

Living Bridges Project Transcript

Standing Her Ground: My Sister Protected Me

[Music]

VOICEOVER: The following audio is part of the Living Bridges Project, an anonymous story-collecting project documenting responses to child sexual abuse. For more, please visit LivingBridgesProject.com.

[Music]

STORYTELLER: My story begins when I came into this world, 11 years after my older sister was born. It was just me and her. And when I was born, I was definitely unplanned, but not unwanted [laughs]. My grandparents—well, first it was my grandmother who said, “I’m coming to the United States.” And my grandmother was born and raised in a small village in Thailand and was a farmer her whole life. But did not want me to be raised by a bunch of strangers like how my sister was. And my parents were constantly working, chasing after that American dream, and so my grandma came.

While I don’t remember how she arrived because I was just a baby, I do remember her one time going back to Thailand and then coming back with just a bag around her shoulder and nothing else, which showed me how little was needed for someone to actually live in joy and abundance. And so that’s the image I have of her is of this older, short, dark Thai woman with thick hair, beautiful brown skin and a sarong. And that was it, that was all she needed. And so she actually raised me the first 3 years of my life. And my grandfather—they actually had at least 8 kids together in the village. But you know, he was so in love with her that he actually ditched an arranged marriage to be with her, his childhood sweetheart. And he missed her so much and he decided to join her in the United States. And he did and I just remember growing up, how green our house was and they just brought beauty to the place because of their green thumb. And they got homesick, so they left. They went back to Thailand.

And I remember my mom telling me she was so stressed out and over worked that she actually thought about leaving me in Thailand. And I remember that too, as a kid, me getting dropped off in the village and her leaving and me waking up crying because I dreamt that she was not coming back. And it turned out that that is what she was planning, but she felt so guilty when she got back to the city, that she came back for me. But my grandparents wanted her to leave me in the village because they did not want me to go through what my sister did. And so I guess my mom was like, “I’m just gonna work it out. I’m gonna figure it out.”

[Music]

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My dad was also around, but... he was not an abusive father or anything, he just wasn't totally there. He just did his own thing. For example, I remember a story my mom told me of my... my mom was at work one night when my sister was still a baby and my dad, I don't think he was working at the time, so he was meant to be the babysitter, well the father, obviously! And my mom comes home and my sister is [laughing] wrapped in newspaper instead of diapers because he didn't know how to change diapers. And so, I guess that's how my sister ended up getting handed off to people that she thought could take better care of her.

[Music]

And so, my sister and I grew up very different. When my sister was growing up, it was when my parents first immigrated to the United States and were hustling multiple jobs and they were living in Long Beach in this small, small apartment. And just saving money. My mom was a nurse and my dad was going to school to be a technician and they eventually saved up enough money to get their first house. And so, of course, they are still hustling and working and the neighbor who lived across the street from that house offered to babysit my sister. This older white man. And I only know this because when my grandparents went back to Thailand—and by that time, my parents actually got another house in a middle class city, so I grew up not living through the struggle that my sister had to go through. So they still had that house in the other city. And them trying to sustain this American dream. My sister could've watched me, but she was, at that time, in middle school when my grandparents left, so they decided to call this man again who was so kind enough to watch my sister. So, he agreed to and he came a lot. And you know, as a child you don't know what's right and what's wrong, but I just remember him.... Actually I don't remember much, other than him telling me not to say anything. You know the whole "our little secret thing." I don't remember, it's a blur, but. It's weird, when you work in domestic violence and sexual assault, it's like, wow why do these words sound so familiar? Oh, that's why, because they were said to me, as a kid. But I know I didn't have it as bad as my sister because he wasn't around—because my sister would babysit me whenever she was not at school.

And so, I just remember... I just remember, as a kid always being afraid when he would come over. I think that was the intuition in me, as a child. Like, I know something's not right when he's here, but I can't say anything. And then the fear in my sister when he'd come.

