) have to do now, as far as trying to control the situation, or to get down to what's really going on. They came in very aggressive and told my mother, "Just get back, get back." She's like, "What? I'm trying to see what's going on with my daughter. This is my oldest daughter, she's in a wreck!" They're like, "Okay, well, just get back." One of them pulled out his billy club—that's when they had the long billy clubs, back in the day—and punched her in her stomach with it. From there,

everything rocketed. Neighbors...people that we didn't know because it wasn't our particular street, but it was predominantly black...they came out of that house. My sister and my cousins who were dropping us off...everyone gets into this big thing with the police. It was so physical. I'm standing there hollering at the top of my lungs, crying. I don't know what to do. It was one of those traumatic things.

So that was my first experience with [police violence]. I can't really say it was racist because he didn't say anything racist or anything of that nature. It was the fact that he was white, we're Black and that's what happened. That's how I looked at it from that point: the police are really not to be trusted.

*'What's going on here?'*

The second time, I was much older. I remember coming off the freeway through Torrance. A friend of mine lived in Torrance and I was going to his house; I got off at the wrong exit. I'm driving down this industrial street and the streetlights are far and few in between. That was about maybe 8:00, 8:30 at night, so all the businesses and warehouses and everything were closed. It was dark. I didn't have a sense of direction.

At the time, I had a little 280Z. I see some headlights way in the distance. That car is far enough away, so I make a quick U-turn heading back towards the freeway. I see the headlights suddenly coming up in my rearview mirror, real fast. I'm like, *well, what's going on here? What's going on here?* It's the police. It was a gang unit...that's three policemen in the same car. The officer in the passenger front seat was livid. I don't know what had happened that day in his life, but he was livid! I mean, he's pointing at me, gesturing and gesticulating, *what are you doing? what the...! Pull the f\*\*k over, pull over!* I'm like, *okay.*

I happen to land in a dark patch in between the streetlights. The only light that's illuminating this little area is coming from the police car. He (the officer) comes up to the car and says, "What the f\*\*k was that?" I said, "I got off at the wrong exit, so I'm heading back towards the freeway." He was like, "You got any drugs or weapons?" I'm like, "No, sir." He said, "Get out of the car." So, I get out of the car. Then he was like, "Where's the dope, where's the guns?" I'm like, "Sir, I don't have any drugs or any guns; I got off at the wrong exit."

He snatches me up by the collar, drags me over to the back of the car, throws me against the car and searches me. I say, "I don't have anything." He

was like, “Just shut the f\*\*k up, just shut up.” I mean, the whole time, his anger is just *emanating* off of him. I’m like, *oh my Lord*. He says, “Sit down.” He’s pointing and telling me, “I’m getting ready to search your car and if I find any dope or any guns in there...” *Oh*, I mean, just *oh*... .

He tears my car apart, throwing out the CDs and everything. I’m sitting there looking at his partner, a Hispanic guy and his partner is looking like...a thousand-yard stare. Like whatever he does, [it’s] *I’m going to go along with him*. Like, *you picked the wrong one to get pulled over by*. I’m looking at him like, *what’s wrong, seriously?* I’m like, *Oh man. I can’t believe what’s going on*. He comes back, still mad as heck. He’s like, “I didn’t find anything.” So, the Mexican cop says, “Well, let me search it because I know where the stash spots are. These little cars like this and whatever...” When he came back, he’s like, “No, he’s okay, he’s clean.”

So, the guy reaches down and snatches me up, spins me around. He had me by the scruff of my pants and neck. He tiptoed me over, dragged me to the car. He says, “You see what it says on the side of that car?” And I say, “Yes sir.” He says, “That’s right. You know what that means?” I’m like, “No, sir.” He says, “That means that we don’t like you motherf\*\*ckers out here. I want you to get back in your car, get the f\*\*k on the freeway and get the f\*\*k out of Torrance, you understand?” I’m like, “Yes, sir, yes, sir.”

He shoves me off and I get in my car and on the freeway. I can’t recall having been through Torrance since—I just can’t. That was the first time in my adult life that I thought I might actually lose my life by the police. I mean, I ran from the police as a teenager and this and that. This is the only time that I felt, “Hey, it’s their story.”

*‘It makes you question the value of your life.’*

I could’ve been laying down there dead [and they might say], *we thought we saw you make a quick motion*. When I see a man lose his life at the hands of the police, I can see how it could happen, I really can. If my view is kind of slanted towards the citizen, it’s because of my personal experience. It could have been me, very easily. It makes you question the value of your life, from the perspective of the next person. It’s like, *hey, we’re all human beings, man... what have I done to him?* I mean, *what really, to the point where you feel and you have, the authority to kill me? If I can’t raise my hands, then what am I left*

*with? What am I going to do? So, that’s all my life is worth?*

I understand that it works both ways, because you have monsters in society who are criminals and they [do] the same thing. But if I, a law-abiding citizen, [am] not doing anything but walking down the street and [I] happen to encounter you, [do] I have to lose my life? You’re supposed to be here to protect and serve? Hey, I’m telling you, *I can’t breathe and you’re still applying pressure*. That means that *you’re killing me, slowly, in front of everyone*. *Oh yeah*. So that’s been my experience with violence and racism.

*‘The police acceptance criteria have to be strenuous.’*

Until we get to that point where policy makers and politicians are willing to stand up and be accountable, it’s going to keep going on. Policy makers, I need you to stop. First and foremost, the acceptance criteria into law enforcement has to be strenuous. I mean, a heavy emphasis on psychology and psychiatry, before you put this gun into this person’s hands—it has to be strenuous. [You] can’t just come in here with a high school diploma, immature, still haven’t really got your own thoughts or mentality together.

You can become susceptible to things that you may come in contact with in the force. If there’s any hint of racism, [then] *no, I’m sorry. Go try another city, another world*. I mean, we go from shooting people to this outright vigilantism really because they’re having a bad day or feeling a certain way or think a certain way or have experienced certain things that they haven’t gotten over and they come into play. It has to be strenuous evaluation for a healthy mind from the beginning, because you’re putting people’s lives into this person’s hands.

*‘Every single person is responsible.’*

As far as policy making goes, pay them to do the job that they’re doing so that they don’t have this financial pressure that can come into play doing their job. For policy makers, that’s your job—you’re the vanguard. You’re the first that can change something when the police do something. Then, hey, [if] they do something out of line, then you’re the people who approved the criteria that got this person hired. It’s also your job that’s on the line. Everyone in the process, from the psychiatrist who may have interviewed this person during

the hiring process, to the chief of police, to their first training officer...every single one is responsible.

That's the way I see it, because everyone's just passing the buck and young people are sliding through the cracks. They shouldn't be there; they shouldn't have a gun in their hands. If you really want to change the [police] force and the view of the force by the citizens that they patrol, then this is what you need to do. Do it from the beginning—do your job. Because when people die, there's no coming back from that. So, while we're here, at least make the effort. Try to do the right thing.

## Tin Thang

My name is Tin Thang. I'm living now in Rosemead, California. I lived there for the past year-and-a-half. My story is similar to a lot of people that went through what I went through in life, which is escaping Vietnam when the VC (Vietcong) took over Vietnam.

