

Survival Stories — Testimonies from Participants

Introductory Comments

The following narratives were written by woman abuse survivors involved in the project. They write about their personal situations and their experiences as they addressed custody and access issues. In all cases but one, the names have been changed to protect their identities.

These reports will give the reader an experience of some of the information heard in the focus groups, at the conference, and in the working group committees. This kind of input from survivors is essential and must continue to direct and inform the work we do in these areas.

Carol's Story

I would like to thank Rita Benson for inviting me to today's training session and for the opportunity to give my comments on the topics covered today.

When I first read the pamphlet outlining what the day was going to be about and what was going to be covered, I couldn't believe it. It identified issues that I had gone through and difficulties that I had encountered and now they were going to be discussed with people who could make a difference. And to think that somebody else thought things needed improving upon - it was really incredible!

I am honoured that I have been asked to speak as a survivor of domestic abuse. The fact that I am a survivor is the result of the help and support of a number of people here today, to whom I will always be grateful.

To give you a bit of information about my past, as it relates to custody and access issues, I left an abusive marriage 5 years, 5 months ago. I have one son from the marriage. His name is Kyle and he was 1 ½ years old at that time. It took 5 years and 3 weeks from the time I left for me to get my divorce finalized. The majority of the time was spent on deciding some custody issues but mostly access issues.

Initially Kyle's father, Michael, wanted joint custody and liberal access. But I somehow started out with sole custody in our temporary court order and the more time that went on, the harder this was for him to get changed. This was one thing that worked in my favour. So, he focused on getting access.

Initially he was seeing Kyle daily as well as myself because I was the one dropping Kyle off. This didn't work well. The exchanges were never short or pleasant. They always involved discussions/demands that I come back "home". Even when he had Kyle, he spent hours on the phone with me trying to convince me to return instead of focusing on Kyle while he had him.

This went on for about 6 - 7 months, with each exchange becoming more heated. He would tell me he was going to take Kyle and I'd never see him again. He even grabbed Kyle from my arms and put him back in his vehicle in an effort to make me think he was taking Kyle. I can only imagine how Kyle felt during this. Then, during an exchange, he assaulted me with a knife. He was charged with assault and assault with a weapon. This happened in front of Kyle.

So now you might be thinking that this was an awful thing for Kyle to have witnessed, but at least access would be stopped. Unfortunately, it was not. It was reduced to 1½ days a week. The real "improvement" was that the exchanges were not being done by me anymore but by a neutral 3rd party. This type of a person is very difficult to find. Anybody that I would want to do it, Michael would hate and I didn't trust anyone he would have recommended. My father ended up doing it, but the exchanges were still tense and the visits weren't that pleasant for Kyle. At that time, he was 2 ½ years old and he had a

speech delay. He wasn't able to tell me what was wrong, but he would kick and bite in the car on the way home after a visit and bang his head on the walls at home. He was obviously quite upset.

The first assessment got under way and the recommendations were quite favourable for Kyle. I had taped, on my answering machine, over 7 hours of harassing conversations and messages from Michael. They helped the assessor see the other side of Michael, for he could be quite personable during the interviews, when he wanted to be. The recommendations from that assessment were sole custody to me, access every Sunday for 2 hours at a supervised access centre and that Michael attend a Men's group for a period of time.

So access started up and lasted for about 9 months. Kyle was a little hesitant at first, but then he got used to the environment and didn't mind going. After about 4 months, Kyle started to not want to go for the visits and would tell me so at home before we left and even several days before the visits were to occur. However, I had to take him to the centre and it was supposed to be up to him if he wanted to go. But when we got there and Kyle would not want to go with the volunteer, it was questioned. After all, the child is only 3 ½ years old, why wouldn't he want to go - unless his mom is telling him not to. So Kyle was saying he didn't want to go, and at the centre, I was told by my lawyer to encourage him to go and to tell him to go because this was all being written down by the volunteer. This would be proof to take back to court that I was encouraging the visits and it was Kyle's choice. Meanwhile, I was not acknowledging Kyle's request to not go. Visits eventually stopped because Kyle refused to go on 3 occasions and the policy of the access centre was if this happened, the access issue was sent back to the lawyers.

