

NO BOTTLE, NO BRUISES

*One Woman's Story of the Unseen,
Usually Unspoken Side of Abuse*

By Rhonda Voss

No Bottle, No Bruises

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www.AhyssaBlount.com

I have recreated events, locales and conversations from my memories of them.
**In order to maintain anonymity (in some instances), I have changed the
names of individuals and places. Some identifying characteristics and
details, such as physical-properties, occupations and places of residence,
may have been changed.**

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Dedication

This book is dedicated...

To the glory of God and in humble gratitude for all the blessings He has given me.

In memory of my parents, Carl and Lela Blanton, for all the sacrifices and love they gave me and for raising me with the values which helped me become the person I am today.

In honor of my husband, Larry L. Voss, my best friend, biggest supporter, tireless listener, and the love of my life.

To my two wonderful daughters, both special in their own way. I love each of you more than you will ever know!

To my three step-children: first adopted by their father, now adopted by my heart.

To all the ones who refer to Larry and me as grandma and grandpa. You enrich our lives every day. May you live your lives in peace and passion!

To my assistants, without whom I don't think I could exist!

To my dear friends and trusted associates, who make me better simply by your presence in my life.

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Purpose

I wrote this book for you or for someone in your family, or for someone you work with, or someone you know at your church or school, or perhaps your next-door neighbor. I wrote this book to bring awareness to perhaps the most devastating and least discussed forms of domestic violence—the non-physical acts such as verbal, mental, and emotional abuse. These are the abuses that leave no bruises. They are often not accompanied with alcohol abuse. And even though there is “No bottle, no bruises,” the lasting pain and suffering continues generation after generation.

This book is merely my story, my truth, my observations and my own learning. I am in no way a scholar, professional counselor or expert on the topic. It is just my experience and I share it here in hopes that it will help others. I hope it will help us all become more aware and recognize these forms of abuse that are so hidden and secretive. Domestic violence and abuse will only cease when the cycle is broken by education, understanding, treatment and relief for the pain that abusers feel. I hope that by speaking out, I can help end the cycle.

One of my favorite quotes is:

“Success isn’t just about what you accomplish in your life, it’s about what you inspire others to do.”

I hope that reading my book will inspire you to do something! Volunteer, donate, advocate for victim’s rights, lend a helping hand or a listening ear, or speak out yourself.

RHONDA VOSS

Acknowledgments

I want to acknowledge AVON for its impact on my life and for being the company that encouraged and empowered me to grow both personally and professionally.

“This is the company that puts mascara on lashes and food on tables, that fights wrinkles with one hand and breast cancer with the other. That knows the value of the perfect lip, but still opens its mouth and speaks out against Domestic Violence and for women’s financial independence. This is the company that not only brings beauty to doors, but also opens them. The company that supports 6 million Representatives in over 100 countries. This is AVON. The company, that for over 130 years, has stood for beauty, innovation, optimism and above all FOR WOMEN.”

The Avon Foundation supports women’s causes around the world and all Avon Representatives are to be commended for their crusade against breast cancer and domestic violence.

I am proud to represent a company who has empowered women for over 130 years! AVON is the main reason that I am in a position to establish the Broad River Abundant Life Foundation and begin a retreat center for victims of domestic abuse. Thank you, AVON, for being “THE Company for Women” and giving me “Beauty for a Purpose”!!

RHONDA VOSS

Last, but not least, I want to acknowledge the leaders and all members of the award-winning VOSS Avon Team who believe that

Vision + **O**pportunity + **S**upport = **S**uccess!

Every member of our nation-wide team contributes to our success and in effect, ultimately contributes to the Broad River Abundant Life Foundation.

We love and appreciate you all!

A Call to Action

Malala Yousafzai said, “The extremists have shown what they fear most—a girl with a book,” and I agree with her. To make a broader change, we have to change it in our children; we have to change the way we condition little girls and boys. It’s easier to teach a child to be full of love rather than relearning it as an abusive adult. After education, the next most important thing is speaking out.

Speaking out will help other people see the reality of their situations. We have to empower victims and hold abusers accountable; we have to educate. Imagine a world where we have systems in place for situations of abuse and manipulation. Where a counselor is a social imperative rather than just an option. Where education on abuse happens at an early age, and children are warned about how fear and hope can be tools for manipulation. Where there is help for the hurting and hope for the healing.

If you are being abused (whether physically or in every way but physically) recognize it, acknowledge it, and make a plan to get out. I know you’re still scared. There are places to turn; there are things you can do. There is no shame in admitting that something’s going on, and you don’t need to keep it a secret. You don’t have to make a decision right now, but you need to begin preparing yourself to nip it in the bud or leave. Get help. Reach out for support from a professional. Make a plan to leave, and then leave. When you’re out of that abusive situation, don’t be afraid or ashamed to seek therapy and counseling. Sometimes it takes years of therapy

or personal reflection; it's never a one-time fix. Bottom-line, you need to take time for yourself and figure out what's going on and what to do about it. Then do it.

CHAPTER ONE

Growing Up

I was born May 8th, 1956, in the Shelby Hospital, now Cleveland Regional. I lived within one mile of my first home until I was 28. I grew up with extended family, because the farm I grew up on belonged to my granddad; that's where my dad and his siblings were raised. My mother's parents lived just a mile up the road, so I always had them. Having an extended-family, knowing your grandparents and seeing them on a regular basis makes growing up a bit different; it gives you a security that you wouldn't have if you lived farther away.

Another major influence on my childhood and adolescence was timing, since my folks were older when I was born. Mom had been married at 18 and her husband was drafted into the Army, where he was killed; she waited for ten years after that before she married my dad. They were 32 and 36 when they got married; Mama was 34 when I was born, and that was old, very old. Back in 1956, people were

having babies at 20. I always felt a bit “less-than” my friends at school, because their parents were around ten years younger than mine. Their parents were out there playing with them, but Mom and Dad were old fuddy-duddies who didn’t allow me to do as much as the others got to do. I wasn’t allowed to wear my skirts as short as the other girls’ skirts, go to the skating rink, those kinds of things.

Older parents meant old-fashioned—much more old-fashioned than my peers’ parents. My mom’s personality and traditions had a serious impact on me. Looking back, Mom and Dad were different types of people. Mom was a saver: sometimes almost selfish and forever concerned about “What will people think?” Dad was a giver: he was a hard worker and trustworthy to the core. It’s interesting how these contrasting people came together to make a whole.

In my family, there was Mama, Daddy, and my baby-sister Renee. My maiden name was “Blanton.” My mom was a Hamrick; if you’ve lived in Cleveland County, you know the Blantons, the Hamricks, the Greenes, and the McSwains. My mama’s mama was a McSwain. We were right from here, and half the county was related to us. Mom had ten brothers and sisters, but a set of twin girls both died shortly after birth. Daddy had 15 siblings, four of which died at birth or in early childhood. Originally, we had about 55 cousins on Daddy’s side and 15 cousins on Mama’s side.

The farmhouse was right here and we’d always have a dinner on holidays; all the cousins would come in. Back then, family was simple: it was your mama and your daddy and whoever lived in your house, whoever’s feet were under the table at dinner. Maybe grandparents, aunts and uncles,

and cousins. Today, family is different for me; family is made of the people who show they care about you, not just who you care about. It's really who cares about you, that's your family. It took me a long time to learn that, and I should have learned it sooner.

One of my cousins told me that we they were once among the poorest families in the county. After Daddy died, that same cousin told me, "Your daddy let me clean out the cow barn, and that meant the world to me." I suppose my daddy paid him maybe a dollar to clean out the barn. Because my daddy let him do that and earn money, he said, "I was the richest boy in school thanks to Uncle Carl."

Dad sold a piece of the farm, 30 acres, to my neighbor, and I cried and I begged him as a grown woman to please let me buy that land instead. But he had already given his word; he had said he'd sell it, and his word meant a lot to him.

Another thing that meant a lot to Daddy was his garden. He was always a farmer at heart. He had a huge garden every year in front of the lawn and grew loads of sweet corn. One day, he went out in the sun, pulled all the corn and threw it on the back of the truck. He took it to the Wednesday night service at church, and my mama just crossed her arms and said, "You didn't have to take that over there and give it all away. There ain't no sense in it. You could've taken that down to the farmer's market and got some good money for that." But, Daddy said, "I didn't grow it to sell," and that was the end of that, because he grew it to give away.

Daddy did a lot of things like that, and it was always about doing the right thing. Mom, on the other hand was more about doing the culturally-right thing. Like, you went to church on Sunday not just because you were going to

RHONDA VOSS

worship God, but because that's what you were expected to do; that was the culturally-right thing to do. I'm thrilled now when I go to church, because it's different. I once got back from a vacation in Las Vegas in time to tell Larry, "Oh boy, we can go to church on Sunday!" But back then, going to church was an absolute social pressure. You were expected to be there, because you were taught to fear what people would think. You could not cut the grass—and you still can't do it to this day in this area—on Sunday! People around here will have you completely in Hell, burning to a crisp. No sir, you don't cut the grass on Sunday.

FARM-LIFE

People around here look after one another, and you learn that sort of thing. Growing up in a rural setting, you learn you gotta plant the seeds at the right time. The right time is Good Friday, by the way; Good Friday is still the time you plant around here. Once you collect the harvest, you learn the work of canning and freezing. My family even raised hogs; we would butcher our own meat.

Farm life teaches you the value of hard work, and it teaches you about preparation and the satisfaction of being able to see what you have done when all your work has paid off. These days, we work in factories or push paper in offices, and you can't look back and see what you've done. When you plow a row, you can look back and see your work bloom. If you gather tomatoes, wash, and peel them, then can them and have all those jars stacked in front of you; you can see what you have done. I used to love to rake the yard and see all the leaves piled high. It made it look so clean and pretty.

It was important to see what I accomplished.

As a young girl, I would go along with Daddy to milk the cows, and it was fun. They'd come into the barn, and they'd go into the little stalls, and you put the milkers on them. I remember it being hard work; Daddy had to pick up big tanks and dump them. I remember the milk man coming down to get the milk. I loved the cows, but I always wanted a horse. According to my Daddy, one horse would "eat up all the grass from the cows." We had 100 acres of grass and only 30 cows. I never understood how one little horse could make such an impact!

I was about 6-years-old when the cows were sold. There was a real sadness to it. In those days, it was difficult for the small farmer to make a living. We had a couple of pregnant cows, one of which had a baby the night before; the baby had to go away with its mom. I remember being very sad about that.

Being raised on a farm is a good lesson in the cycle of life, that there's a season for everything and a purpose. A farm puts you in communion with God, because you're a co-creator with our Creator. You get so close to the Earth, and you're dependent on God for the rain and the sun, and that takes faith. Gotta have faith as a farmer, and a Ford tractor! Gotta have faith to see the cycle through, because death is a part of the cycle of life. On a farm, you see so many things born, and live, and die. Some people have emptiness in them when their kids leave for college; I didn't have that, because I realized raising my daughter was what I'd been doing all those 18 years. I was working to prepare my child to be able to stand on her own and start her own life, the same thing my parents did for me. The farm helped me see this and even the death of my parents as a part of

God's plan for the cycle of life.