I was born in 1976, shortly after the Vietnam War ended. I recall my parents telling me that we need to escape because the Communists took over Vietnam. We weren't raised to believe in Communism. If we stayed in Vietnam, me and all my family members would be put in a re-education prison camp. We fled to China, Hong Kong, then laid over in the Philippines before finally arriving in California in 1985. I was eight years old. Prior to that, we spent about five years as a refugee [family] in Hong Kong.

I was four or five years old when we arrived in the refugee camp. We were confined in an environment like a prison. We didn't have any access to go and come in the community. We had to ask permission through the guard. Thinking back, I think it wasn't normal. I witnessed a lot of domestic violence, drug use [and] fighting in the camp, because a lot of people were stressed out at that time. I didn't understand as a child why I was seeing that.

I also witnessed domestic violence between my parents. At that time, I didn't know that it would cause me emotional damage as I grew up. Now I know it did affect me in a negative way.

*'Kids could be cruel in school.'*

Coming into this country, I didn't speak any English. I was in culture shock. I recall that I was getting bullied a lot in school too for being different. That was one of the main reasons I was getting bullied. Kids could be cruel in school. At that time, I didn't have coping skills for my anger. My only way of coping when people teased me, making fun of me for not speaking English and dressing different, was fighting. That's how I acted out. That's how I coped with it. At one point, I didn't go to school a lot because I didn't want to deal with the negative environment of kids making fun of me.

When we came to California, my parents didn't speak any English. They didn't have education where they'd get a good paying job. My mom was working in a sewing factory, sometimes ten hours a day. My dad, all he knew

was construction...he was doing that. Both my parents were working a lot to make money, pay the bills and give us food and clothes, just to basically raise a family. They weren't home giving me guidance and giving me the love—the care—that I was craving at that time.

We were poor; our family barely had enough. We were on welfare. Both my parents were hardly home. They had issues at that time. They were fighting a lot... arguments, physical fights. I was fighting a lot in school, being picked on. We lived in a very low income, gang-infested neighborhood where the majority of community members were Hispanic. There were very few Asian families. There was a lot of racial fighting amongst Asians and Hispanics.

Gradually, I met a group of people that were in the same situation like me. They'd escaped Vietnam and come here. The only problem [was that] they were from a gang. At that time, I didn't look at *oh, this group of people is no good for me...oh, they'll give me negative influence*. I was focused on *they will give me the love and attention that I was craving and wanted from my parents*. To be accepted, right? I embraced them. That's how I joined a gang between 14 and 15. My whole life changed and was them.

*'I turned to the gang for family support.'*

One of the reasons I joined was to feel protected. When somebody picked on me, I felt like, *oh, I could let them know and they'll have my back. They're going to support me and stuff like that*. I didn't have guidance. I turned to the gang for the family support that I was seeking. At that age, I was so angry. I started smoking cigarettes, weed. Started using alcohol as a form to cope with the stress I was going through internally and externally. To make myself feel like, *I'm somebody. I'm worthy to be loved*. To almost give myself self-esteem, right? Reflecting back now, of course it was the wrong choice to join a gang and use drugs and alcohol to cope with my problems.

*'It seemed like I wasn't even alive.'*

Gradually, my life just spiraled downhill. I lost total respect for my parents. I had no goals in life. I remember when I turned 17, I was getting high every day. Waking up, just get high...go get high. All the decision-making functions, everything that I believed in, was almost in a dreamlike state. It seemed like

I wasn't even alive. I was kind of like surviving, right?

At 17, to demonstrate to my gang friends that I'm worthy of their love and respect, I committed a horrible crime. I was given a life sentence. I went to prison when I was 21 years old. I served altogether a little over twenty-two years. I was paroled about two-and-a-half years ago.

I remember I was so scared. I'm not a big guy... I'm 5'3", Asian. In the mid-'90s, I recall the prison population was mostly Black, Hispanic, white. Asian were always the minority. The first day in prison, when they transferred me from county jail, I was very scared. But at the same time, I tried to be tough, because when I was in the county jail, people said, "Oh, you cannot show no weakness. You got to man up. People see you show some kind of fear or anything like that, they will step over you."

The night I went to prison, when they put me in a cell by myself, I was so scared. I almost cried but I held it in. I thought, *that's it. My life will pretty much end inside of [the] prison system.* I didn't know how to cope, so I used the only coping skills I know. I was getting into a lot of fights, a lot of trouble, arguing with the corrections officers, being rebellious. I was fifteen years in the prison system. I continued to live my lifestyle similar[ly] to when I was in the streets, but with much older guys.

Some of the guys had been there 10, 15-plus years. I listened to them. They gave me the rules of how to live there and whatnot, like prison politics. I really believed, *okay, this is it. I have to follow these rules that the older guys made up in prison. This is something that I have to obey.* I was a follower...I was pretty much a follower. I never realized that until I began to self-reflect inside prison.

*'There must be a better way to live my life.'*

I was about 36, 37 when it really hit me. *This is not the life I want no more. There must be a better way, right?* You know the phrase: *Insanity is doing the same thing over again and expecting a different result.* I never understood that when I was younger. While I was in prison, I saw people that were stabbed and died. I know people that purposely used drugs and ODeD because that's the only way out [of] prison. When I saw stuff like that, it really made me reflect, *no, there must be a better way to live my life.*

As I matured, it hit me like, *this is crazy.* I've finally realized the way I live

my life, talk to people, perceive life...the way I treated others...is all wrong. I was so selfish. I realized I need to change. That's when I began to read self-help books to cope with my anger issues. I started to participate in Asian classes... educational classes they have in prison.

I got my GED. When I got my GED, I was so happy, because I never graduated high school. That was an accomplishment that boosted my self-esteem. Gradually, I took some college courses in prison. I never finished because I was paroled, but I was always happy about that. Then, I participated in meditation—a Buddhist meditation group inside prison. That helped me cope with a lot of shocks I was going through. Those are some of the main things that led me to my positive changes.

The next step was cut myself loose, distance [myself] from the people in prison that were negative. I wanted to leave that criminal lifestyle. Those people, it's sad to say, but they pretty much gave up on themselves. Not to put those people down, (but) I kept on telling myself, almost daily, *I could do better. I'm better than this.* Just positive self-affirmation. Every day, I filled my mind with positive vibes, surrounded myself with positive people. Read positive books, educated myself more through conversation with people, books, television shows. Anything that gave me the tools I needed to prepare myself to go to my parole hearing and get out. Long story short, that's how I was able to help myself.

*'The day I paroled from prison, ICE picked me up.'*

It was a struggle, too, when I came out [of prison]. I was detained by immigration because I'm not a US citizen, just a permanent resident. The day I paroled from prison, ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] picked me up. I was detained for another eight months at an immigration detention center. They were trying to send me back to Vietnam, but Vietnam would have sent me back because I had no paperwork that said that I was born there. My parents were farmers back in Vietnam. My mom gave birth to me in a makeshift hut at the farm. There's no birth certificate...nothing.

ICE was trying very hard to send me back. Luckily, I was able to meet this immigration attorney to file a petition on my behalf, challenging ICE. Like, *why are you guys continuing to detain him when Vietnam made it very clear that they will not take him?* Two weeks after that [legal] petition, they released

me. My immigration status is still actively on the deportation [list] because Vietnam didn't give the US government a direct answer on *will they send me back or not?* My situation is kind of still up in the air.