During this time, Michael did not follow through on the recommendation to attend a Men's group. He did see a registered nurse for a short period of time to help him deal with the separation. He managed to convince her to write a letter saying the assessment was unfair and he and Kyle didn't deserve the "restricted" access. She had never even met or spoken with Kyle or myself. After the letter was written, Michael never went back to her again.

Michael took this letter to court and used it to get another assessment granted. It wasn't just the letter though, his lawyer used the lines - "the father has rights to see his child" and "the problems were between the parents and not the child" to get the judge to order another assessment.

So the second assessment started. I had to go through the whole ordeal again of explaining the abuse. If the abuse wasn't always physical, was the emotional and psychological abuse really that bad and how did it affect Kyle? I had to explain these sorts of issues to the assessors who obviously didn't "get it". I never felt I was doing justice to what Kyle and I had gone through, and yet so much was riding on the way I explained it. The assessment put stress on me, and even though Kyle was not involved personally yet, he could feel my stress and was affected by it, even though I would try to keep it from him. He just picked up on things - kids do that.

At this time, Kyle was in Kindergarten and his teacher approached me about negative changes she had noticed in Kyle's behaviour at school. She was unaware, at that time that a 2nd assessment was going on. We talked, and it became clear that the behaviour changes she noticed in Kyle had started at the time his involvement in the assessment began. Letters were written and passed on to the assessors to be "taken into consideration". On the way to interviews with the assessors, Kyle would act up in the car. On one occasion, I had to pull off the 401 and stop the car until he calmed down. The assessors were also told this, to which I was told they would "take into consideration". The point I am trying to make here is the assessment process also affects the children and is a stressful event for them.

The thing you have to remember about Michael and guys like him, is that they are really good actors. They can be very convincing - they can even shed a tear if they have to. He was believed more than I was. I told them what Michael was like, that he hadn't proved he had changed and that I thought it was not in Kyle's best interest to have unsupervised contact with him. I said that Michael hadn't changed. Michael said things were in the past - they bought his version of the story. I think there is a belief that if he's the father he has rights and that the recommendations being made that are supposed to be in the best interest of the child are not - they are in the best interest of the father.

Someone was watching out for Kyle because the only thing that saved him from a recommendation of eventual unsupervised access was the fact that Michael got caught in a lie and he was caught before the assessment was finalized. It turned out that he was convicted of assaulting his current partner and was on probation and attending a Men's group and had forgotten to mention this during the assessment. I am very angry that this was missed. The assessor told me that the police check was run only for the Toronto area because the assessment was conducted in Toronto. Michael had been convicted in Durham Region and therefore didn't show up on their check. I don't believe this to be true. If the assessors had run a 'CPIC' - that would show up any charges or convictions across Canada. I think the assessors either didn't run a police check or they ran one at the beginning of the assessment and it took so long that the conviction happened during the assessment. Whatever the reason was, I think the police checks should always be run at the beginning and end of every assessment.

I was hoping to illustrate that Kyle has been put through a lot of stress and strain through this process. Did Kyle deserve it? Do other children deserve it? I think not. The system does need fixing and changing. Kyle went through what he did, not for his benefit but for Michael's. The scary thing is that Michael has the right to request a change in the current access situation, which could result in another assessment. We could be put through the whole ordeal again, when he has not accepted any responsibility for his actions or made any attempt to change his behaviour. I think the courts should not allow this to happen.

As I mentioned at the beginning, it has taken 5 years and 3 weeks to get my divorce finalized with sole custody to myself and supervised access every 2nd Sunday at the supervised access centre. Incidentally, this was approved last August and Michael has not made any attempt to get the access started. It has also taken 2 assessments, a lot of emotional stress and approximately \$25,000. Was it worth it? I'd have to say yes, only because the current end results are in Kyle's favour and the best I could have hoped for at this time. However, should we have been put through the whole ordeal? Should Kyle have been subjected to the stress and strain that he was in order to get this outcome - the answer to that would have to be NO.