I wouldn't take a million-dollars in exchange for the lessons of growing up on a farm. But I wouldn't have given you two cents for it when I was doing it. I would've given a million-dollars to get off the farm!

TRAINED TO PLEASE

One day, when I was a young toddler, it was Daddy's responsibility to take care of me, possibly because Mama was pregnant or had her hands full with my baby sister. I had to go with Daddy a quarter of a mile down the road to feed the cows. Daddy decided to leave me with my grandmother, who lived on the farm. But I didn't want to stay with my grandmother. Daddy got in the truck to go to the barn, and I thought he was going home. In my mind, I just needed to run after Daddy's truck. I ran up the road, and my grandmother couldn't catch me. I was running and running. My daddy saw my head, while turning and looking back, so he turned the truck around and caught me. He gave me a spanking, then he put me in front of the truck and made me run all the way back to my grandmother's. Daddy told me, "Next time I tell you to stay at your grandmother's, I bet you'll stay."

When we got back in the truck to go home, I looked up at him and said, "Daddy, please don't tell Mama I ran after you." He said, "Okay, we won't tell Mama," and he kept his word all those years, the word he gave to a 3-year-old. I only know this story because Daddy told it at the dinner table, when I was about 16. This is how I know my daddy was a trustworthy man. This story also tells me that, even at age

three, I didn't want to worry my mama. I had a responsibility to please my mother, even at the expense of hiding information from her.

After I was born, Mama was very frustrated with me. She told me she would shake me and scream, "I could just kill you," when I had the colic and wouldn't stop crying. She told me that either because she thought it was a funny story, or she wanted me to know how difficult motherhood could be. Even though I was a baby, I've now learned my limbic system internalized those moments; even though I didn't understand the words, her actions had an impact.

Another time, my sister, Mom, and I were at the house by ourselves. I must've been 13 or so; Mom and I would fuss a lot. On this occasion, Mom just blew up, started pulling her hair and saying she couldn't take it anymore. She had a bit of a breakdown, and I didn't know what to do. I knew my mom was screaming and I needed help, so I dialed 911 and told them I needed an ambulance. I called because, even then, my mom had a lot of health issues and I was already somewhat her caretaker. The ambulance came and put Mom in; I got in the ambulance to go with her to the hospital. As we're riding to the hospital, she looked up at me and said, "I'll never forgive you for this."

She probably got around to forgiving me, eventually. In her later days, she was always appreciative of how my sister and I took care of her. Mom took the best care of me she knew, so I wanted to give her the best care I could as well. I know my mother loved me, and sacrificed a lot for me. I don't hold any bad feelings toward her. Still, the result matters. She had the best intentions in the world, but didn't know what she was training me to do.

EDUCATION

I was a fabulous student—a smart kid who didn't have to crack a book. When I got to high school, Daddy said, "If you make straights A's, I'll give you a calf." By this time, we had beef cattle, mostly as a hobby. I came home with straight A's for the first nine weeks and said, "Okay, Daddy. You've got to give me a calf." He said, "No, I meant all year." I said, "No, you didn't say that, just straight A's!" So, I got my first calf and its name was "Choco." She was a real blessing, because Choco grew up to have calves of her own. By 16, when I got married, I had cows to supply me with beef, and we didn't have to worry about buying it.

When I was in elementary school, Daddy was the one who checked my homework. I'd come in with my math homework, and he would look at it, kinda grin and say, "You missed two." I'd ask him which two I missed, and he'd tell me, "You missed two. Go find them." I'd have to go through and check all of them, until I found the ones I made mistakes on. I learned to really check my work, to take it slow and get it right the first time, then check my work again. People today are in a hurry to get it done as quick as they can.

I graduated third in my class of about 400, and was one of the speakers at my high school graduation. I was proud of my accomplishment, in part because of a detour after the tenth grade. I got married because I fell in love. My mama had a fit because my parents had to sign my marriage-papers. My daddy said I was old enough to know what I was doing. Looking back, the guy I married was a great guy, and he still is, but we were too young. We were both wrong in a lot of ways, even though I didn't think so at that time. Still,

I graduated and was viewed as one of the brains in our school, even made my A's while being a wife and living in the single-wide trailer we bought.

My dad went to college. He was salutatorian of his high school class, which got him into Gardner-Webb. He also did a speech at his graduation, which is why it was so special for me to also have that honor. I considered college, and I could've probably gotten a scholarship to anywhere I wanted. Mom had always told me I could go to Gardner-Webb, but I didn't want to go there. I really didn't know what I wanted to do, so right out of high school, I did the next best thing. I started work as a secretary at Gardner-Webb.

Some of my thinking, my generous spirit, my aptitude, common-sense, positive attitude, and ability to see the bigger picture... Those are things I inherited from my daddy. Unfortunately, I inherited many of my mother's physical attributes and as I grow older, and I find I am also facing many of the health issues that she had. My sister seems to be just the reverse with my dad's healthy physical attributes and mom's mental outlook.

There was much spoken and sometimes unspoken pressure to live up to our family's certain standards—mostly imposed by our mom. And of course, when family members need help, families need to pull together and help. But there's a balance to be mindful of, because people who are givers and helpers are very vulnerable to being overworked, under-appreciated, and even abused. Some people will take or give too much and we need to be conscious of what we are doing when we are doing it. We have to learn how and when to say no and when to say yes.

In my later years, I've gotten better at balancing everything

in my life, especially perfectionism and timeliness, but I was really bad during the abusive years. That's a part of being "good enough" and being a perfectionist; it all feeds into the abuse, because you always feel like you've got something to prove, like you've got a standard to meet. You try to control everything to meet expectations, and you try to manage everything to be perfect, because the rest of your life is so far from perfect.

Today in my kitchen, I keep a reminder to take care of myself. It's entitled the "Ten Steps to Self Care."

- **If it feels wrong, don't do it.**
- **Say exactly what you mean.**
- **Don't be a people-pleaser.**
- **Trust your instincts.**
- **Never speak bad about yourself.**
- **Never give up on your dreams.**
- **Don't be afraid to say no.**
- **Don't be afraid to say yes.**
- **Be kind to yourself.**
- **Let go of what you can't control.**
- **Stay away from drama and negativity.**

Healing and growing requires a commitment to take care of yourself daily. Just like a farm, you have to put in the work for good things to grow. It's not about the image of clean hands; it's about the fruits of hard work. It's crucial to focus on building your character, to not just focus on making other people happy all the time. Many who have been trained to please are quick to make excuses for the way they're treated. Many are willing to be lit on fire to keep another person warm. That training can, and often does, lead to destruction.

CHAPTER TWO

Trained to Please

When my sister and I did something wrong—which was about every day when we were little, according to my mama—we had to go out and cut our own switch. You cut a hickory stick and had to cut it big enough, because you didn't want your mama to go down and cut one. Right there in the kitchen at the table, Mama would hold our hand with one of her hands, and hold the hickory with her other hand. I'd be facing away, and she'd strike my legs, and I'd be crying and running all the way around her in a circle. When she got through, I'd have stripes on my legs. These days, doing that would get your children taken from you.

Discipline further developed the sense of perfectionism with which I struggle. When the person who's supposed to love you the most, physically, sexually, emotionally, or mentally harms you, it changes who you are. Looking back, mom's whippings taught me it's okay for the person who

loves you to hurt you. That harm says you're not good enough, instead of saying you could be better. It's not showing you what was wrong and how you can change it; it's saying something was bad and that's the end of it. Worst of all, it's saying, "Here's what I expect from you, in order for me to not give you pain." It's saying you need to please, or there'll be pain.

Daddy was different, but Mom would still tell my sister and me, "Wait until your father gets home." I have only one memory of my daddy being anything close to violent, from when I was in 3rd grade and my sister was in Kindergarten. It happened after we had gotten a black-and-white TV. My daddy loved the TV, and we weren't supposed to bother Daddy when he was watching the news. He'd come in for lunch and watch the news, and you just did not get in front of the TV or bother him.

One day, Mama wanted him to do something while he was watching TV, and he just ignored her. She got huffed as he was sitting in the den in his recliner-rocker. She went in and said something; she had a dish towel in her hand. Renee and I were in the kitchen washing dishes, and Mama was fussing at Daddy about whatever it was she wanted him to do. No matter what it was, he would get it all done, in his own sweet time. But, that wasn't good enough for Mama, not this time. She walked off, then walked back in and cut off his TV, oh yes she did!

Daddy did not kick my mother, but he kicked *at* my mother, which is what he would do with us if we got in front of his TV; he'd just take his foot and kick our little bottoms, so we knew to move. I remember his grunting as he kicked at Mama and cut his TV back on. She went back in and cut

it back off. He slowly stood up, and looked at her. She went running around the dining room table, and Daddy took a step or two toward her, then went and sat back in his chair. After a little bit, my daddy came to the kitchen and said, "Come here, Lela." Down the hall they went to their bedroom, first door to the left, and closed the door. Renee and I were in the kitchen washing the dishes. Daddy had not raised his voice, but we were scared to death about what my daddy might do to our mama. We had never seen Daddy angry before. We were scared, because he kept his guns on top of his closet; we thought he might kill our mama. I still don't know why in the world we ever had that thought, but that one minor episode is vividly ingrained in the banks of my memory. Imagine how constant violent arguing, fighting, and bickering impacts children every day.

Back then, if Daddy said no, he wasn't going to change his mind; he said what he meant, and he meant what he said. As parents, we should be that way, to not threaten or promise if we aren't going to follow through. Mom would often threaten but never follow through, saying, "If y'all do that, I'm gonna whip you," but you knew how far to go until she whipped you. Mom would get angrier and angrier, until she was almost out of control. As an adult, I didn't recognize these behaviors as abuse because I grew up with them. It was normal. I did not see physical abuse. I was told if somebody was physically abusing you, you got away. Abuse meant "beatings." Mother knew how her daddy was; he was an alcoholic who'd come in after drinking and be abusive to my grandmother. I was trained from that mentality, that as long as he wasn't drinking and beating me, then I could endure, that it wasn't abuse. "No bottle, no bruises." But,

it's not the bottle's fault; the bottle merely brings the truth to the surface.

Later, when my second husband abused me verbally, mentally, and emotionally, I didn't recognize it. I couldn't acknowledge it, because I grew up with it.

My mama is someone I love with all my heart, and someone who did the best she could do, and I don't want to condemn her as a bad person. She was good in so many ways. But so was my second husband. I now understand that we can't use the positive attributes of people to excuse the harm they cause—that's the easy, complacent way. If we let people off the hook for the wrong they do, we contribute to a world of injustice. The hardships caused by my mother were real, and hardships need to be shared so that we might reduce suffering in this world.