Luckily, I was able to obtain a work permit, get back my driver's license, stuff that I need to work and support myself and contribute to my family [and] community. I was happy of course, after over two decades of being incarcerated, [to] have a second chance of life with my family and friends out in this free world. I'm still grateful to this day. But that doesn't change the fact that my immigration issue is not resolved yet. I'm working on it. I'm confident it will turn out all right as time passes. It won't happen overnight.

*'I have to unlearn all that.'*

I opened my first bank account when I was at 41. I paid my taxes [for the] first time ever last year. I have to deal with everyday normal people, working productive citizens, such as you...like having a conversation with them. Just adjust back into society with people like that. Because ninety percent of my life up until now, I've spent it with criminals, with people classified as against normal society. So, that's challenging too, because I really have no people skills. The way I talk and everything, I learned when I was incarcerated. I have to unlearn all that and talk kind of like in a conversation.

Luckily, I have [a] strong support network, which is my family and friends. They are guiding me. They give me advice on how to approach situations when I'm out. That's working out fine. The first year, I was so confused. I was like, *I know what I want to do.* I didn't have the confidence to say, *yeah, I'll do it.* There was a big gap missing. That aspect was challenging. Now, a little over two years out, I can only say I'm still adjusting but my confidence level and people skills went up.

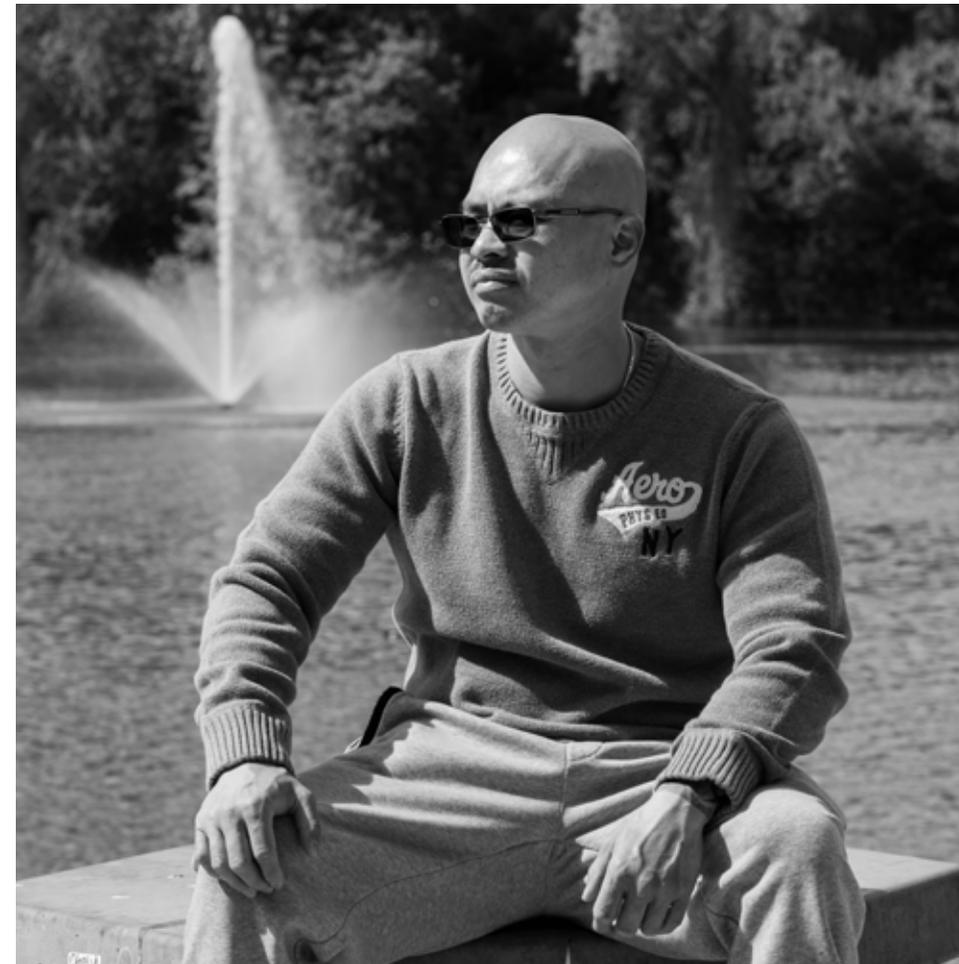
Back then, COVID-19 wasn't happening yet. Keep in mind [that] about two years ago, it was like, *whoa.* Everybody's like, *this is crazy.* I coped with it by just taking a deep breath and just minding my own business. Reminding myself like, *damn, less than a year ago, I was still incarcerated. Now, I'm out.* So, it's good. I'm patient. That's how I cope with difficult situations and negative people. It's reminding myself like, *look, about three years ago, I was still sitting in the cell, right? So now I'm out. I'm able to do what I love to do.* That's my number one coping skill right there.

*'Be more understanding to juvenile offenders.'*

The number one thing that popped to mind is to be more understanding to juvenile offenders, especially people that came here that are not naturalized citizens. I want the policy makers to keep that in mind. I was so young. I'm not perfect. I admit that even though I earned my freedom. Nobody's perfect. People make poor choices and people can change. I'm only one good example. There are many others like me. I want the policymakers to keep that in mind.

Today, as a 44-year-old man, I'm productive. I give back to the community. I support my family. I have goals. I'm paying taxes. I'm working. I'm not hurting people like before...I'm totally changed. I did a 180 degree turn for my life.

Everybody deserves a second chance. Don't give up on people, especially youth. If you give them a chance, I'm confident and I say this wholeheartedly, they will be very productive members of society. We can help and guide them back on the better path.



## Tyler

My name is Tyler. I live in Santa Monica, California. I am a survivor of a relatively new acronym in the military known as MST, which means Military-related Sexual Trauma. I am a United States Army Reserve Soldier. I was raped in my home by my best friend of six years, who was a United States Marine. We're both gay and had previous consensual sexual encounters. He was the one that inspired me to join, actually.

While you're serving in any military branch, if something happens to you when you are in an active duty component; it's considered to have happened in the line of duty, which entitles you to certain benefits upon separation. Even if it's on a weekend, or happens while you're on leave or a holiday; it's considered to have happened in the line of duty. If you are serving in a Reserve Component and you are injured while in an active status; the unit must issue you what's called a Line of Duty Memorandum, because otherwise it is considered not to have happened in the line of duty and therefore not recognized as service connected for continuity of healthcare after you separate or disability benefits. That particular weekend, I was on active orders. The assault happened in my home and not at my military unit. They did not issue me Line of Duty paperwork when I immediately reported it.

*'My best friend ended up raping me.'*

At that time, I was dating someone else. My best friend came over and was probably expecting some sort of sexual encounter, but I told him no. He was intoxicated and asked if he could stay the night because he was at a bar maybe six miles away. I said he could stay the night but had to sleep downstairs on the couch. The next morning when I had to get up to go to my unit, he came into my room and attempted to invoke a sexual encounter and I told him no again. He was sober at that point. It sort of progressed for about an hour and a half to where he just became more and more violent. Ultimately, he ended up raping me. He was at least 20 pounds heavier than I am and stronger. In those moments, I was thinking about how much force should I apply in this situation? What do I need to do to get him to stop? I didn't punch him, I didn't kick him, but I did use techniques the military taught me. I applied the most minimal force possible and he responded by choking me. He choked me so hard until

I stopped fighting back. My neck hurt for about two-and-a-half weeks after. Swallowing was painful and I didn't think the pain would go away. In those moments afterwards, I think he realized what he'd done and tried to cuddle with me. He didn't let me get up, for about three attempts. I just stared at the wall. I remember thinking, *OK, this is what sexual assault is, this is it.* My goal was to get him out of my house, so I kind of played nice and he got dressed and I got dressed and he left.