Kate's Story

I speak with you this day as one who has nothing left to lose, but much to gain. My loss? The violent death of my 3½ year old son at the hands of his father who then took his own life. My gain? That my voice, added to the courageous voices of all the women who have participated in this focus group will be heard, will be listened to, and acted upon to effect some much needed change.

As I continue, let me be very clear that my purpose here today is not to point fingers, or to lay blame, but rather to tell you of my experience in a way that will allow you to gain a sense of the related events through my eyes. For I strongly believe, though due process of the law may have been exercised, that my voice and my concerns resulting from my experiences, took a back seat to that process

By way of background, I met the man who later became my husband early in 1989. We married in August of 1992. Our son was born in December of 1993. Although not apparent when we married, my husband had undiagnosed mental disorders, which, left untreated, became more and more prevalent as time passed, all the while maintaining that he wasn't sick - the rest of the world was.

His illness manifested itself in ever-increasing emotional and psychological abuse toward me, but never in front of our families. Once a very responsible and hardworking man, he worked less and less, and in the last year, not at all. Of course he found ways to blame me for all of his disappointments. We attempted marriage counselling in early 1994, which I tried to believe would make a difference, but my husband fell back into his ways before too long and became progressively worse. In November of 1996, I sought personal counselling from two sources in an effort to decide what to do. This counselling helped me to come to grips with the realization that my husband's behaviours were, in fact, abusive, and that there was no



longer anything I could do to get him to a point where he might realize his need for help.

Another thing counselling helped me to understand was that I was actually frightened of my husband, although I could never pinpoint why. I knew instinctively that if I said that my son and I were leaving, that he would have stopped me, but how? I never knew.

In April of '97, I began to make arrangements to leave him, and by mid-May had managed to buy a small house for my son and I to live in. All these plans were made in absolute secrecy, even from my own family and all but one friend, because I was terrified about what would happen if he found out.

By this time, my husband had not been working for about 8 months, and showed no signs of ever resuming work. He was reclusive, and seldom went anywhere. In June of '97, he demanded to look after our son during the day instead of him going to the private home where he had received care since the age of 6 months when I returned to work. I didn't want to agree, but was afraid to refuse him. My plans to leave in mid-August were approaching, and I just kept telling myself to hang on. I knew my husband would look after our son's basic needs, and there was no sign that my son was afraid of his father in any way. The tension and oppressiveness in our house was great by now and I worried a lot for my son because of this, and so kept as focused as I could on my plans to get us both out of there. I asked my husband to make sure to take our son to spend time with his friends from private daycare that were like brothers and sisters to him, but he never did.

I had arranged for a reason for my son to be elsewhere on the day I planned to leave, and was going to then go back to the house with some of my family members (who by then had been apprised of my plans), to confront my husband to let him know that we were leaving and to try for the last time to get him to seek help.

This plan would never materialize, as I was forced to "escape" a week earlier with my son in my arms, my purse, and the clothes on our backs. I was by now absolutely terrified of my husband and his behaviours. He had stripped me of my car keys in an effort to control my movements. He had already isolated himself, and then our son from his friends, and now he was closing in on me.

My son and I fled to The Denise House in my brother's truck, pursued by my husband who, at one point, engaged in dangerous driving to try to force me off the road. I don't know if he could have been charged with dangerous driving, because the police on site at The Denise House never actually spoke with me about my escape. They spent a lot of time speaking with my husband though. When I questioned the police many weeks later about this, they said that I had told them I didn't want to talk to them. I'm sure I didn't want to talk to anyone at the time because I wanted just to keep things calm for my son. But, I was sure they would want to talk to me later, but they never did. Had they done so, it might have provided some "evidence" to support my request for supervised access.

I spent the following week looking over my shoulder, even though I was by now in a safe house that no one except one friend knew about. I met with my counsel and we revised my affidavit to include these recent events. My husband was served on Wednesday and we went to court two days later on Friday to establish interim custody and access.

I had spoken with counsel many weeks prior to our first scheduled visit in the first week of August (which I was assured was sufficient time to prepare the case). Additionally, I was assured that counsel's current caseload could accommodate my case as well.