On one hand, I wasn't raised in an abusive family, not the kind most think of, where some man comes in and beats a woman. But my mom was still abusive; she even did it to my dad, even though Dad never raised his voice. At the time, I didn't recognize the non-physical and mostly unspoken sides of abuse, but I see it clearly now, and I see that it happened in my family.

Erosion can happen in a moment or over the course of years. Regardless of whether you take bulldozer to the side of a hill, or the rain wears it down over time, it's the same; a mountain can become battered. A person becomes hurt. A person loses who they are. It can happen in a day, with physical abuse, or it can happen over the course of years, with mental and verbal abuse. We must recognize that damage, even if it can't be seen by the naked eye. Recognition is the first step to addressing abuse.

MARRIAGE

I married Sam, my high school sweetheart, when I was 16; I wanted to get away from home, so we got married. It was great until he found somebody else, and that was the end of that. It wasn't all his fault; I don't blame it all on him, by any means, since we both found other interests. We were married for about four years, so I was about 20 when we separated. Back then, especially in the south, every divorce is a horrible divorce. The family aspect of it. The "being married for life." The, "We don't divorce," and all the shame.

Sam and a bunch of other people played on a softball team together, and one of his teammates was a man named Gary. I didn't like Gary at the time. Not only did I not like him, I couldn't stand the sight of him! Gary drank. He weighed 250 pounds. He had the foulest mouth you've ever heard. I wanted nothing to do with him.

Sam and Gary's wife ended up seeing each other and eventually moving in together. So, Gary called me and said, "I'd like to talk to you about what all's going on," and I said, "Okay." We went out to eat dinner, and he was a bit nicer than I thought. The next day or so, Gary sent me flowers. Then—I don't much remember the specifics—we started dating, seeing each other, going out to eat, and things like that. We started crying on each other's shoulders, and bonding through emotional empathy. We were there for each other, when no one else could understand. Gary was very kind and considerate; nothing indicated he would be violent toward me. Gary would come and take me out to lunch. He would come and take my car to wash it for me. He would do anything he could possibly do to be just wonderful.

I knew better than to marry someone who was an alcoholic, so I wasn't going to marry him; I wasn't even going to think about it. Then, out of nowhere, Gary said he quit drinking, and he did. He seemed dedicated, even started going to church with me. We found a good church to attend, and took his 4-year-old son. I helped Gary with the son, and things were really good. When he asked me to marry him, I said I would, because things were wonderful, on the surface.

Before Gary asked me to marry him, Sam found out that Gary and I had been going out to eat. I remember Sam came to get something out of the house, and as he was leaving, he asked me, "Has he started beating you yet?" At the time, I had no idea what he was talking about; but now, I realize Sam was with Gary's ex-wife, so he knew the stories of Gary beating her. I remember thinking, "Oh, I'm going to fix him!" I thought about how I got Gary going to church, and how he'd stopped drinking.

I should have known something was off on the day that Gary asked me to marry him. We were supposed to go somewhere on a Saturday morning; Gary was supposed to be at my house by 9:00, but didn't show. It got to about 11:00 before Gary arrived, and I was about as mad as I could be. I hadn't heard a word where he could be—it was a time before cell phones. And what had he been doing? He had gone to the jewelry store to buy me a diamond, because it was more important for Gary to do what he wanted to do, to get the diamond when he wanted to get it. It was about what was convenient for him, then and always. That was a red flag I didn't see; I just thought, "Oh, how sweet! He got a diamond!"

I remember we had the wedding in our church. I was standing there, sick as I could be with a terrible cold. I'd done all the decorations and flowers, because my mama was a florist and I knew how to do all the things I wanted. I thought the church looked just beautiful and perfect, so this wedding must be the right thing to do! I'm standing there in my wedding dress, looking through the window that looks into the sanctuary and, in my gut, I heard, "You don't need to be doing this." That was the still, small voice that God uses to speak to you. Oprah says if you don't hear the voice, He gives you a thump on the head. If you don't get the thump on the head, a brick falls on your head. If you don't get the brick falling on your head, the whole brick wall crashes on you. So, it was 30 minutes before my wedding, and I argued with the voice, "But, everybody's here and this is what's expected. What would people think?" I wanted to please people, but that moment should have been about me and what was right within my heart.

After we married, we went where Gary wanted to go for the honeymoon, to Rock City; Gary never asked where I wanted to go. When we got back, Dad and Mom gave us some land and we began building a house within our first year. Then, the arguments started. Gary would have explosions of anger, despite the lack of alcohol in his life. An alcoholic who's not drinking will still behave like an alcoholic if they don't address the deeper issues. Alcoholics Anonymous refers to these people as "dry drunks." Gary's anger was most likely rooted in his early childhood experiences of seeing his father and grandfather throw fits of rage. For him, I believe it was a learned behavior—a way to deal with deeply rooted pain and fears. Abusers abuse

more than people. They abuse substances like alcohol, because it's easier to self-medicate rather than do the difficult work of digging into the depths and darkness of their pain. Abuse is a product of a person's selfish mindset, and alcoholism is underneath the umbrella of abuse. If someone thinks only about themselves, they can't leave the mindset of an abuser.

When we were building the house, Gary could explode over the least little thing. That's where the arguments started, and I didn't know any better. I thought if someone argues with you, it's time to say something back and defend, so I did.

We built the house. Gary wanted custody of his 4-year-old, and I was all for helping him get custody of that child; we felt we'd be the better family for the child. We went to court, sued for custody, but at that time, courts gave custody to the mother no matter what. So, Gary started drinking again. I tried to stop it, but he told me he was just drinking a beer; nothing wrong with drinking a beer. Gary was right that there's nothing inherently wrong with drinking a beer, but there's something wrong with drinking a six-pack of beer all at one time. I don't know if he might've been doing pills in addition to the drinks he may have been hiding. Be careful of those that hide what they do for their own benefit.

Addiction has so many consequences. When we're not open with our spouse, the relationship crumbles. There has to be openness. When secretive behavior makes its way in, we start changing. We regret. We become resentful. We crumble.

Gary had told me stories of when he was an alcoholic who did pills and sold pills; the problem was that he lied so much that I never knew what was the truth and what was

not. Soon after he started drinking again, he started hitting. I learned to hit back, but trying beat an abuser at their own game never ends well.

MANIPULATION MANIFESTATIONS

At one point, I worked at a company in Greensboro, making good money and advancing quickly. I went in as a temporary receptionist, but advanced quickly to the customer service manager. I did a great job, so I took on more responsibility and became an assistant to the CEO and president. The president, named Harry, and I were close to the same age, and he was a pretty sharp guy, but I didn't respect him like I respected the CEO. Harry and I worked together at the office, which was a block from our house. If we had a big presentation or deadline, we would work late. Soon enough, I was needed to fly around the country and do some work; I was busy, and I was empowered.

All of a sudden, I walked into my house and Gary had this typed letter held up in the air. Gary showed me the letter that said I'd been promoted in the company because of my relationship with the president, and that there was something going on between us. Now, Harry was one of those I had to watch, because he was doing under-handed things with the company, but there was nothing happening between the two of us. Still, Gary was crying about how it was so terrible. Gary said the letter proved I'd gone to some hotel with the president, but Gary should've known me better than that.

I took that letter and marched into the CEO's office and said, "Look at what my husband got. Someone wrote this, accusing Harry and me of having an affair." I was livid, to

think it was someone at the company sending a letter like that to my husband. A couple weeks later, Gary got another letter, and I was trying to figure out who was sending them. I even thought it might've been Harry's wife, that perhaps she was jealous.

Today, I'm pretty sure Gary wrote those letters to accuse me of having an affair with Harry. Gary wanted to control me and to keep me from flying around the country.

The mental abuse and manipulation was the worst, with nonstop arguments and Gary always telling me how lazy I was and everything bad was all my fault. Abusers are good at twisting your words; they can take the smallest thing like, "It sure is pretty and sunshiny today," and they can twist that into something that shows what you think about them. They tell you what you think, even though they're really telling you what they think about themselves. Gary saying to me, "You think I'm stupid," meant Gary thought he was stupid. Gary was projecting, and that can be an incredibly indicative thing. Case in point, when I divorced Gary, he said that he was scared I would kill him while he slept because he knew there was a knife hidden in the bedroom. He also said that he was scared I would burn the house down. I thought he was just making things up—but I now believe it was projection. It was Gary who had thought of killing me. It was Gary who thought of burning down the house.

One time, we had an argument, and I told him he was a lousy SOB and that's what I thought. Gary said he was going out back to kill himself (that used to be his threat, that he'd kill himself). He went running out through the backyard and into the woods, then shot a gun off to make me think he had killed himself. I thought, "Well, if he's

dead, he's lying out there in the woods and that's okay." I didn't go check on him, because that's what he wanted me to do. When he finally came back, he didn't have on a shirt; he had run into a tree and hit his ribs. He was all scratched up, but he wasn't dead.

Another time, we were arguing and Gary went and got his gun. He chased me into the bathroom, and I remember sitting on the toilet when he cocked the loaded gun and put it to my temple. At that moment, I didn't know whether he would do it or not. I didn't think he really wanted to do it, but I did think the gun could accidentally go off, or his hand could slip, or that his anger could take over and he wouldn't make the rational decision. Afterward, like always, it was, "Oh my gosh, I'll never do it again. I love you. I'm sorry," and then Gary wanted to have sex. Sex was the end to everything. A woman doesn't feel like sex after you've held a gun to their head; I don't care how much apologizing you do. But, you do it because of the fear of retaliation. Today I realize that submitting to sex only to keep the peace, or to perform because the act is less painful than the consequences, is a form of rape.

According to Gary, everything negative that happened was my fault. If we planned a picnic for a day that ended up being rainy, it was my fault because I picked the day. However, I kept thinking one thing: "I already had one failed marriage. I've already gotten one divorce. I've said, 'I do,' so I'm supposed to do this." I was making excuses. Social accountability can be a huge factor in staying or leaving an abusive situation. I didn't want to let Mom and Dad know; I didn't want anybody to know, so I kept it all a secret. It festers and it keeps on getting worse and worse.

On the night of a Thanksgiving Eve before my mom and dad knew about the abuse, my mama's extended family were having dinner at a cousin's house. Abusers isolate you from people, so Gary picked an argument to happen on this night. I was in the hallway, and there was this little stand with books on it. Gary hit me with his fists, then pushed me onto that stand. He gave me a black eye. We were supposed to go to this big dinner. He called my mama and daddy everything in the book, and said he was going to kill them. He took a gun, got into his truck, left our driveway to kill my mama, my daddy, and my sister; he left me there. But, I could not let him drive over and kill them, so I called their house.