I called one of my best friends in my unit, who is also a civilian police officer. I told him what happened and he asked if I'm okay. I said, *yeah, I think so, but I want to go press charges right now.* He said he was busy at the moment, but would come over later. I said, *Yeah, I think that's fine.* Granted, during this time, I am supposed to be with my unit. I texted my platoon sergeant to let him know I'd be late. I waited about two hours and realized my friend wasn't coming. I also realized the only person you're ever going to have in this world is yourself, so I got dressed and left to go to my unit.

*'It started to create real anxiety.'*

For about three months I tried to pretend it didn't happen. I was spending more and more time with my unit and they would talk about what we're supposed to do for each other and how we're supposed to take care of each other, especially in our field. I'm a combat medic in the Army. It started to create this anxiety and this real anger, not just at the guy that did it but even more so, for the people that swore an oath never to abandon me ever. I wanted to go and get him arrested but that never happened.

About two months later, we were expected to go to the field to qualify on our weapons. We normally have annual qualification. This is considered active duty. If you are injured or something prevents you from going, you don't have to go, [but] you let your superiors know. There is an official form created to perform rescheduled training. I put on there exactly what happened. I wanted some support for what I went through. So, I put it on the official forum and I sent it to my platoon sergeants, which is the next step in the chain of command. It's time-stamped and dated.

I sent it through official email channels to be forwarded to my commanders because in the military, when you experience a sexual assault and you report it, there are a number of things that are supposed to happen. [It's] supposed to

trigger an investigation [and] resources.

Because some people have difficulty accessing their military email, when I didn't get a response from my platoon sergeant I followed up with a text message two days later. I asked him "I assume you haven't read my email yet?" He responded that you shouldn't assume things and that makes me look like a moron. He's supposed to act on it immediately—he should have. At least [ask], *are you OK? What can I do to help you?* Right? He didn't do any of those things. The commander called me a few days after that. His first question was, *did this happen at the unit?* I said, *No, sir.* Then he asked me if I was OK and I said, *I'm fine now, I guess.* I basically said, *I didn't want to go with my unit because I don't trust them, even though it was not anyone in my branch. It wasn't even at my unit.* He was like, *OK, well, I'm going to excuse you from this, but in the future, you will have to participate with us.* I said, *I understand.*

*'I couldn't find anyone to help.'*

My conversation happened in 2018. At this phase, I'm kind of still in shock. It was really starting to fester like an infection, psychologically. When my unit went to the range, my former squad leader texted me, *hey, why aren't you here? Because normally you love doing this stuff.* I told her what happened and it enraged her. She told my former platoon sergeant, who went to the chief nurse. Hearing what happened and how I was treated by my unit also enraged the chief nurse. I heard that she walked into the commander's office and yelled at him. That is kind of when he started to take it more seriously.

When the commander learns about the sexual assault in the military, you no longer have the option of handling it quietly. They have to conduct a criminal investigation; it's required. He didn't do that. He deferred me to our sexual assault representative. You're supposed to get three things if you want it: medical care, psychological help from a psychologist and legal and professional counseling, by an expert and military attorney trained in sexual assault in the military. I didn't get any of those things. It was all denied. They basically gave me an 800 number for a group that provides free or low-cost resources to service members, but it's not official military personnel or resources. I couldn't find anyone [to help] when I called them. After a while, you kind of give up.

2018 starts to roll into 2019 and that's when the suicide ideation starts to happen. They sent me to the VA. I was assessed and I convinced them

to release me because I was in school studying to be a licensed health care provider. If they had kept me for suicide ideation, I was going to have to repeat the semester. They reluctantly released me, but at that point, the commander had to start that Line of Duty paperwork. So yes, this officially happened in the line of duty. I can receive continuity of care and possibly medical separation and disability benefits if needed later on.

*'My psychiatric pathologies have become so bad.'*

2019 rolled into 2020. At that point, the post-traumatic stress disorder and mood disorders are really starting to affect me. We got a new commander. She noticed I had a pattern of coming in really late in the day. It turns out that in her civilian job, she was a (sexual assault) nurse. She had me call the a government sexual assault hotline. Then I got in touch with people at LA Air Force Base, [but] that kind of fizzled out because of the pandemic. My psychiatric pathologies have become so bad that it's difficult to be at my unit.

My chief nurse asks if I want to initiate the process of medical separation. I said yes. This is where it really starts to get kind of ugly. I was assigned a psychiatric registered nurse case manager who was outright hostile towards me. The sexual assault representative wanted me to get a medical and police report. It was kind of like they're creating hoops for me to jump through. I said, *well, I'm not going to do that because I've already taken steps to suppress my identity.* They said, *we can't prove this happened on Line of Duty without that police report.* We would go back and forth for months. Eventually I asked for a different case manager; it was denied. They're intentionally creating situations designed for me to fail. If I didn't submit it, they were going to say that I was non-compliant and find it not in the line of duty.

I didn't have evidence of penetration (though) I tried to get evidence of it when it happened. I didn't have any help and I didn't want to do it by myself at that (2017) moment. I do have evidence that I reported it and they did nothing. I do have evidence that I was revictimized following a paper trail. I can't make that stuff up; I still have the emails...the text messages. He tried to say it was consensual, it was not.

*'I had four documented suicide attempts.'*

At this point, I have had four documented suicide attempts; two of them [I] had to be taken to the hospital. Then I got a new case manager...a lot more empathetic. I finally got assigned an attorney by the Army. He said the only reason they wanted that police report is because they would have used it as evidence that it didn't happen...to find this in the line of duty, we need an actual conviction...they're not going to cover it. My case manager said, with your permission, I'd like to send it [your case] to the board and see if they kick it back. They found it not to have happened in the line of duty. My lawyer wrote an appeal. Just a few months ago, they found my psychiatric injuries to have happened in the line of duty, with an Army Line of Duty Memorandum overruling the Army Reserve and also that I experienced revictimization by what my chain of command, RN case manager and Division Sexual Assault Representative put me through. So now I'm awaiting medical separation. They will determine a disability rating.

All these things take a psychiatric toll on you. It made me not want to be around people. I felt disgusting. The trauma therapy has helped to a degree, but, you know, remnants will always be with me. I'm a different person than I used to be. I try not to think about that too much. I'm trying as best I can to rebuild. I did graduate school; I got my license. There's a caveat, though, because as a survivor of sexual assault, I don't like it when people touch me. I also don't like touching other people. How do you do that as a licensed health care provider? You have to touch people, physically care for them. That had made me squeamish and I recently got fired from my first job.