[Music]

I just remember one day my sister hid me in the closet when my parents called him to come and babysit me again or—no, they didn't even call him, he actually would just come

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unannounced. And he knew my parents' schedule, so he would just come. And I don't... wow, I'm just realizing how much I don't remember, like whether my sister was there when he was there too and if she just didn't say anything or... anyways, I remember this one day, I could not have been older than 6 years old, but she hid me in the closet and she was telling me we were playing hide and seek. And then the door knocks and she goes down stairs and... I wonder if he even had a house key because my parents trusted him so much as a white man. Yeah, and she just stood at the door way and I could just hear it from the closet. And she just stood there and she said, "You can't come in! You can't come in." And I just remember the fear on her face all the other time s he came over and how much resilience and strength that must've taken for her to stand her ground as—maybe a 13 or 14 year old or young teenager, to say, "no, I won't let you come in." and he left. And I was like, wow, my sister just protected me. And that was it; we never really talked about it after that.

[Music]

I don't even remember if he came around much after that, but I do remember being a little older and then, yeah, trying to bring it up to my mom. And by that time, he actually died of a heart attack and she was just in complete denial that it happened. My dad loved him for some reason. And I'm just like, could you not even know every time he came over and you guys were around; every time he'd even pick me up, he'd throw me up and down and I *knew* what he was doing, but how could it not have been that obvious to my parents that he was molesting me right in front of them? Maybe it's a lot of shame and denial? Especially my dad, just not there at all, I could not talk about this stuff with him. Yeah and I've seen the way that my sister's been affected. If I tell her about this story about her standing her ground in the doorway, she would not remember at all. But it's a moment in my life that has stood out to me. I don't remember much of my childhood either, but I remember that. And today, I see how much my mom blames my sister for so much of the mishaps that have happened. Like, with financial stuff and just a lot of things. Like where she's just like, I don't get why your sister is the way she is, after I've given her so much.

So, that first house that they had, where he lived across the street, my mom gave it to my sister because they paid it off and my sister lost it, but not because she's money-hungry or anything. Its just with the housing crisis and what not, didn't tell my mom and it really hurt my mom. But I know my sister's such a good person, it's just, I try to tell my mom, "there are things that happened that you and I don't know about." All those times that I know you were working hard to create this life for us, but just be kinder to her because she's never had a space to heal from these things." And so, yeah, I try to remind my mom. I try to affirm all that my mom has done to provide the life that she has for us as Americans and it's a process, but I'm doing the healing for them.

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I wish that our parents saw the patterns that were right in front of them. I don't know if they were in denial because he was this white man that they trusted and symbolized the American dream to them and what they wanted to embody? Or if it was just plain denial because of the desperation of them to have a babysitter? Yeah. It's just like, "how could you not know it was happening right in front of your face?" So that's what I wish: I wish that my parents saw what was happening and they believed it, but I think it would've hurt my mom too much because she... even still today, my mom is like, "I don't know what home is anymore. When I go back to Thailand, I don't feel totally Thai and accepted and when I'm here in the United States, I don't feel American either, so I'm in between." I know she has a lot of remorse for that.

[Music]

I remember the one time they went back to visit the old house. They were like, "oh yeah! Let's go visit him!" and I remember being in so much fear and walking into that house and he had 2 grand daughters and I sensed the fear in them too and then another girl who ended up renting the house from my parents. Another young Thai girl. And she told me that he touched her too, so he was doing it to all the little girls in his own house and on the block. [sighs.] And then he died of a heart attack, so nothing could've ever been addressed, but I've been so interested in reaching out to his grand daughters, but I have no idea what their names are. I didn't know his last name, I only knew his first name, Hank, and that's it. So, whenever I hear that name "Hank," I'm like, "ugh, yuck."

[Music]

I've been thinking about how there's a fine line between fear and courage. There's just a very, very fine line. And her hiding me was driven... I guess, of course, it was driven by fear. And then the switch was, "I don't want my sister to go through what I went through." I think that's where it was in its very essence. Because, like I said, I know she had it worse than me. Especially if she's 11 years older than me and I was only 5 or 6 at the most. So, I think it's because she wanted to protect me.

[Music]

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