I told my sister, "Lock the doors. Listen to me. Get inside. Lock the doors. If you see Gary's truck turn in your driveway, you call the police and don't dare go to the door. He's beaten me up. He's drinking. He said he's going over there to kill you." In reality, Gary only drove down to the river and came back to the house; but the secret was out. He didn't go to the Thanksgiving celebration, of course. He came back and apologized to me, but I still went to Mama and Dad's house first, to make sure they were alright, and to let them know I was okay. I had a black-eye covered with makeup. My parents told me they weren't going to the cousin's house, but I said, "Oh, yes we are." Mom and Dad told me to get away from him, and I started planning an escape.

If they're drinking and they're beating you, you get away, I knew that without question. There was a bottle and there were bruises! I knew I couldn't fix it, but I kept thinking about those vows and how I'd broken them before. I thought I had to give it everything I had and started going to a counselor by myself, without telling Gary. I told the

counselor what was happening. The counselor told me, “Look, I don’t think he’ll come to counseling. This just won’t change that easily. There’s no hope.” I went to a lawyer, made sure I was protected, and found out all my options.

My first plan was to back up a truck, load everything in it while Gary was work, and be gone by the time he came home. Gary was working at a factory then, not a minister yet. I decided against that plan and instead to talk to him and give him every opportunity to change. One night while he was in the bathtub, I said to him, “Gary, I want you to go with me to counseling. *We need* to go to counseling.” Gary told me, “I ain’t going to no goddamn counselor.” So, I went into my closet, reached in for a sweater, pants, and blouse. I started walking out of the house, and Gary came out of the bathroom and asked, “Where the hell do you think you’re going?” I said, “I told you, if you aren’t going to the counselor, I’m going to leave.” Then, Gary changed his mind: he’d go to the counselor. He didn’t want me to leave. We went, and Gary said he’d quit drinking and hitting me, to the counselor’s surprise. Gary stopped drinking and hitting me, for the rest of our marriage.

RHONDA VOSS

CHAPTER THREE

The Mind of my Abuser

A lot of times, arguments started because I left my shoes in the den, or I left a dish in the sink rather than the dishwasher. If I hadn't vacuumed the floor, or anything that normal people just look at and move past, Gary would make a big deal out of it. Gary could argue in any room. One day we were in the kitchen and he was so angry about something, while making the coffee. He was barefoot. He took the coffee-pot full of water and slammed it down on the cabinet. The pot shattered all over everywhere. Pieces of glass went into the top of Gary's foot, blood mixed in with water, and it looked like he was bleeding to death. I got a towel, and he was just crying like a baby and falling apart. It was terrible, because he had to be cared for like a child. We eventually had to go to the doctor to get the glass out, but he could always feel a piece of glass in his foot, probably even to this day. Just like his personal sins and abusive behavior,

Gary could never get the slivers of all that glass out.

What you do to harm others just hurts you; it doesn't always harm the other person the exact way you intend, but it always hurts you. It is as Celie expressed to her abuser as she was escaping in *The Color Purple*—Everything that you have done to me, has already been done to you. The intention of abusers to hurt others results in the ultimate harm of themselves.

The majority of our marriage didn't involve physical abuse. Gary straightened up; he met my mom and dad's pastor, Mark, and decided he wanted to go back to church. He had quit going to church when he was drinking. Now he decided he wanted to start attending church, but not the church we had selected and been married in; he wanted to start at my mom and dad's church. I told Gary I'd already moved from my church once for him, when we first got married, and now that I had settled and established relationships, he wanted to uproot me again. Gary stayed at places for a while, but would always find a reason to leave, which is what abusers do. Abusers don't like to stay in one place; they're afraid they'll be found out. It's harder to manipulate people when they learn your true colors.

I prayed about it, thinking how I didn't want to change churches again. Then, I read the Bible, and felt that God told me to go where Gary wanted to go. We changed churches, and I do believe it was God's will; we attended there for a while, then Gary felt God was calling him into the ministry. We were working with the youth group, and he was good at it. He talked about going back to school. On the surface, everything seemed wonderful. I got pregnant. When our daughter was born in April, he officially

announced that he would go to school to become a minister.

He started at Gardner-Webb that fall. He quit his job, even though I didn't want him to and begged him to start college part-time for a while. As usual, it had to be Gary's way. I continued to work. Mom and Dad kept my daughter so we didn't have to pay day care. Gary attended college and after three years completed his degree with fabulous grades. He did great. Of course he did great; every time he had a paper to do, I'd do the paper. He'd do the words some, then I'd type it out and correct his grammar. He made straight A's and B's. Then we started youth ministry full-time. I say "we" because always in his ministry, I was right there with him for every step of the way. Every time the doors opened, I was the one who unlocked them. I typed sermons and notes. I sent letters and kept records. I taught classes and arranged details for trips and retreats. I served the snacks, talked with kids, organized meetings and volunteers, decorated for the parties, hosted dinners at our home—you mention it, I did it!

I participated in Gary's position, all while holding down a full-time job, trying to be a mom, and keeping our home running by paying the bills, cooking, and cleaning. I stayed busy, but he didn't see it that way. Soon enough, as usual, all good things come to an end. Gary took a job in a church about an hour away and we had to move. That was one of the worst days of my life, when I had to leave our little house, the farm, and family I loved so much.

We were already three months behind on the house payment, and it looked like they were going to foreclose on the house. I was very angry at God. Gary was working part-time; I was working full-time, and we couldn't pay all the

bills. Gary had sold his hunting dogs, sold an old car, and wanted me to sell my grandma's dining-room set, but I put my foot down. Gary pushed and pushed me to sell the house and land that my folks had given us. I was angry at God, and screamed at Him, "I have given up absolutely everything. If what you want is this little house, you can have it." Then, in another still, small voice, God said, "I didn't want you to give it up. I just wanted you to be willing to." So, for the wonderful house I'd designed and helped build, God gave me an idea. I put an ad in the paper and rented the house for just a bit more than I needed for the payment. Over the years, Gary argued over and over to sell that house, but I would never budge. In the divorce, Gary gave me the little house and huge mortgage because we had refinanced it many times to buy cars for him. It's now mortgage-free and a constant income for me; another time Gary meant something to be bad, but God turned it into a blessing.

After our daughter was born, and after Gary stopped drinking and beating me, the abuse became more subtle and underhanded, more creative. Really clever manipulation, by putting me down and making fun of me while it looked like just a joke. For example, I have Crohn's disease, which causes horrible pain in your intestines. Your bowel movements can be very loose, and excruciatingly painful. You'll sit on the toilet and literally scream, before it calms down, and this sort of thing would happen to me before work. Gary would be in the next room, laughing, "Gwen, your mama's in there having a religious experience!" He made fun of me hurting, and that hurt just as bad.

Still, I used to say we could never divorce, because Gary was my memory; I still have a hard time remembering some

things, and now I know it is because I had to block so much out. I blocked out so much of the bad that I don't have as much of a memory as I should. If I hadn't blocked it out, I'd probably have recognized the abuse sooner. By being too nice, I let my abuser take advantage of me. I trained him how to treat me. By living my life to please others, I sacrificed part of myself.

Before Gary graduated from Gardner-Webb, he got his first church in a small town about an hour away. We stayed there until things got bad, which Gary said was my fault. We then moved to a bit larger town even further away, where we served as youth and children's ministers. We stayed there for a few years, but Gary got itchy again, so we moved to an even bigger city in North Carolina. Something happened again, and it was my fault, of course. So we accepted an offer to move back to the first church in which we had served, which was horrible the second time around. Gary was a fabulous youth minister; many kids and volunteer counselors went into ministry because of his influence. Gary had some of the biggest youth groups in the state, and every church he served got two for the price of one, because I did almost as much of the work as Gary. God did use him, because Gary is a Jekyll and Hyde, like many abusers.

Serving in a United Methodist church, over the years Gary was required to complete many graduate courses and various classes. The Methodist church always has people doing something to get some title or designation. During the latter part of this time, I was doing well with Avon, and Gary was constantly going all over the country to get the courses he needed. One of the final courses was at Duke University, so we packed up, and went to live there for one month. I

cooked and made sure he was fed; I typed all his papers. When we finished, we were supposed to go to an Avon convention in Las Vegas, because it was my turn to do something professionally fulfilling.

We got to the Avon convention, and the first thing he did—even though we only needed to be there for three or four days—was pick a fight with me, the minute we got into a room. Here I had just sacrificed a whole month to support him and the first thing he did when we got to my event was pick a fight and continue the verbal assault until I was in hysterical tears. I cried for a very long time. But finally I got settled down, so we could go to the convention, and he told me he was starving and had to eat. We were going to be late, but Gary stopped and got himself a hamburger. When we finally got on our way walking to the convention center, there was a gentleman walking the same direction and had his Avon credentials on so I recognized him as another Avon person. As we walked, I struck up a friendly conversation with him. Gary then accused me of flirting with the man and said that I was after him. The man was black, and Gary is so racist, he accused me of one ridiculous thing after another.

He saw my confidence and freedom and wanted to tear it apart, because he always had to be in control. I remember he'd say "Show me the money," every other day; when he wasn't saying that, he was accusing me of spending all his money on Avon. Gary always told me I wasn't ever going to make money with Avon.

During this time, I started even more self-development. I watched Oprah. I read "The 7 Habits of Highly-Effective People." I heard Dr. Phil say that you teach people how to treat you. I got stronger. My Avon team was growing, so I

had a way to make money and be on my own. Gary kept on saying, “You’re not making any money. You need to quit this.” In the first few years of our marriage, I’d been somewhat successful at selling Tupperware, but Gary talked me out of doing that; he made me quit. One day, I had had enough, and I decided to “show him the money,” by golly!

I’d been just playing with Avon, and wasn’t taking it too seriously; if we went out to eat, I’d take the money out of my Avon earnings. So, I made the decision to keep every penny of my Avon money and put it into a separate checking account, to never touch it. After that, I’d pull money out of our regular checking account, when we went out to eat. One day, I showed Gary our checking account and said, “Look, we’re pulling out all this money, now. Where do you think we were getting that, before?” Of course, when you show someone something to prove them wrong and they don’t ever want to be wrong, there’s an argument. Twisting of the words to exhaustion is the abuser’s way. Gary always picked the time before bed to start an argument, because it’s when I was already about exhausted. Gary knew he could win, or keep me up and going with it for hour upon hour of going over the same thing.

RHONDA VOSS

CHAPTER FOUR

The Breaking Point

I was in my bed crying after Gary and I had an extremely harsh sort of argument, not physical. Gwen, who was in the 11th grade, came to me and said, “Mama, let’s just leave Daddy. He doesn’t really love you. All he wants you for is to do his work.” Out of the mouth of babes. I said to her, “Gwen, you only have one more year of school.” I had already started seriously looking into places to rent, but didn’t have a job; my Avon wasn’t earning enough to support myself and her. I looked for apartments. I tried to figure out how we could leave, and it seemed like the best idea was to live through it for one more year. During that year, I said to Gary that we needed to go back to counseling, and Gary said these six words that burned into the depths of my soul and the creases of my memory:

“I’ve changed all I can change.”