*'You need that Line of Duty investigation.'*

I've gotten better about being around people for a long while. What's not expected is the numbness...you don't have normal emotions anymore after an experience like this. Your emotions are impaired, even with the trauma therapy. EMDR therapy did help. I went from maybe having ten to twenty percent emotions to about seventy percent. Really what helped is getting my puppy. He is absolutely essential in my recovery. That dog has reopened up my ability to feel and go out and be happy—to at least make an effort.

I'm thankful that my story has a moderately happy ending. I will get VA care

now. I should be able to receive continuity of care for any pathologies that I experience. As far as how you pick up your life after that [assault], the first place is, you have to go to a safe place. My advice is, if you're on guard or reserve duty and it [sexual assault] happens to you in a duty status, you absolutely must do everything you can to provide evidence that it did happen and while you are in an active status; you need that Line of Duty paperwork and investigation. You must get that immediately. You have to go to a hospital. You have to endure the [medical exam], you have to obtain the evidence. Find psychological care through your insurance; you do need to find one who specializes in sexual trauma. You have to find a trauma psychologist.

The biggest problem was that leadership didn't take accountability. They didn't do what they're supposed to. This happens in all of the cases. The only thing that's really going to change it is if you put in criminal penalties for commanders or any staff that attempt to conceal or neglect or revictimize or retraumatize any survivor of military-related sexual assault. If you codify criminal penalties for the people in positions of power, then you'll see change. The policy change has to come at a federal level.

## Veronica Morales Servin

My name is Veronica Morales. I was born to a teenage mother. She was 17 when I was born; my father was about 18. My parents weren't married because my grandmother on my father's side didn't want to sign the paperwork for them since my father didn't seem to know anything about being a provider. My oldest sister is three years older than me. My mother was very young when she had her; I was her second child.

We didn't have a lot to begin with. There are hardly any childhood pictures of me because my mom says that we were so poor that they couldn't afford the film. I often say, "Do you remember sleeping in the car, how fun it was?" because we'd go and find someone's house to sleep outside. We'd lay [down] pillows and look at the stars at night. We thought that was fun but we slept there because we had nowhere to sleep. I can't even say I was homeless. I always say we lived in cars. It was normal to not have somewhere to live, sleep in a car and go from one school to another school. We just thought that's the way it's supposed to be.

*'He was a kid raising a kid.'*

My father started drinking and doing drugs at a very young age, never working. That's why we slept in cars. I remember having a hard time learning to read because when I'd go to one school, they'd be in one session and I wouldn't be able to catch up. I had to stay home because my mom started working and there wasn't anyone to take us to school or pick us up. My father sometimes was too drunk or was gone. [I'm] realizing now he was probably in jail or had left us.

I remember my mother getting tired of how we lived. How, after [she was] beaten by my father, he'd take off somewhere. Sometimes I'd follow behind him and ask, "Where are you going? Don't leave us." I'd miss him because I was daddy's girl. Other times, we'd be glad he was gone. "Do you remember having to call the cops every other weekend to get my father to stop hitting my mother?" At that time, the law was very different. You weren't mandated to press charges, even if there was evidence of blood or anything. My mother would at times say *No* and sometimes *Yes* when asked if she wanted to press charges. I remember watching my father walking away in handcuffs.

Overall, he was a kid, young and foolish without any parenting skills. He was a kid raising a kid. He used to like to teach different things about music or fixing cars, but he also taught me how to fight. He thought it was cool that we cussed. He wouldn't tell us it was wrong; he just didn't want my mom to hear us. He thought it was cool to teach me how to steal. When I got older, he thought it was cool to let me sit outside of a bar and wait for him just so that he could say, "I took her with me. I'm not doing anything bad."

*'I was dehydrated and starving.'*

My mother only had an eighth-grade education. Her means were to get welfare. I remember standing in line for cheese...it looked like a big brick. I remember biting into the cheese...I honestly thought it was so good. They also gave us butter, powdered milk and powdered eggs. I remember at about six years old, waking up and opening the fridge and it was mayonnaise, mustard and jalapenos. I said, "Dad, what are we going to eat?" And he said, "I don't know." I remember seeing him stressed out. He said, "Eat toothpaste. Just put something in your stomach." By the end of the day, I had diarrhea. He got worried and took me to the clinic. He said, "Whatever you do, do not tell them that you haven't had anything to eat today." The doctor started asking me what I had for breakfast and lunch and I made up this whole menu. They gave me a vial and told me to go to the bathroom in it and that's how they knew I was dehydrated and starving.

*'They'd leave us for long periods of time.'*

I remember having to live with my grandmother in Echo Park. She had one bedroom with double doors and slept in the living room with my grandfather. We were in the second room, with my big sister and cousins. There were always a bunch of us sleeping in one bed. My *abuela* would talk bad about my father and my mother because they'd leave us there for long periods of time.

When my mother got tired of that life for us, she started driving the school bus for the school district [as] a part-time employee. She told me, "I'm going to get a job and I'm going to leave your dad." Then my dad started to change. She ended up pregnant again with my little sister, a.k.a. Baby. My father was really happy because she'd conceived and there was always that hope for a boy. My

mother had to go back to work, so unfortunately my sister and I couldn't go to school every day. There was no one to take care of the baby. We were her caretakers.

*'Has your father ever done anything to you?'*

My father started drinking heavily. He ended up being accused by a neighbor's daughter—a little girl—who said that he touched her. She was my best friend at the time. I was shocked. I was sad, hurt and confused, but I was in denial that he'd done something wrong. The first thing I thought was, *I'm going to go upstairs and I'm going to beat her up.* My mother confronted him and he denied it. She said, "You need to leave." She went into the kitchen, grabbed a knife and tried to stab him. He caught it with his hand. I watched him walk away with blood dripping everywhere. Next, she said, "Get boxes and start packing everything. I can't be with him. What if he had done something to you girls?"

The next thing we know, we ended up at this lady's house, H.. She was a heavysset Irish woman and my mother's co-worker. H. was a love. She said, "You can stay with me. You'll be safe." I remember her telling my mom, "Save your money and get your own apartment."

*'My mother really wanted to do it on her own.'*

I was raised in Echo Park where there were only Mexican, Salvadoran and Vietnamese kids. All of a sudden, I'm living at this white Irish lady's two-bedroom apartment in Van Nuys. The only rule was [that] we couldn't tell anyone we were there because the landlord would charge H. extra rent. We'd look through the curtains, watch kids in the courtyard playing. They didn't keep that house clean at all; we would actually clean because that house needed it.

My mom would come home after work and cook. H. would look at me and say, "You look like a beautiful little Hawaiian girl. Look at your curls. The color of your skin is so lovely. You'd look great in a cute, little tutu suit." She took me to Montgomery Ward and The Broadway and to lunch. She taught me how to eat with a fork and knife and hold a spoon. She bought me a bathing suit with a tutu. It was brand new, not used as in my sister's hand-me-downs.

*'The Valley was just so different.'*

My mother got her first apartment. After being raised in LA, it was difficult coming to San Fernando Valley, where everyone had brand new stuff. Kids would make fun of our shoes and our hair because we didn't have designer stuff. It was so different. The people that we saw [who were] Black where we lived [before] were either driving a bus or on the curb [homeless]. One of the first things I noticed when I got there was a Black principal. I thought she was so cool. There was a Black lady in charge who spoke Spanish. There were Sri Lankan students, an Asian student, a white...just every color. Even with all that we went through, my sister always managed to do well in school.