Because I had no idea of what to expect of these proceedings, I was very apprehensive, and I remember saying to my lawyer that I really needed to know what kinds of things were going to happen in order to feel a little more comfortable. My counsel had another case going into court that morning and appeared too pressed for time to explain much to me as we walked to the court for 9:00 am Friday morning. I'm so thankful that my sister from Toronto met me there, because I don't believe I would have got through it otherwise.

First of all, you are left in a large waiting room while the lawyers disappear in and out of various doors as they negotiate

through their cases. With two cases at the same time, my lawyer did not have any time to witness my state of absolute terror when my husband entered the waiting room and approached me, touching my shoulder and, with a great show, asked me how my son and I were. I went cold with fear and buried my head in my sister's shoulder. I had to be in the same room with him for about 6 ½ hours, and was terrified the whole time.

My affidavit gave some background on our relationship, and spoke to the progressive decline of my husband's state of mind, and the effect on me and my concerns about the effect on our son. There were very clear statements and key words in my affidavit as well, such as "I am very concerned with the respondent's mental stability and that he will act on his threats to take and keep my son from me", that he was "increasingly isolating himself", and "beginning to isolate our son", that he frequently made suicidal references. I gave several examples of his "abusive behaviour" toward me.

When my husband was served, I was asking for sole custody of our son, supervised access, and some measure of financial support for our son.

My lawyer finally appeared from one of the rooms to advise me that I had sole interim custody of my son. I broke down with relief, and was so overcome that my lawyer removed us to a private room for a short time. I had fully expected a fight from my husband over this. In the presence of my lawyer, both my sister and I remarked that this was out of character for my husband. I was then strongly advised that my husband had shown "good faith" in this concession, and that I had better be prepared to co-operate.

One of the times that my lawyer came out from behind closed doors, I was suddenly advised that I wasn't going to get supervised access because my husband had no priors before the court. Why, then was I allowed to request it in the first place? I maintained that I only wanted my husband's access to be supervised until we could see how he was going to react. No priors before the court was repeated to me. My sister tried to provide an example of something that had recently come to her attention about my husband's ability to provide sound care to our son, and she was shut down immediately, and asked not to speak. I was confused and bewildered by this turn of events and I know it showed on my face. I tried one or two more times to revisit my request for supervised access, but again was met with "no priors before the court".

By now, I was also told that it was better if an agreement could be reached without intervention by the judge - that intervention by the judge would not be seen as favourable. And then, access times were being set for the period of a month. I was told my husband wanted access the very next day. I said, "it's too soon - it's too soon".

Again, I was strongly reminded to show co-operation. I was absolutely weary from fear by now, dumbfounded at the court process, and felt I no longer had a choice or a say. I signed the agreement with the access laid out, and was told that they would request police enforcement of the agreement. I was never given an opportunity to see my husband's responding affidavit throughout this whole day, and didn't know I could ask to see it. When I found his copy some weeks later, I found it full of inaccurate statements that I never had a chance to refute.

Perhaps more horrifying to me is the next thing that I would find out quite by accident some weeks later. My husband's sister, who accompanied him to court that Friday, at some point had been asked to comment on and vouch for my husband's ability to care for his son. She declared him fit. This is a sister who would have seen us as a family maybe three times in over five years, and not once in the last year or so of her brother's life. Just how much weight did her assertions about her brother's ability to care for his son carry? Why would they carry any weight at all? If her opinion was requested in light of the fact that my husband had been caring for our son just prior to my leaving, why was I not asked to speak to that concern?

My questions? What happened to relegate my very real concerns over my husband's mental stability to a place where they carried no weight, where they became secondary to my husband's right to see his child? How did they also become secondary to the process of getting interim custody established?

An Added Note:

Kate's 3 year old son was strangled and burned to death on that first unsupervised visit with his father. Her ex-partner, the child's father, died in the same fire.

Jean's Story

I was born in Holland 48 years ago. After the war, my mom and dad came to Canada. The Dutch culture has been a very strong influence in my upbringing. However, since I was only 2 years old when I immigrated to this country, I acquired this country's morals and values, becoming more Canadian.