I heard Gary’s words, and I heard there was no hope, and that was the brick falling on me. The wall was on its way.

VULNERABLE

Shortly after the “I’ve changed all I can change” encounter, I went to our long-time accountant, Joel, to get our taxes prepared. Gary didn’t come with me, because that was, of course, my responsibility. At that appointment, I learned that Joel and his wife were separated. He played me. We had an affair, which was not so much about the physical as it was about having someone that listened, someone to hear me and understand. Gary found out and I freely admitted what happened, because I wanted to; I was relieved; I felt so guilty. Joel and I were together three or four times in about five months; mostly, we talked on the phone. One time, before anything physical happened, I said to him,

*“Joel, what is going on? We don’t do things like this.
We don’t have affairs. We don’t cheat on our spouses.
This is not us. We’re not this kind of people.”*

Looking back, he and his wife had separated, and he probably had the same thing going with her, as far as verbal abuse against him. When Gary first found out, he told me I had to get out, but I begged him to let us do the right thing; I knew that this didn’t have to be the end, that there are marriages that survive infidelity. Amazingly, suddenly, Gary was ready to go to counseling! We stayed together and even though Gary told me he forgave me, that he realized he had played a major role in pushing me away, he used that affair to manipulate me for the rest of the marriage, about two more years.

The first counselor we selected met with us twice and immediately determined the problem. While Gary thought

everything was my fault (as usual) the counselor recognized Gary's role in emotionally harming me. The counselor told me I was starving and somebody held out a piece of bread; that's what led to the affair. I remember exclaiming, "Yes, that's it!" The counselor then asked to speak with Gary alone. Gary went alone twice and told me, "This is not about my mama. This is about you. That guy doesn't know what he's talking about." So we had to change counselors, even though I'm sure that first guy knew exactly what he was talking about.

That was the problem—the counselor was getting too close to Gary's secrets. We found another counselor who was very good at helping us negotiate compromises, and things got better. In fact, really just hunky-dory. After an exhausting six months, I thought we had gotten past Gary continually throwing the affair in my face. Gary said he forgave me and we even purchased new wedding bands and recommitted ourselves to each other.

Gwen went off to college, and she had been a major stressor in the home. Gary would berate Gwen for the smallest things, and he maintained unrealistic expectations for her.

There's something about abusers that keeps you and your children still loving them and looking up to them. Those kids are taught all their life that they have to take care of Daddy, and please Daddy and to forgive Daddy. Part of an abuser knowing how to twist blame is knowing how to craft situations where they become the hero.

I remember that we had \$10,000 we saved for Gwen, to help her through college; \$2000 went toward a car and we gave her \$2000 for the first year. \$6000 was left for the

remaining three years. When Gary recognized the money was in my name, he came to me and told me we could use that money for some upcoming expenses, and pay it back later. He told me to take it out, but later turned around and told Gwen I stole it. She believed him.

Before the divorce, Gwen came home from school for her first visit, as a freshman at ECU. On the way to pick her up, Gary told me, "Look, since she has been out of this house, things have been going good for us. She's not going to come back and take control, not going to tell us what to do!" I agreed with him. Gwen got in the car, with a pet iguana and a frog; she had been in a car with those pets all the way from ECU, four hours away. We drove an hour to pick Gwen up from a person who brought her closer. There we were, excited to see our daughter, and we had waited to eat dinner because we wanted to take her out. We were going to stop wherever Gwen wanted to eat, and she told us we couldn't stop because she had her creatures. Gwen told us the creatures couldn't stay in the car, even though they'd been in the car for hours. And even though Gary and I had that discussion only 30 minutes earlier about Gwen, Gary started saying he didn't know what to do. I told Gary to pull in somewhere, for us to eat. Gary started saying he only wanted to keep the peace, and he did that sort of thing all the time, where he'd say one thing to me then act in a different way. He'd pretend to be the hero, to make me the villain.

The weekend after that incident was horrible, because Gwen was so mad at me. She came to me before going back to school and said, "Mama, I'm sorry we've had such a weekend. Let's just make peace." Gwen told me there are times when it sounds like she's telling me what she's going to

do, when what she's really doing is asking permission. I said I could understand, but as her mother I needed the option to approve or refuse those questions, but Gwen told me I couldn't do that. She got in the car with her daddy, for her ride back, and said to her father, "I can't come back home, as long as Mama is there." Gary had gone a bit crazy by then, taking pills he called "vitamins," and laxatives daily as a way to maintain his weight. Gary had really been bothered by Gwen leaving for college; but I knew that's what I raised her to do. I think he got the "empty nest" depression that many parents experience, but I was confident that Gwen was ready to spread her wings and go after her dreams.

When Gwen said that to her daddy, Gary must've thought he needed to get rid of me, so Gwen could come back. Gary had already lost one child in a custody battle, so he must've been even more desperate to keep his daughter. From that minute in October, Gary secretly worked toward getting me out.

THE DIVORCE

One morning, Gary got up to go to what I was told was a meeting. At about noon, he came back. Soon after, his district-superintendent calls and said he missed Gary at the meeting, and I knew then that Gary didn't go to the meeting. Gary told me,

"Nope, I've been to my lawyer, the bank, and I've closed the credit cards, checking and savings accounts. The lawyer said the parsonage is provided for the pastor, not the pastor's wife; you have two weeks to get out."

You could've slapped me in the face and it wouldn't have hit me any harder. I had no idea Gary had ever thought about getting a divorce. He thought it all out, and he wanted to control me until the bitter end. He had already told Gwen, and to Gwen I was now the big bad wolf. Everything came crashing down. I didn't have a job. He'd already called my mama and sister to tell them we were separated, to control the story. I tried to live in Mom's basement, but Mom and I had a confrontation and I realized it couldn't work. I cried. I prayed. I begged. I asked Gary to stay with me through Christmas. He allowed me to stay in the house, though the whole time he kept threatening me, telling me I had to get out.

One night, I escaped. God woke me and told me there was something I needed to see; the keys Gary usually kept hidden had been left in the open. God showed me those keys, and in his car I found some files (car titles, insurance policies, etc.) with \$5000 cash. He'd been threatening me and telling me I had to get out, but I had zero access to my hard-earned money. I grabbed that money and my laptop. I got in my car and left in the middle of the night; I went to a hotel. I didn't want to scare anyone, so I called Gary the next morning. I told him I got what was in the car and I was okay. Gary traced the call and found where I was. I got out with the clothes on my back.

The next day, Gary had a funeral, so I drove to the house to get more clothes while he was gone. The locks had already been changed. My best friend from church drove in behind me, even though she was supposed to be out of town. A month earlier, I had been helping Gary search for his lost cell phone and I found something under the bed that looked

like a jacket that belonged to that best friend. Gary said it was something one of Gwen's friends left, that he'd thrown it under the bed when someone was arriving for a visit. Now, I believe she and Gary had something going on; I was never able to confirm that. I was perplexed because she was my best friend in the whole world and she was angry at me. Gary had gotten to her, too. I stayed in the hotel for a week, until I convinced Gary to help me find a temporary place to stay while we sorted things out.

Instead of fighting it out in court, we went to a mediator in Raleigh to get the separation settled. I'd seen Gary break down and fall apart over little things, and expected I could potentially take advantage of that. But, I'm the one who fell apart, because I still wanted to salvage my marriage. I did love him. I loved the good part of Gary so much. All I knew was being the pastor's wife and Gwen's mom; that was my whole identity. We went to the mediator for the second day, and it was killing me. There we were fighting over *things* and who got what when all I really wanted was my marriage, my husband, and my daughter! We took a break for lunch. I went out to my car; I read through my Bible and I heard God saying, "Go in there and pray with Gary. Ask him to pray with you. Tell him to write down what he thinks is fair, and it will be enough." So, that's what I did. I went back to the room, asked everybody else to leave, then I asked Gary to pray with me, but he didn't want to. I prayed and called the mediators back in, told Gary to get a paper and tell me what he thought was fair, so I could sign it.

Gary decided it was fair to give me half of our retirement, the rental house with its mortgage, and \$200 a month for 12 months. He would pay my insurance for a year. He would

take all the cars, except the one we had recently bought for me. It was the car he wanted me to have, rather than the one I wanted.

PICKING UP THE PIECES

Sharon, Emily, Lisa and her husband, Darrin were all brought to me through Avon, and they helped me during my greatest time of need; a lot of what they did was just listening to me and loving me, no matter what. They were my support group, and I don't know what would've happened, if not for them.

When I had to get out of the house that we had arranged temporarily, Emily said I could stay in her spare bedroom. I had all my clothes and possessions in my car, and was technically homeless. I stayed with Emily for three or four nights. Then I found a job in Concord as a leasing agent at an apartment complex. I was also able to rent an apartment there and I will never forget my street and apartment number. Biblical Numerology states that Seven is the number of completeness and perfection (both physical and spiritual). Add up my apartment number to get not one, but two sevens. I lived at 106-16 Avon Street.

I took that as a sign that God was looking after me and everything would be double perfect with me and my Avon business. Little did I know all the blessings He had in store.

Gary and I separated in early November, but hadn't yet divorced. I didn't want to be married again, after that traumatic and way-too-long chapter of my life; I didn't even want to date anyone because I felt like I couldn't trust men. But, I realized the issue was that I couldn't trust myself or

my own instincts. So, I started working on myself, trying to figure out what had gone wrong. I started learning about the control Gary had held over me, through endless research and reflection. I spent the better part of a year lying in bed crying, searching for answers as to what happened to me. I went through every Christian resource. I went to counseling. I listened to recordings and read books. I stumbled upon something about alcoholism, then remembered that Gary had been an alcoholic. I looked in the phonebook and called to find out if there was an Al-Anon group in my area. Al-Anon is a support-group for the families and friends of alcoholics, and provides a companion-group for Alcoholics Anonymous. I went to meetings and started finding answers. I found out you can go to the AA open speaker meetings and listen to people tell their stories. You could hear what happened to them. I learned from those stories and began to realize what happened to me.

You don't have to be a close family member of an alcoholic to attend Al-Anon meetings. Addiction affects many more people than the actual addicts; addicts often collect codependents, and their codependents can become dependent upon meeting the needs of addicts. That relationship can become abusive, because codependency is a big part of abuse, since it creates situations that are difficult to leave.

At those meetings, there was a nicely dressed man who didn't look like the rest of them. He was good looking, like he perhaps he had money; he was sharp. Several guys there asked me out, but I turned them all down. One night, that sharp man and I were standing outside talking. I was telling him I didn't want to date anybody. He said he also wasn't

looking to get married again. He said, “I understand how you feel, but I thought you and I might go out to eat, some night.” I opened my mouth and the words dropped out, “Oh, I’d like that very much.”

That was Larry.