Our mother would leave early in the morning to drive the school bus. The only sad part was that we didn't have anyone to take care of my baby sister. My mother would drive her to my uncle's house on Sunday and we'd pick her up on Friday night. It was as if we didn't have her. My mother didn't bond with her because she was so little; we never bonded with her. There's still a huge disconnect between us.

My mom was adamant about not getting any help from any system; she wanted to do it on her own. She started to figure out how to get daycare. She'd only work during the school year. She worked as a waitress just to make extra money. Little by little, she started to get it together. She bought a new car, then was able to pay for daycare. During summer breaks, she'd have different jobs. My big sister and I would watch my [baby] sister and take her to the pool. H. was there for us as a neighbor [and] friend for many years.

*'My father didn't want to pay child support.'*

My father tried to get back together [with mom] by getting a job, but when my mother filed for child support, he didn't want to pay it. There were three of us and the child support was too high. He stopped working because it was too much for him to pay. I was about 15 years old when I got a call from my grandmother saying my dad is not doing well. I was working part-time at Domino's that summer. I took the bus from Van Nuys to Echo Park because my grandmother didn't drive; it took a couple of hours. He didn't look good. I cut his hair and gave him about \$15.

*'She'd hit me the way he would hit her.'*

My mother started resenting me for visiting him. She was just like, "You're just like him." I started to get on her nerves and became her punching bag. Being my fathers' daughter, I liked to mess around and say funny things, sometimes speak out of turn and my mother would hit me. She'd hit me the way he'd hit her...nonstop. She dragged me by the hair...I'd have chunks of hair coming out of my head. Then she started drinking and smoking marijuana.

I remember her accusing me of stealing her weed. I was around 14 years old. I didn't take it but I remember being in the bathroom looking for it for her. She came behind me, grabbing me by the hair. She was able to rip the seat off the toilet and began hitting me in the head, telling me that I needed to give her back her weed. She broke my nose and I started choking on my blood.

Baby was watching and coming behind her, trying to stop my mother. She was only three or four years old. My mother throws her out of the way. I remember banging at the front door, the neighbors heard us. I thought, *I'm going to die. I'm choking. She's killing me.* My little sister was crying. I thought *I have to do what I have to do* and I turned and slugged my mother. I remember ripping an earring off her ear and punching her face and head like my dad had taught me; I was tough. I did it because I was scared. I remember Baby putting a chair against the door, unlocking the door and the apartment manager walked in. There's blood everywhere. The manager told us to stop and we did. I just remember the manager saying to my mother, "I'll bring you some weed." The fight was resolved that simply. I fell asleep on the couch.

When I opened my eyes, my sister was home from her date, crying while standing over me. She thought I was dead. She said, "What happened?" I said, "Mom, she thinks I took her weed." My sister said, "No, I hid it because I didn't want Baby to find it." She took it to my mom saying, "Here's your stupid weed!" As I was showering, all my hair was falling out. I had bruises all over my body. The next day I went to my neighbor's house, K. I asked his mother, "Can you shave my hair?" She simply said, "Okay." No one reported anything to the authorities.

*'Sometimes we don't have choices other than to fight for our lives.'*

My mother wouldn't look at me after this incident; she didn't even question my

haircut. I remember her telling everyone that I beat her. To this day, I'll hear her say, "Oh, Veronica has some heavy hands, huh?" I think to myself, *I wish she wouldn't tell people that. I know what I did was to defend myself.*

As I grew older, all I would think about [is], *I can't go to my dad's, he's a drug addict.* I didn't want to live with my grandma; too many people lived there. I didn't have anyone to run to. Then I got a phone call that my dad overdosed on the money I gave him. He'd been using cocaine, but that time decided to inject it. My grandmother sent him to rehab, all the way to Mexicali. He's gone, trying to clean up. All of a sudden, I receive a letter from him, about how he's recovering. They had him doing Bible studies and labor jobs.

I was mad about my dad leaving, angry at my mom for all the abuse. The one thing she didn't do wrong is that she never brought a man home [and] she never stopped working.

*'I became suicidal.'*

As we were getting older, people started offering us weed and alcohol. I started to accept them. *Why wouldn't I? my dad did it; my mom does that...* There was a beating that came while she was smoking her weed and drinking at home. All of this caused me to get depressed; I became suicidal. I remember trying to overdose on Tylenol or some medication. I was hospitalized. I remember her visiting me because I was institutionalized. Back then they weren't mandated to do drug tests as they do now. The only thing she said was, "Don't tell them that I drink and smoke weed because they're going to take you girls away from me; they're going to take your sister away from me, too."

After all that, I started running away and running around in the streets, kind of like my dad would do, hanging out with the wrong people. At 16, I drank and smoked weed like my mom and got pregnant and ended up with a deadbeat guy. I was embarrassed to go home. I just thought being pregnant was unacceptable at my mother's house. I didn't even show until I was about seven months pregnant so no one really knew. I finally couldn't do it anymore. I called my mom and said, "Mom, I'm pregnant." She said, "Just come home."

When I began going into labor with my son Mark, I was by myself. When I called his father, they said he was out partying. My mother took me to the hospital at four in the morning and they told her, "Oh, she'll be here all day because it's her first time giving birth." She believed it. She said, "I'm going to

go home to rest up, then go to church and I'll come back. Back then the parents had to sign a consent form if you were a minor to get an epidural or for pain while giving birth. They couldn't give me anything. It was traumatizing. By noon, my mother was by my side, able to watch my son be born. It was pretty painful but I remember the relief. She cut the umbilical cord. She had a little blood on her church dress and she didn't want it dry cleaned because it was from her grandson's little cord.

*'Baby was raising herself.'*

I was in the same scenario as my mother with somebody that was more interested in being out on the streets, with alcohol and drugs. She really didn't care for him [the father], especially after he'd finally showed up to the hospital where our son was born with hickeys on his neck. She told me, "Don't worry, I'll help you." Unfortunately, the abuse continued with her. By the time my son was three or four, he was watching her hit me...she'd smack me upside the head.

My youngest sister became a bad little sister. She was disconnected from us. She started getting into trouble really young, hanging out with gang members, running away. I felt bad. Baby was just kind of raising herself, mimicking stuff that we were doing. By the time she was 14, she ended up in juvenile hall. We lost her to the system. That was always my fear.

She ran away from home after being let out of juvenile hall. She took everything that had value from my mother's house. My mother filed a police report. She went to court and said, "I work all day. I can't keep an eye on her." The court said they could help by taking her. She became the ward of the courts. We'd visit her in foster homes and girl's homes. I'd visit and keep an eye on her. They put her in these programs. They did remove tattoos she had on her face and other places; we thanked God that they were gone. When she'd accomplish something, we'd go celebrate with her, like when she graduated from high school. At 18, she got out of there.

*'I was learning to do something with myself.'*

By the time I was 19, I left. I struggled with a three-year-old, but I managed. I got on Section 8 and hit the jackpot; I got my own apartment and furnished it. Next, I got a letter from this program that said they were going to send me

to school or they weren't going to give me any welfare, my Medi-Cal and food stamps. I hadn't graduated high school.