Commitment and trust are very important to me. Members of my family and I were no strangers to hard work. I knew poverty, felt the discrimination against my family who were seen as "foreigners" and experienced language barriers. I overcame these obstacles and, in fact, flourished and learned many lessons. I graduated from Grade 12 (the first in my family to accomplish this) and started working at age 19. I had worked 10 years in business and was working as an Administrative Assistant, when, at age 29, I met my ex. We were married in 1981.

Up until this time I had never experienced abuse. I had heard of physical abuse and was clear that I would not tolerate it. I made these views known to my ex (then my husband). At that time I felt self-empowered to take action and change any circumstances.

I met my ex through a blind date and was swept off my feet. The romance was hot and heavy and our relationship included family, travel and friends. It was wonderful. I had worked for 10 years and felt very comfortable with marriage and family life. I had great expectations!

The first year we bought a house. He had a down payment and we both worked. My pay went to paying off the mortgage, which I did in 4 years. The mortgage amount was the exact same amount of the down payment and a small loan for the 2nd mortgage. I mention this only because he ended up paying in dollars and cents the exact same amount as I did for the house. This detail I didn't realize until later, and there are other examples of how I was manipulated financially.

Then a change occurred. Our first child, a daughter, was born while I was still working and my ex-spouse changed jobs. He expected me to be at home with the children and "be his mother". When I refused and asked him to do more at home, the relationship became a battle of wills. My son was born 2 1/2 years later.

Ultimately, I saw the situation was hurting the children. I was working full-time, running both children to the baby-sitter, doing all the domestic care, and being left by myself more and more, while he went on fishing, snowmobile and business trips. He was not my partner. In a way, he became a king and I his servant.

After some terrible fights and long periods of isolation, I started to believe that maybe this was how some marriages were and felt that there might be reasons for his actions. Maybe he was right!! After all, I came from a Dutch culture. I had to change and I needed to improve, to "work harder to make my marriage work". If he was wrong, where would I go with my two small children? I had heard horror stories about women's shelters. Besides, he hadn't hit me!

From this point on my story takes a horrible downward slide into an abyss of emotional, spiritual, sexual and financial abuse. I had no words to describe what was happening to me. I began to believe his criticisms of me and began to lose my sense of "self". Isolation is a powerful means of control and punishment. Especially when you are exhausted and feel trapped and ashamed.

Sexually, it became apparent that I couldn't please him in the normal heterosexual way. He said that after the birth of the

children, it was impossible. He wanted me to take a different role. Sodomy. I didn't consent. I kept silent. I was ashamed, and continue to feel ashamed, even to this day. I hated short hair and I could never lose enough weight to look like a boy. The process of brainwashing was very subtle. I wanted to please him, because I was committed to the marriage. I could not talk to anyone about it.

I couldn't keep up with all his demands, take care of the children, and work full-time, therefore, soon after my son was born, "there was no other decision" for me, other than stay at home. My spouse was meeting all the financial expectations and we were saving money and spending it on the addition to the house and his mother's cottage. I reasoned that his demands were logical, and that I could meet all the responsibilities being forced on me. To leave was not an option any longer. Just keeping up with all the responsibilities of taking care of a home, children, his sick mother and entertaining his business clients and our friends at home and the cottage was all consuming.

But as time went on, he became more demanding. I withdrew into myself because I had no idea what mental, spiritual and sexual abuse entailed. I believed his criticisms of me. All the while he was living the life of a single man. He was using the family finances for his own purposes and justifying his actions with every logical reason that you could think of. I had no concept of "his" or "mine". In my mind it was "ours", but now I realize that I was wrong. One of his manipulations of our income involved giving me a financial allowance.

He grew into a monster. I descended into a pit of confusion and despair. Finally, there was only 10% of my spirit remaining still alive.