On our first date, I saw our situation as two friends just going to dinner; but, something happened, while scheduling that outing, that really spoke well of Larry’s character. I worked in Charlotte and Larry lived in Concord. I had a doctor’s appointment in Lexington. We were going to eat in Salisbury. I was planning to go to Charlotte, drive to Lexington, come back to Concord, go back to Salisbury—not a good plan. Larry was flexible, so I called and asked him if he was willing to come to Lexington with me, to save me some trips. Larry said we could do that. But, I didn’t tell him the doctor I was going to was my gynecologist. I figured that date would never lead to anything serious, so I made a big joke. When we got in the car I told him, “Well, you’re going to have a good story to tell all the guys. You can say you got her into the car and it wasn’t even 30 minutes before she had her pants off!”

We got to the gynecologist office and Larry decided to go in with me, to stay in the waiting room alongside pregnant ladies and other women. That was an eyebrow-raiser, that he was willing to support me like that. Rather quickly, I started thinking a bit forward. I found out we had so much in common; Larry and I were raised so much like each other, even though he was from halfway across the country.

I was walking to exercise and still trying to sort through my mental and emotional scars. I was still in a fog, really reeling from that horrible, 23-year experience; I was still in

love with Gary, and Larry knew that. I still had a glimmer of hope that God would work everything out, but it was nice to have a friend. I was determined to make a better selection if I were to ever marry again, so it occurred to me to thoroughly check Larry out. I called Larry and told him I was going for a walk, asked him if he wanted to meet me. I told him I was thirsty and to bring me a Diet Coke, because I'd decided to be a little more demanding and have my own control.

After walking, Larry asked what I was doing the next morning. He said he could bring breakfast, and we could go to the park and walk. During that walk, I made it clear we'd have this friendship, but it wasn't going to become physical; it was just a friendship, with no kissing or anything, and that was a rule. At about the second or third week, we went out to an abandoned gold mine, which was a place we'd heard about. I wanted to go see what it was, just exploring. When we got ready to leave, he came around the side of the car to open my door. Then, the sweetest thing happened as I was stepping into the car; he just pecked a little kiss on my cheek. He immediately pulled back all worried, said "Oops, I'm so sorry!" I said, "It's okay," because we'd quickly realized there was romance there. I had found real gold at the gold mine.

MARRYING LARRY

Larry and I talked a lot, before we were married, about our future marriage. We talked about what the marriage was going to be like. What we wanted to do, what were our goals and values. It wasn't just about me or just about him; it was about what each of us wanted, in line with what the other person wanted, and that's true love. That's respect.

When we realized my tendency to get over-involved with things could become an issue, Larry and I came up with a signal. If Larry really needs me to hear him, he says the words, “We need to talk.” Even until today, we have that signal; we’ve never had an argument, because we have those words. We drop whatever’s going on to show we’re the most important thing to each other, because we need to talk if we need to talk. Because of this communication, our interactions are never violent. The worst Larry has ever said to me was, “Get your butt over here!”

Larry and I started dating in May, and got married the following March. When we started dating—maybe even when he kissed me that first time and into the following year—I was still so broken. I wasn’t capable of giving myself to somebody else; I hadn’t healed. Larry listened to me talk about another man, about how I loved Gary, and Larry understood it and allowed it. Larry still cared through all that, as a human being seeing another human hurting. The understanding he gave to me was one of the biggest aids to my healing, which continues to this day; I don’t know what I would’ve done without Larry.

I loved our wedding. It was in Concord at Saint James Lutheran Church, where we attended for several years. Larry and I were so focused on what our marriage would be like, so we didn’t plan the wedding the way most people do, and we didn’t worry about the flowers and dresses and all that. We were in a group at the church for seniors, and we told them we were just going to the chapel with the minister and a couple of witnesses. The group wanted to attend also and convinced us to do the wedding on a Thursday after a group meeting. Larry would wear a suit and I’d wear a dress,

just a little fancier than usual. Larry's daughter would fly in from Denver with her boyfriend to stand with us.

When we got to the back of the church to walk in, we noticed the church had candelabras set up with the candles all lit. Mama and Daddy couldn't come, so they sent a bouquet, which was sitting on the altar and almost perfectly matched with my dress. We went down the aisle; Kelly and Damon stood with us. The church's organist was with the senior group, so he played for us. When the minister said, "Let us pray," one of the men in the group, who had a beautiful baritone voice, sang the Lord's Prayer. We planned none of this; it was all prepared without our knowledge.

During part of the service, as we were saying our vows, one tear dropped down my cheek and Larry reached up to wipe that tear. It was so beautiful. Our minister said it was the sincerest wedding she'd ever officiated, like God planned every detail. Then, one of the people in the group invited everyone over to their house for lunch, after the wedding. One of the men in the group had made us a wedding cake. The host had prepared napkins with our names on them. We didn't know any of this, and it all came together perfectly.

Larry is one of the humblest, loving, and compassionate people I've ever met. He's the most Christian in his actions, thoughts, intentions, and speech. He's very caring and observant. He's the most empathetic person I've ever known; he can look at me and other people, and instinctively know their needs and feelings. He is so much the opposite of Gary. Where Gary would tell me I'm lazy, Larry will look at me and say I look like I need to lie down. He's looking out for me. With Crohn's disease, you can get washed out all of a sudden, and Larry will see it in my eyes, then tell me I

need to lie down. I'll tell him I'm fine; but, ten minutes later, I'll be lying down. He can see it on me before I feel it in my body. He cares for me, and gives his all to care for me. I wish I could be more like Larry. More observant. More caring. More compassionate. Before I found Larry, I thought to myself, "I wish I had somebody that would do for me what I have done for Gary." Someone to look after me, take care of me, think of me. I found that. Larry cares about me more than he cares about what he wants for himself.

With Larry, I had to learn to be careful about what I said, because he'd truly care and listen. There have been times I saw something I liked and said, "Look at that! I sure want one of those things," and didn't always mean it. Sometimes, I'm just talking. If I blink my eyes after forgetting how Larry listens to me, whatever I said I wanted will be sitting in my yard. Larry makes me want to be more than just the taker; I want to be the giver. It would be easy to just take, but that's not what I want, not when Larry's involved.

Being with Larry for over 14 years now, I've learned the meaning of love. I've realized that love is not the surface of the wedding; it's the depth of the marriage. Love is the depth of the relationship. If you want to know if someone loves you, don't listen to their words. Watch their actions. If they say they love you yet do un-loving things, you better question it. We act on our beliefs. We act on what we feel. If you're tearing someone down, you don't love them, because you're not acting out love. When you have no self-control, no discipline, no willingness to confront that which prevents you from actualizing your values, those values are illegitimate.

CHAPTER FIVE

Abuse in The World Around Me

Non-violent communication is a question of how the person is talking to you. Are they talking about how they feel, or are they blaming you? Are they saying things that are aggressive? Are they saying things that might feel good to just them, instead of saying things that could actually help the situation? Communication is so crucial, both to yourself and to others around you.

The classic example of violent communication is yelling, but there's much more to it than that. It's a matter of telling you what you've done wrong; it's talking down to you, in order to disenfranchise you. It's shaming. It's blowing matters out of proportion. It's selfishness. It's the little digs, the little jokes at your expense. It's making you a joke.

My cousin was abused by his father in every way possible, and his father also abused his mother. As adults some people recognize those abusive traits and decide they won't be that way. They find a way to heal, or at least try to. There are

many ways to heal, one of which is to find the right type of person to marry. If a person who's internalized abuse marries someone willing to stand up to them, that can keep them from becoming abusive. It's a powerful experience, the accountability of having a person who tells you, "I'm going to hold you to the fact that you know this is wrong. You have to get this out of you."

***Abuse is bigger than we think,
and never as simple as black or white.***

Now at age 60, my cousin has been in a wheelchair for the last 17 years; there's research that shows the abuse we hold inside will manifest itself as health issues. I have Crohn's disease, and I believe mine and my cousin's situations are connected to the abuse we underwent. Trauma manifests in more ways than we realize, and it can spread unless we weed it out. Trauma isn't necessarily a one-time event like a bomb exploding; trauma can be small instances over time, the things that happen every day.

There's another case I encountered of a man, who as a 16-year-old boy, endured so much verbal and physical abuse from his mother that it caused him to think the only thing to do was burn his house down. He thought burning his house down would give him time to figure his situation out. In situations of abuse, we often don't think about consequences, especially if we're young. That boy's actions resulted in his father being killed by smoke-inhalation; the boy's brother was burned and scarred over most of his body. The mother, who was the abuser, escaped with only burns on her hands. The boy was sentenced to 16 years in prison,

and that all came from the powerlessness he felt; he didn't see a way out.

I don't know where the hurt in Larry's ex-wife came from, but I know there had to be hurt. She lost her father at a young age, and had a step-father for most of her life. Maybe it was her mother who was very controlling; Larry's thoughts and feelings were never taken into consideration. Whether it was purchasing a home or disciplining the kids or whatever, Larry's ex-wife made the decision. To counter some of his hurt, I ask Larry where he wants to eat; when he tells me to pick, I ask him again. I continually encourage him to have his own dreams and set his own goals.

Larry is a wonderful server. He wants to help me attain my goals, to be supportive at every step of the way, and he's been that way since day one. Even all the flowers he plants around home are for me. Larry and I don't think the same way, and I could never imagine doing what Larry does, to give all of myself to serve another person. A lot of conflict comes from thinking the other side thinks the same way you do, so that's a difficult thing to accept, that people have a different experience than you. Taking those differing experiences into account requires mindfulness. The work of remaining mindful is worthwhile, because we need people like Larry; the loudest people do most of the talking, and we need to create space for smaller voices. We need to empower people who serve people, so they can tell us what they really think. Healers and helpers like Larry are often taken advantage of, and they too often get accustomed to being abused. It's sad, because they're so wonderful and they'll keep trying to help.

Larry suffered much abuse during his 33-year marriage,

but instead of internalizing it or lashing out, he dealt with it on the other end of the spectrum. Larry resolved to be a healer. He has empathy and self-control, because discipline is a necessary part of weeding out the mentality of accepting abuse. Many of us were trained to accept abuse, and we have to train ourselves to stop abuse. Much of the abuse in our lives is cyclical; if we go back ten generations in our family, we would find the same strain of abuse.

There's a book called "Father and Son" that I highly recommend; reading that book allowed me to forgive. Reading that book caused me to think of the times I'd experienced Gary's father, and the verbal assaults I witnessed while visiting my in-laws. My father-in-law would come out cursing and carrying on over any little thing. I wouldn't allow my child to spend the night at his house, or be there too long without anyone else; I didn't want Gwen around that, even though, lo and behold, that was in my house. In another house, I could better recognize abuse.

"That's just the way Pawpaw Frank is," everyone would say, just accepting that abuse. I didn't like him, the same way I didn't like Gary. I loved Frank, because he was my father-in-law, but still did not like him. When Frank and Gary's mother separated, she left the area and didn't tell anyone where she was going; she didn't even let Gary, her only son, know. She was probably afraid of Frank. After Gary and I started dating, I offered to help Gary find his mother, and we found her in Gulfport, Mississippi. She definitely got as far away as she could, the only way she knew how.