I agreed. I got up every morning, jumped on the bus, dropped my son at daycare and went to Pierce College to get my GED. I ended up enjoying schoolwork. For the first time, I felt good about it because I was learning to do something with myself, for my son. I finally took my GED [exam] and remember calling my sister, saying, "I passed!" She said, "Why do you sound so surprised? You're really good at math, too—you're better than me." That was good to hear from an honor roll student.

After that, this lady became my case manager. She'd take me to meetings, take my son and put him with other kids, provide us with dinner. We'd have these group talks to support each other. They gave us incentives like a free car seat for attending. She offered to let me use her car for the (DMV) test. I got a license. Little by little, I started trying to improve my life.

Somehow, through all of that, my father became a different person. He fully recovered. He had not used or drunk anything for four or five years. He was at peace. He started telling me about God and what the Bible said. My mother started going to church as well.

*'I had a GED, so I thought I could do anything.'*

I tried to get into the military, but they wouldn't take me because I didn't have anyone to watch my son. I had a GED, so I thought I could do anything. I volunteered at my son's school. They had a mobile clinic that hired me as one of their coordinators in the San Fernando Valley. I was still on Medi-Cal, getting cash aid and food stamps while working. What was sad was, I'd ask these people if they got welfare and I realized, *I'm like them...I'm part of them.* I wanted to really accomplish myself and not be that statistic.

I went back to school, to UEI (United Education Institute). I entered school as a Computer Application Specialist. I ended up graduating on time; I never dropped out. I applied for a position as a 911 school police dispatcher and they liked me. I loved it. I'll never forget when I got my first paycheck. I called my social worker and I said, "I'm done. Please give it to somebody else that needs it." That was the best feeling in the whole world. Never again did I ever have to get back into the system. It was an accomplishment.

I went from school police to state police, listening to calls about domestic

abuse. It hits home every single time. I want to raise my children differently, especially from my culture...to teach them to connect with someone emotionally. We have to take responsibility for children. We have to lead by example if we want a better future for them.





## Message from Los Angeles County Office of Violence Prevention

When we first conceived of the Storytelling Project in early 2020, the project seemed straightforward: the Office of Violence Prevention (OVP) wanted to collect and share stories and photos from a diverse group of survivors of violence across LA County to document the extent and the impact of violence on the lives of our friends, our neighbors, our communities. We wanted to hear directly from those most impacted by violence to learn from the stories shared with us and better understand where systems had helped, where systems had failed them, and where there were missed opportunities to intervene earlier and more effectively. We wanted to invite readers to take that journey with us, through a connection of heart and mind with those most directly affected by violence in all its forms.

This project was conceived before, but implemented after, two seminal events of 2020: The COVID-19 pandemic and the news of the shocking and brutal murder of George Floyd. These events dramatically changed the context and process we had set up, changed who we heard from in our outreach efforts, and influenced why people participated. The task was not simple, nor was it easy. Much to the credit of our Artist in Residence, Olga Koumoundouros, and the commitment of our partners at the Department of Arts and Culture, we were able to collect 100 stories in the midst of a raging global pandemic. **These stories matter** and we are grateful to those who shared them with us.

It has been a great privilege and honor to read and re-read all the stories that have been collected, both those contained in the book and those that will be later shared online. I'm humbled by the dignity,

courage, and determination of each survivor-storyteller. I'm forever changed by the words I've read. These stories have enhanced my understanding of violence and the complex interplay between interpersonal, institutional, and systemic violence. It confirms that **violence is preventable** and highlights how we can support prevention and healing. The stories, each placed in a section that links the experience of storytellers with our OVP Strategic Plan priorities, motivates us to advance these strategies in ways that statistics and data alone cannot. It is my hope that you will read every story and be compelled to learn more and do more.

On behalf of the Office of Violence Prevention, I want to express my deepest thanks and appreciation to all those who shared their stories and insights, to those who've been involved in this important project from the start, to those who continue to do the hard work of violence prevention and healing, and to those who will eventually join us in these efforts. I particularly want to thank Dr. Deborah Allen for her guidance, and Olga Koumoundouros for her perseverance and tireless efforts in the face of many challenges.

In the end, let us not forget the resounding message that is inherent in all the stories that while violence enters far too many of our lives and affects all of our communities, in each story there are pointers to prevention; interventions that worked, or opportunities that could have made a difference given a culture of compassion and prevention. These stories point to a prevention roadmap to achieve our vision of a violence-free LA. We invite you to join us in this effort. **Together, we can and will make a difference.**

**Andrea Welsing, MPH**  
Director, Los Angeles County  
Office of Violence Prevention

## Violence, Hope and Healing Creative Strategist Process

When Larae Cantley said “Art kept us alive...it was our saving grace without us ever knowing”, I was reminded of the value of art and how it can be a vital step in trauma recovery when we let our body’s knowing guide us, to communicate what is buried or too difficult to say. This project began with a foundation in the arts and was supported by trauma-informed processes. Cantley’s voice is among many that spoke to my heart and mind as I worked in 2020 to record oral histories of individuals navigating violence in their lifetimes. Variations in tone, cadence, and non-verbal emotions expanded my understanding of these stories and through the sharing of these narratives, we are given threads that can guide us to accessing our shared humanity. I was so very honored to listen to them all.

*The Violence, Hope and Healing in Los Angeles County: The Storytelling Project* emerged from the Creative Strategist program, facilitated by the Department of Arts and Culture with the Office of Violence Prevention (OVP), housed within the Department of Public Health. It was born of a process that combined the processes and approach of public health with art to evolve into a book reflecting their intersection. Structural support was provided by the Department of Arts and Culture’s Creative Strategist program, facilitated by Cross Sector Manager Kimberly Glann. This program places artists in residence at Los Angeles County departments to develop artist-driven solutions to complex social challenges. From this launchpad, I set out to find ways to utilize my art training to support transformational policy, practice, and systems change that truly centers survivors.

In early 2020, I set out to record 80 to 120 stories informed by a rubric to ensure we were recording a selection of stories that reflected diversity of gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, type of violence and geography. Locations and language interpretation services were lined up. Community based organizations, parks, and libraries were identified for holding recording sessions that could comfortably host storytellers.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, we restructured

to record people virtually and by phone. There was a break of a few months as public health pivoted to respond to the pandemic and when we rebooted the *Storytelling Project*, it was in the wake of mass public demonstrations of outrage and grief at the murder of George Floyd. This and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests, speaking for racial justice and calls to restructure our police and carceral systems, informed the project going forward as we collectively witnessed another generation of young Black and Brown community leaders and voices emerge across the US and Los Angeles. It was within this context that the *Storytelling Project* shifted to include the violence of systemic racism as people shared their stories about the different forms of violence that they had experienced and their ways of navigating through the thick of it.

To get the word out about the project, we printed postcards with my phone number on it so people could text me. We built a web page to allow participants to self-record their stories at their own convenience. The OVP Community Partnership Council (CPC) and Trauma Prevention Initiative (TPI) staff and community partners lifted up this project in their meetings. These individuals, who had nurtured and built trusted, long-term relationships with communities through their violence prevention work, vouched for me. A turning point happened when I attended an online TPI Community Action for Peace (CAP) meeting. Afterwards, I received a text from an attendee interested in participating. After I had my first audio recording session, I was referred to other community members. The process was now known and the project’s integrity affirmed.