A great and deep fear lived in me. Fear of everything - to go out, to see people, to drive in the rain, fog, snow or at night. Fear of not meeting my spouse's standards and unreasonable demands. The punishment was indescribable. Isolation and ridicule - being treated like a doormat, as if I had no opinion worth listening to, having to plan three days in advance to have some time for myself, and not being acknowledged that I existed. All this happened in front of the children. I was told, usually on his way out to work in the morning, how to cook his meals, when to have everything packed, when to get up in the morning, how to plant the flower garden, what plants to buy, where to buy plants to save money, how badly the neighbours planted their gardens, and what they were not doing right in lawn care. He had, what I came to know as a "black list". Many people were on it. He made it impossible for me to have any meaningful contact with my family. When my grandmother was on her deathbed, he intimidated me into going to the cottage to look after company, instead of going to see her. My grandmother died that long weekend.

I tried to get work outside of the home to have some adult contact. Ultimately, he refused to allow me to work because it would affect his income tax (very logical). I had signed a contract and felt safe. However, he made me tear up the contract and explain to my employer that I wasn't allowed to work. As time went on, I stopped arguing and kept silent. I started to believe him. I felt worthless. I didn't exist, even for myself. Now when I look back, I call this period of time "the deadly wilderness". These events and many similar ones happened between the years of 1986 and 1993.

My normal sense of self - emotional, mental, sexual, physical, financial had disappeared. What was left was maybe 10% of a sense of spiritual self. In this 10% resided my heavenly Father, who would never leave me or forsake me. Therefore, I was not completely alone. I couldn't tell my husband about my faith because he believed all religions and churches were moneymaking businesses.

Then an old friend died. She had committed suicide on sleeping pills. I went to her funeral. Something happened. I saw myself lying in the coffin instead of her. Suddenly I knew with terrible fear that this is what would happen to me if I didn't take action. Recently, I found out she was abused and separated. She had two boys. Her ex-spouse was a detective.

I decided to leave my husband. I wanted the help of a family lawyer, not a divorce lawyer. A Children's Aid Worker helped me. My children were my first concern, before myself or anything else. At the first meeting with my solicitor, I could not speak coherently. I was shattered. In her opinion, I needed to be financially secure. This was an essential foundation to



establish. I couldn't have spoken about my abuse to a judge anyway, because I couldn't even describe how I had been abused sexually. During the six months before he physically left, I was sexually assaulted twice. His last words before leaving me were "goodbye you bitch!" It was as if I was in a fog and was brainwashed. I do remember when my lawyer asked me for my social insurance number. I felt like I had been reborn.

I now have times of great joy and times of feeling greatly overwhelmed. I have an imaginary bat, which I use to hit the critical self. I never felt this critical self before my marriage. When I say critical self, people in general think of an uncomfortable feeling they get when they think they could have done better. When I say critical self, I mean a feeling of paralysis. I hear his voice, his words and the fear of being punished comes back to me. The fear he instilled into me using the punishment of isolation, and my reaction to it, will never really leave me. I can only hope to recognize it for what it was and use strategies to work through it and past it.

The first step for me was to not focus on or live in the past. Not to get stuck there, as I found out through the therapy I was taking. I decided to finish my college course (which I had started and had attended for one week prior to him physically leaving.) His decision to physically leave me at that time, I believe, was to stop me from continuing going to school and becoming independent against his will.

Although I didn't know it at the time, I now know he had had a girlfriend for some time. I can't understand why he felt the need to control me and have a relationship with someone else. Perhaps he felt he was losing control of me. He certainly is still trying to control me by abusing the custody and access court ordered schedule and the support payments. My kids are teenagers and I am diligently trying to detach myself from the chaos he creates around every contact with me. I still worry about the sexual abuse and how it continues to affect me and the children, but I am trapped. Until the children reveal any wrongdoing to me, I can only document in my diary anything I feel is out of the ordinary, which happens to them.

When my daughter turned 16, she started to see through her father's antics. Unfortunately my son is still very angry with me. My son believes my ex and thinks I'm to blame for everything. My son doesn't see that I have gone on with my life and I am being abused even now, by his father. His father undermines my parenting of my children and sometimes my son uses words that no 14 year old would use. I can now recognize abuse and I speak the word "abuse" to my son, making absolutely sure in my mind that I'm responding as a parent who sees the bigger picture, making allowances for normal teenage rebellion. The balancing act I do, day in and day out, would make a mental health expert's head spin. It took some time for my daughter to see her father for what he is, and I said nothing to bring her to this decision. She experienced it herself, after many hours of me not giving up and many tears.