In his younger years, Gary lived with his grandparents and parents, all together in one house. I heard the stories

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of his grandmother, who he called “Missy.” Once, when Gary was little, Missy went to the store, and Frank asked her to bring him back a pack of cigarettes. Later on, Missy came home, but had forgotten the cigarettes. She had a carton of milk, and Frank threw a fit. He grabbed the milk carton and threw it against the wall, all because Missy forgot the cigarettes.

When Gary and I were together, his father was always putting him down, telling him how awful it was to be married to me. Gary would tell me about that after Frank said it. The minute we separated, Frank started saying it was a stupid thing for his son to do, to separate from me. It was always wrong whichever way it was. What’s more, Gary would tell stories of his grandfather being an alcoholic. He didn’t drink often, but would drink a lot when he did, and I started seeing the cycle. I said, “Okay, I can forgive Gary, because that’s what he grew up with. I can forgive Frank, because that’s what he grew up with.” But knowing the cycle shouldn’t be a reason to accept it. Knowing the cycle should be catalyst for creating change.

ABUSE IN THE NUMBERS

As one of the major problems plaguing American families, I highly encourage you to educate yourself on the facts, signs, and responses to abuse. Keep yourself informed, so that you may inform others. When information is easily accessible, more people can become part of the solution. NoMore.org is one of my preferred resources for information on domestic violence and sexual assault. NoMore.org defines “domestic violence” as:

“A pattern of behavior used to establish power and control over another person through fear and intimidation, often including the threat or use of violence.”

NoMore.org states that:

“Talking about these issues openly will help end the shame and stigma that domestic violence and sexual-assault survivors are burdened with. The next time you’re in a room with six people, think about this:

- 1 in 3 women, and 1 in 4 men, experience violence from their partners, in their lifetimes.*
- 1 in 3 teens experience sexual or physical abuse, or threats from a boyfriend or girlfriend, in one year.*
- 1 in 5 women are survivors of rape.*
- 1 in 2 women, and 1 in 5 men, have experienced some form of sexual violence in their lives.*
- 1 in 4 women, and 1 in 6 men, were sexually abused before the age of 18.”*

Sources: The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey; Liz Claiborne Inc. & Family Violence Prevention Fund; U.S. Centers for Disease Control (2005)

John G. Taylor writes in “Psychology Today” about the cycle of violence, which I found to be both simple and powerful:

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Phase 1: Tension building (In this phase there is usually tension building from the batterer/abuser and there is usually an argument)

Phase 2: Explosion (this is where the assault happens)

Phase 3: Honeymoon Phase (this is where the batterer/abuser apologizes for his behavior, buying the victim gifts or flowers)



The cycle of violence will not end until one partner leaves or seeks treatment.

Lastly, LiveBoldAndBloom.com gives 30 signs of emotional abuse; use these signs as a guide in recognizing abuse:

1. Your partner humiliates you, puts you down, or makes fun of you, in front of other people or alone with them.

2. They regularly demean or disregard your opinions, ideas, suggestions, or needs.
3. They use sarcasm or “teasing” to put you down or make you feel bad about yourself.
4. They accuse you of being “too sensitive,” in order to deflect their abusive remarks.
5. They try to control you and treat you like a child.
6. They correct or chastise you, for your behavior.
7. You feel like you need permission to make decisions or go out somewhere.
8. They try to control the finances and how you spend money.
9. They belittle and trivialize you, your accomplishments, or your hopes and dreams.
10. They try to make you feel as though they are always right, and you are always wrong.
11. They give you disapproving or contemptuous looks or body language.
12. They regularly point out your flaws, mistakes, or shortcomings.
13. They accuse or blame you of things you know aren't true.
14. They have an inability to laugh at themselves, and can't tolerate others laughing at them.
15. They are intolerant of anything that could indicate a lack of respect for them.
16. They make excuses for their behavior, try to blame others, and have difficulty apologizing.
17. They repeatedly cross your boundaries and ignore your requests.
18. They blame you for their problems, life difficulties,

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or unhappiness.

19. They call you names, give you unpleasant labels, or make cutting remarks under their breath.
20. They are emotionally distant, or emotionally unavailable most of the time.
21. They resort to pouting or withdrawal to get attention or attain what they want.
22. They don't show you empathy or compassion.
23. They play the victim and try to deflect blame, rather than taking personal responsibility.
24. They disengage, or use neglect/abandonment, to punish or frighten you.
25. They don't seem to notice, or care about, your feelings.
26. They view you as an extension of themselves, rather than as an individual.
27. They withhold sex as a way to manipulate and control.
28. They share sensitive information about you with others.
29. They invalidate or deny their emotionally abusive behavior when confronted.
30. They make subtle threats or negative remarks with the intent to frighten or control you.

SOLUTIONS

Growing up, I was told about the dangers and destruction of alcohol abuse and was clearly instructed to never allow anyone to beat me. That was unheard of in my family of origin. But no one talked about the put-downs. Nobody

talked about the mental control, and the verbal abuse. Part of the reason why that sort of abuse is passed down from generation to generation, becoming what's accepted, is because flicking the off switch is a lot harder than hoping things will just get better. It can be tough to recognize, when we are in abusive relationships, that we're hurting our children. Awareness of a problem is the first step toward reversing its cycle, and people can't know about a problem that isn't talked about.

Back 30 or so years ago, women weren't as empowered; it was almost deadly to try to stop abuse. There have been advancements, but we can't let this continue by ignoring it, letting it fester and get worse by failing to provide resistance. In the South and Bible Belt, we need to stop thinking, "What would people think?" Handling abuse needs to be about the individual in the situation, not what people see on the surface.

In abusive situations, you still want to look good on the outside. There's a book called "Not to People Like Us," which researches affluent people and the secretive abuse in their homes. They all experience shame and blame, which is a human problem beyond all class, race, and culture. It's a bigger problem than we realize *because* we keep it all hidden. No one wants to air their dirty laundry, but stopping abuse is more important than saving face.

I would've acknowledged it if I'd known.

I didn't know.

I was supposed to be the smart one.

As it's passed from one generation to the next, one abuser can affect the whole; one abuser can create a world of people in pain. People in pain hurt other people. The mental illness of addiction and the mental illness of abuse comes from a place of hurt. Hurting people want to have power in their life, from places where they didn't previously have power. Unless they understand and make the conscious choice to be different, the cycle will continue.

**HOW DO WE GET ABUSERS
TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY?**

When Gary said, "I've changed all I can change," I should've gone to a counselor by myself; I should've gone and got myself fixed. I should've worried about myself, not about my abuser or the people who might think less of me. I didn't know the signs of abuse, beyond what society told me were abuse's red flags; I would've acknowledged it if I'd known. I didn't know. I was supposed to be the smart one. I didn't know that abuse doesn't always come with red flags like bottles and bruises. I didn't know that there are some pink flags even bigger and brighter and more terrifying. Most pink flags aren't even acknowledged, in a community that sees abuse in a black-and-white manner.

As Gary's wife, the preacher's wife, I lived in a glass house; if someone had suggested I was being mentally abused, I would've denied it. I looked on the positive side, never focusing too long on the negative. If somebody would've said to me, "Gary is abusive," I would've said, "I know, but he's such a good preacher." I would've defended him, because that's what I was trained to do.

Malala Yousafzai said, “The extremists have shown what they fear most—a girl with a book,” and I agree with her. To make a broader change, we have to change it in our children; we have to change the way we condition little girls and boys. It’s easier to teach a child to be full of love, rather than relearning it as an abusive adult.

I’d love to think this change could start in the school, but by the time children get to kindergarten, it can be too late. Children learn so much, so young. Think about how I told Daddy not to tell Mama about me running away from him; I was 3-years-old. Babies don’t come with a manual, but wouldn’t it be nice if there were at least parenthood classes, or literature on the elements of abuse, offered to every new parent that leaves the hospital? Don’t you think we could do better? We have to develop a society where helping parents raise good human beings isn’t taboo; where stepping into abusive situations is being responsible, not intrusive.

Speaking out will help other people see the reality of their situations. We have to empower victims, and hold abusers accountable; we have to educate. Imagine a world where we have systems in place for situations of abuse and manipulation. Where a counselor is a social imperative rather than just an option. Where education on abuse happens at an early age, and children are warned about how fear and hope can be tools for manipulation. Imagine a world where there is help for the hurting and hope for the healing.

If you are being abused, whether physically or in every way but physically, recognize it, acknowledge it, and make a plan to get out. I know you’re scared. There are places to turn; there are things you can do. There is no shame in admitting that something’s going on, and you don’t need to

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keep it a secret. You don't have to make a decision right now, but you need to begin preparing yourself to nip it in the bud or leave. Get help. Reach out for support from a professional. Make a plan to leave, and leave. When you're out of your abusive situation, don't be afraid or ashamed to seek therapy and counseling. Sometimes it takes years of therapy or personal reflection; it's never a one-time fix. Bottom-line, you need to take time for yourself and figure out what's going on and what to do about it. Then do it.

RHONDA VOSS

CHAPTER SIX

Find Your Purpose

I began a non-profit foundation, the Broad River Abundant Life Foundation, to act on a vision I had after Gary and I separated. I was walking on the farm where I grew up one crisp autumn day. I stopped and looked around and thought, “Wow, what if I would’ve had a place like this to go, to have a few days to sit and think? Could I have seen things differently? Would I have made better decisions?”

After my mother and father died and I inherited half of the farm, I felt a sense of obligation to responsibly use that which had been entrusted to me.

Thus, the Broad River Abundant Life Foundation’s first project is the construction and oversight of a respite care retreat center on our 50-acre farm in the foothills of North Carolina.

It will begin by serving mainly women through small group weekend retreats where they can begin some healing and learn new coping skills. We hope to eventually expand

to serve men, children and families who find themselves in the usually unseen, unspoken, less recognized domestic abuses. Our purpose is to use the land as a place for emotional, mental, spiritual growth and healing—a place where people can come to be reborn, rejuvenated, reignited, and restored.

If I had a place like this when I needed it most, where I could have hit the pause-button, I would have done better. Knowing that, I'll spend the rest of my life developing and expanding this retreat center. My mission is to give women the opportunity to think without interruption, to have empathetic listening ears, and to hear those soft words, "be still and know that I am God."

It fills me with great joy to foresee giving women time to get away from the stresses of life and look at their lives. I want this retreat center to be a place where women can decompress and breathe for as many hours as they need. Women who have been abused must be reminded we are human-beings, not human-doings, even if we're always doing, never having the time to be still and just be.

The retreat center started as 50 acres of God's creation. Our plans include walking trails, small cabins, and various activity centers. Those acres will have one crop: empowerment. Women will choose what they take part in, such as group dialogues, morning yoga, art therapy, therapeutic journaling, massage therapy, and alternating classes. A library will provide ample resources and reading material along with computer access. Special meditation areas will be established near the creeks and streams.