I learned that asking survivors questions about their experiences can feel similar to the interrogation processes that many have experienced with authorities, whether social service providers, police, courts, or scientists. So, I was careful not to proceed like I was conducting a study. I favored a trauma-informed process in which people shared their own narrative from their point of view. This was not meant to be journalism, but personal testimony. I was there as a witness and recorder.

At the close of a session, I asked participants what they wanted policy makers to know to inform social change. I ended our recording sessions with suggested somatic grounding exercises. When monolingual Spanish speakers signed up to participate, TPI staff member Patricia Hernandez led trauma-informed, in-person language interpretation in our recording sessions. She also assisted with text and email communications so that our monolingual Spanish speaking participants were informed and comfortable with the project process.

Throughout the process, I made it clear that contact information and names would remain confidential and offered the option of anonymous participation. Individuals named by survivors in stories were identified only by their initials to protect confidentiality and ensure safety of survivors, without sacrificing the content of their narratives. We also avoided identifying specific service agencies or providers by name, but we did identify them by their work or role in a survivor's experiences. Additionally, I worked with photographer Johnny Pérez to photograph participants interested in having their portraits taken. We did this in outdoor locations of the storytellers' choosing. It was important to me that the stories be presented in a beautiful book and I was thrilled to collaborate with graphic designer Carolina Ibarra-Mendoza. Anne-christine d'Adesky was also hired to edit stories to highlight key insights shared by participants. The voices presented in this book represent a sample of the 100 individuals that participated in the project and the many types of violence that people face. While only a selection of stories were able to be shared in the book, all project participants will have their stories and photographs shared on the Office of Violence Prevention and Department of Arts and Culture websites in the future.

*The person that's caused that harm is hurt, too*, is a truth shared by participant David Guizar that was echoed by many others. To me, it sums up a necessary *Call to Action*, one that demands to be carried out with sensitivity and care – dual pillars of our violence prevention work.

Finally, on a personal note, I want to emphasize that nobody does anything alone. I give appreciation to the colleagues who gave me invaluable input when I needed direction at key intersections. I called these individuals with all sorts of questions, both strategic and logistical: Jeanne Baron, Anne Bray, Joel Garcia, Robin Garcia, and Jennifer Moon. Thank you for sharing your skills, professional contacts, far-reaching visions, and commitment to systemic change and its contribution to centering community voices for a more peaceful Los Angeles County.

**Olga Koumoundouros**

Creative Strategist Artist-in-Residence, Office of Violence Prevention  
Los Angeles County, CA  
March 2022

## Gratitude and Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the many community organizers and leaders that participated in this project for your referrals to peers and colleagues doing violence prevention work countywide. The input and encouragement of the OVP Community Partnership Council (CPC) and Trauma Prevention Initiative partners was instrumental and we appreciate how you all cheered and affirmed this project in its early stages, as well as gave us pause to question our process. We appreciate everyone's honesty so we could evolve to become a more effective project centering survivors' voices. We appreciate Gilbert Johnson for his invaluable outreach work that brought a steady persistence and vast array of connections through sharing his vast community organizer's skills with us. We would also like to thank LaTanya Ward, Tiffany Duvernay, Tue Huynh, Amanda Perez, Pastor Byron Smith, Diane Ujiye, Bamby Salcedo, Tobias Tubbs and David Guizar for their labor in providing outreach assistance. It is clear that without your ongoing commitment to end violence in Los Angeles County, this book would not exist.

The outpouring of your generous spirit to help others is an inspiration. We give special thanks to the following participating storytellers: Califa Abwoon, Ashley Agramon, Yaquelin Alvarez, Anonymous, Mia Baker, Anonymous, Joseph Bloomfield, Anonymous, Mildred Brown, Oliver Buie, Rickitia Canady, Deshanae Cantley, Larae Cantley, Liza Ceballos, Patricia Chappelle, Liza Contreras, Karen Cortes-Gonzalez, Pamela Crenshaw, von curtis, Maria Delgado, Rhiannon Diaz, Victor Noel Diaz, Keisha Dixon, Teniecka Drake, Tiffany Duvernay-Smith, Patricia Espinoza, Melvin Farmer, Joel Garcia, René Garcia, Sergio Garcia, Yvonne Garcia, Cynthia Gary, Atala Giraldo, David Guizar, Guy, Ronald Hall, Celida Hernandez, Anonymous, Kesau'c Hill, Ms. Holmes, Barbara Holwordea, Ngan Hong, Rodney Howard, Tue Huynh, Anonymous, Anthony Jenkins, Kay, Gilbert Johnson, Zondre Johnson, Jasmine Johnson-Walker, Carolline Kim, Tim Kornegay, Anonymous, David Lara, Kimi Lent, Phillip Lester, Anonymous, Flor Liu, Anonymous, Bryan Magana, Wendy Martinez, Anonymous, Veronica Morales Servin, Indigenous Mother, Easther Mulipola, Anthony Nix, Alexia Partidacruz, Bruce Patton, Amanda Perez, Ernesha Powell, Rene Pryor, Noretta Quiroz, Anonymous, Maria Roman, Reyanne Rocha, Alicia Rhoden, Andy Ruiz, Kim Rodgers, Nicole Rojas, Bishop James A. Ross, Bamby Salcedo, Angelica Sanchez, Nalah Skye, Pastor Byron Smith, Jabbar Stroud, Latia Suttle, Anonymous, Tin Thang, Oland James Thomas, Tobias Tubbs, Tyler, Diane Ujiye, Anonymous, Anthony Wade, LaTanya Ward, Jimmy Williams, Lechelle Williams, and Cordie Williams Moss.

## 1

Take a few deep, slow breaths and practice any or all of the following regulation practices:

- Drink a glass of water
- Count backwards from 20
- Go for a walk
- Listen to environmental sounds
- Name six colors you see
- Name everything green you see
- Push against a wall
- Notice your surroundings
- Notice the temperature
- Touch the furniture
- Touch something in nature

## 2

Grounding is the direct contact of the body with the ground or with something that provides support to the body. You can ground by sitting in a chair, standing against a wall, walking and paying attention to how your feet make contact to the ground, lying down on the floor or on a bed. When you are grounded, you feel your body and are aware of the present moment. When you are in the present moment, you are not worried about the past or the future.

- Find a comfortable position, sitting, lying down or standing, take your time.
- Notice how your back is making contact with the chair, sofa, floor, wall, bed, etc. If sitting, bring attention to your seat, making contact with the sofa or chair.
- Scan your body, from toes to head, and notice making contact with the ground
- Notice the sensations that are more pleasant to you or neutral within your body. Take your time. Notice your breathing, heart rate, and muscle relaxation.
- If you become aware of uncomfortable sensations, bring your attention to places that feel neutral or more comfortable.
- As you bring your attention to neutral or comfortable sensations, notice your breathing, heart rate, and muscle relaxation.
- Spend some moments noticing and concentrating on sensations that are pleasant and/or neutral.
- As you get ready to end this activity, slowly scan your body and bring your attention to all sensations that are pleasant or neutral.

## Disclaimer Statement

The views and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily state or reflect those of the County of Los Angeles or the Los Angeles County Departments of Public Health and Arts and Culture. Please be advised that the content may include strong language, which may be considered offensive by some.