There will be flowers around the log cabins to remind women they are always blooming. There will be a greenhouse

so women can plant things and play in the dirt. For the first time in a long time, women who've been abused will have the choice to simply breathe, and *be* in whatever way they want to *be*.

All women deserve respect; abused women deserve to be seen as the valuable people they are. When we can see the value in each other, we can begin to see the value in ourselves. The retreat center isn't a place to learn what an abused woman should do in her situation; instead, it's a place where women can learn who they are, and why they're beautiful, and how they are always worth it. Time spent at the retreat center will not be the end, but only the beginning—the beginning of hope, help and healing.

CONCLUSION

When God speaks to you, listen. Get to know that still, small voice. Don't wait for the thump on the head or the wall falling down on you. If you don't believe in God, listen to your gut instinct and intuition, to the subconscious floating in your head.

There is always a way out. It doesn't matter what your situation is right now; no matter how bad you think it is, or how impossible it seems, there is always a way out. There are people willing to help you. There are resources for you. If you don't know those resources, seek out someone who can point you in the right direction. At the end of this book is a list of resources. During my time with Gary, I thought there weren't resources for those experiencing the unseen side of abuse. I thought no one would understand those things that are in our hearts and souls, but people do understand.

If you don't know where to turn, contact me; if I don't know where to send you, I will find a place. No matter how bad it is, realize you can use any situation for good. When I was going through it, I didn't realize it would ultimately be my calling to help other people through it. There's a scripture I love, Romans 8:28, which states, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose." Anything bad that happens can turn around for good; you have to stay positive without being blind to abuse. Whatever you're going through now, there's a purpose and lesson. Most importantly, there is a solution.

Children are one of the most common reasons we stay in abusive situations; staying in those situations will always have a negative effect on your children. It will manifest itself in many ways, but it will undoubtedly perpetuate the hurt. It will allow that hurt to pass from generation to generation. In the majority of us, there is some kind of family-sin that passes down. We have to dig within ourselves and find the bravery to say, "It's hard, but I'm going to make a change."

Mental abuse harms more than the victim; it can pass, like a virus, to other victims. One must assess and move through the reflection of their trauma, or their trauma seeps deeper into their psyche. Abuse seeped into the way I interacted with people; I've gotten much better, but my own tendency toward criticism and control was real. Co-dependency got into me, and it was horrible.

Self-awareness is key; look at yourself from the outside, and see the abuse you're receiving and the abuse you're bouncing off. People who recognize and work on their faults

are truly being their best. They're not doing the easy thing and excusing themselves because they're hurt. They don't say they've "changed all that they can change."

To continue my growth and healing, I surround myself with people I respect, people who I consider better than me, and/or people who make me better. I go to counseling every once in a while, just to check in and keep growing. I love improving myself. I love learning. Educate yourself through books and seminars. Get some alone time. Journaling is also an excellent tool for growth and gratitude. Have some time to just think. I spend many mornings when I first wake up with my eyes closed, just thinking and allowing thoughts to come and go.

My counselor asks me questions that make me think, that help me become a better person. I have coaches, like one for my business. I have close friends who will tell me the hard stuff; they'll tell me if they think I'm off track. I keep an open mind and an open heart to the words of my sweet husband, who listens and comes to me with things I ought to think about. Larry gives me gentle bumps back on track. He gives me another perspective, one I know comes from pure love and my best interest. It's hard, but I'm learning to acknowledge and accept these words. When you're in an abusive relationship, whatever your abuser is saying to you — about how you need to improve — is for them. It's never really helping you be your best. They want you to be your "best," but only doing what *they* want you to do; they want you to enjoy being what *they* want you to be.

One of the biggest things in my life is my relationship with Jesus Christ and God. I accepted Christ as my savior at a young age. I asked my mom the question, "What do they

do when they go down front, in church?” My mama told me, and I remember the invitation being extended, and me going down front; I remember being baptized, at around 8-years-old. All throughout my adolescent life, we always had youth Sunday. I was always the choir director or the pianist, and felt even then a calling from God to be a full-time Christian servant. I thought I was going to be a music director, which didn’t work out. I was the wife of a youth minister, for a while. I’ve served God all my life, in many ways. I’ve gotten off track before; I’ve taken twists and turns. Some things have happened that people in the Bible Belt see as the worst sins anyone can do; I’ve probably done them all, and through it all, God has loved me. He allowed me to experience all I’ve experienced so I would become less judgmental. I see when things weren’t good decisions, but still consider there may have been a reason. I strive to be non-judgmental. I hear people say things about people, and I’ll ask them, “Have you thought about what they may have gone through?”

I have learned that tolerance can be a dangerous, slippery slope without the presence of self-respect. I found the good in Gary and excused his abuse for 23 years. There’s a fine line between cognitively accepting abuse and looking for the good in someone. My ex-husband was a wonderful man, and that breaks my heart, because he was a horrible man — Gary was both, at once.

I want a world where we actively challenge and change the negative elements from our pasts that infect those around us. I hope abuse stops in this generation. I hope we’ll become so aware we’ll recognize abuse immediately. I hope we’ll become a society of people who will want the best for all.

RESOURCES

Where to go for Help

National Domestic Violence Hotline:
1-800-799- 7233(SAFE) (for ANY kind of abuse)

Here are some basic resources:

aa.org

alanon.org

celebraterecovery.com

genesisprocess.org

focusonthefamily.com

ncadv.org

thehotline.org

helpguide.org/articles/abuse/domestic-violence-and-abuse.htm

joyfulheartfoundation.org

nomore.org

flyingfreenow.com

Meaningful Quotes & Sayings

“Setbacks pave the way for comebacks.”

“When God gives a vision, he will make the provision.”

“God often removes people from your life for a reason; think before you chase after them.”

“I live in abundance.”

“Everything is as it should be.”

“All things are working in my favor.”

“Society grows great when old-men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in.” — GREEK PROVERB

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone. And as we let our own

NO BOTTLE, NO BRUISES

light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.” —MARIANNE WILLIAMSON

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.” —LAO TSU

“The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.”
—ALBERT EINSTEIN

“I cannot give you the formula for success, but I can give you the formula for failure – try to please everybody.”
—HERBERT BAYARD SWOPE

“God allows us to experience the low points of life in order to teach us lessons we could not learn in any other way.” —C.S. LEWIS

“What doesn’t kill me, makes me stronger.” —FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

“Many men owe the grandeur of their lives to their tremendous difficulties.” —CHARLES SPURGEON

“I thank God for my handicaps, for, through them, I have found myself, my work, and my God.” —HELEN KELLER

“The moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help

one that would never otherwise have occurred...
Unforeseen incidents, meetings, and material assistance,
which no man could have dreamed would have come his
way.” —JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

“I know God will not give me anything I can’t handle. I
just wish that He didn’t trust me so much.” —MOTHER TERESA

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about
things that matter.” —MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

“The moment we begin to fear the opinions of others and
hesitate to tell the truth that is in us, and from motives of
policy are silent when we should speak, the divine floods
of light and life can no longer flow into our souls.”
—ELIZABETH CADY STANTON

“I invite people to just stop and be still. And in that you
discover who you are, because once you discover who you
are, you can stop fragmenting into pieces. I know that in
any one day there are moments where there is nothing
going on, but we link up what is happening from thought
to thought without any space. We overlook the
spaciousness that it is all happening in.” —GANGAGI

“How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single
moment before starting to improve the world.” —ANNE
FRANK

“It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness.”
—ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

Supplementary Resources

The habit of reading will change your life. These are a few of the books that have educated and inspired me. I highly recommend them.

For information about abuse and domestic violence:

“The Enabler: When Helping Hurts the Ones You Love”
by Angelyn Miller

“Codependent No More” by Melody Beattie

“Father and Son: The Wound, The Healing, The Call to Manhood” by Gordon Dalbey

“Not to People Like Us: Hidden Abuse in Upscale Marriages” by Susan Weitzman

“Emotional Abuse – Silent Killer of Marriage” by Austin James

“The Anatomy of Abuse” by George Rolph

“The Verbally Abusive Relationship” by Patricia Healy Evans

“The Dilemma of the Alcoholic Marriage” by Al-Anon Family Group Head Inc.

“Unholy Charade: Unmasking the Domestic Abuser in the Church” by Jeff Crippen & Rebecca Davis

“Changes that Heal: How to Understand Your Past to Insure a Healthier Future” by Dr. Henry Cloud

“How Al-Anon Works for Families & Friends of Alcoholics” by Al-Anon Family Groups

“Alcoholics and Their Families” by John E. Keller

Some books that have impacted my spiritual growth:

“In His Steps” by Charles M. Sheldon

“P.S. God Loves You” by Connie Witter

“The Prayer of Jabez” by Bruce Wilkinson

“The Circle Maker: Praying Circles Around Your Biggest Dreams and Greatest Fears” by Mark Batterson

“The Source of my Strength” by Charles Stanley

“He Still Moves Stones: Everyone Needs a Miracle” by Max Lucado

Video

“Carpe Diem: Seize the Day” by Dr. Tony Campolo

Books that have inspired me:

“See You at the Top” by Zig Ziglar

“The Secret” by Rhonda Byrne

“Who Moved My Cheese” by Spencer Johnson, M.D.

“The Butterfly Effect” by Andy Andrews

“Turning Terrible into Terrific” by Dr. Dennis Cummings

“The 7: Seven Wonders that Will Change Your Life” by Glen Beck & Keith Ablow, M.D

“Miss Brenda and the Loveladies: A Heartwarming True Story of Grace, God, and Gumption” by Brenda Spahn & Irene Zutell

Books for personal growth and development:

“The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People” by Stephen R. Covey

“The Success Principles” by Jack Canfield

“How to Win Friends and Influence People” by Dale Carnegie

Resources for help with financial success:

“The 9 Steps to Financial Freedom” by Suze Orman

“Secrets of the Millionaire Mind” by T. Harv Eker

“The Millionaire Next Door: The Surprising Secrets of America’s Wealthy” by Thomas J. Stanley, William D. Danko, Cotter Smith

“The Top 10 Distinctions between Millionaires and the Middle Class” by Keith Cameron Smith

“Financial Peace University” by Dave Ramsey—a nine week course that usually meets at church facilities once per week or on-line

“The Millionaire Mind Experience”—a 3-day seminar. To learn more, visit: successresourcesamerica.com

Other authors I enjoy and highly recommend include:

Joel Osteen, Rick Warren, Mark Batterson and John Maxwell

Dr. Phil, Suze Orman and Dave Ramsey

I also enjoy Oprah Winfrey’s Super Soul Sunday on OWN

*To learn more about
Broad River Abundant Life Foundation,
our retreat center development,
or to donate please visit:*

*www.BRALF.org
704-313-7176*

NO BOTTLE, NO BRUISES

To contact the author:
RhondaVossWithAvon@gmail.com
980-621-2866

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