I know my son is angry, confused, says extreme things, acts out and is in need of good friends to remind him of what is acceptable behaviour in families where abuse does not exist. He also needs me to not allow abusive behaviour. When time is spent away from his father, my son relaxes and becomes "himself". One time, after an extended period of time with his father he came home with such an abusive attitude, even my daughter finally said to him, "Oh _____ just be yourself." I am tired of this! I believe that my son has the right to make a decision and have his father respect it, accept it and support it or not, without having my son feel that it is somehow an attack on his father. Power and control is not something my 14 year old son can understand, but he is very able to act it out with people who allow it to happen.

My son is finding out that authority figures are there to control and have power over and is suffering the consequences. His father has ingrained it into my son that all therapists, school counsellors, etc. are quacks and there is no need for them. I believe in my son and I use tough love when parenting him. However, I do look at the consequences he suffers and try to make sure he comes into contact with lots of people, not just me. I want him to learn good strategies to meet his needs, rather than have him suffer in isolation, thereby reinforcing the cycle of abuse he has learned from his father. This is extremely draining on every level: mentally, physically, spiritually and financially for me.

My spouse accused me of stealing his money, being a closet lesbian, being mentally unstable, doing drugs and in general being a "bitch". He threatened to take the children. I look back and I know he accused me of everything he is guilty of. In my

few moments, sometimes extending to days, of being "inside of myself", grief, betrayal, fear, hopelessness, fatigue, confusion, worthlessness and self-doubt overwhelms me, until I realize it and take action to get out of it. I know I would never give up for my children's sake. I want the days of proms, weddings, grandchildren and golden retirement, when finally I can say - my children have health, happiness and have become well-adjusted adults. I know a lot depends on how strong and self-empowered I am.

I knew in my heart that stability and continuity would give us a fighting chance to prevail against this storm, and so keeping exclusive possession of our home became a major issue along with custody.

In the first months of separation and under my lawyer's direction, access had to take place. I asked my ex to sign notes as to times and dates of pick up and drop off during the first months of access. He used these times to abuse me in front of the children. This went on for three months. When I believed he was taking the children for extended periods of time, I kept the children until a written agreement was made. He signed it, but did not follow it and made life a living hell for me. He laughed at every pick up and drop off. He turned the children against me. I directed my lawyer to start court proceedings. I suffered greatly. My children were very angry with me, but they didn't understand.

If I called the police to enforce the custody and access schedule, I was looking at climbing, what I would call a "slippery slope". The police would get tired of responding and my ex would have another way of abusing me. He knew he was in control. I was devastated. During this ongoing battle, the court proceedings required me to gather information for court documents (all financial in relation to our marriage), and I kept and maintained the house, made meals, paid bills, dealt with the transitional times before and after access, dealt with angry children who needed to go to school, as well as car repairs, snow removal, yard work and a furnace breakdown in winter. On top of this I was cross-examined by his lawyer in the "Discovery" part of the court process. I was truly alone. No one wanted to get involved, except my family. I had people come into my life declaring their support and friendship who were actually pumping me for information for my ex. Thankfully I had nothing to hide. I had not taken prescription sleeping pills or left my children alone, etc. My past was investigated and I was exonerated and proven innocent.

My son was 11-12 years old at the time. He was acting out in school. I was in contact with the school counsellor who had been informed by my ex that I was an unfit mother. The school took control over meetings discussing my son, without informing me until after the fact. I finally spoke to the principal and confided in him the details of my son's home life and the abuse. Even though I had custody I had to explain myself.

My daughter was 14-15 years old. She was acting the part of the rebellious teenager. She felt she had all the power over me, because that is how it had always been. She did not realize that her behaviour in the past had been abusive and unacceptable. I had a great deal of concern about the choices she was making as well as fear for her safety. I spent many hours communicating with her about her behaviour and reassuring her that my motives were concern for her safety and well being.

I would not let my children down even though they acted like they hated me. I went to court and spoke to the judge (all of about 15 minutes). Thankfully the judge was well informed and my lawyer well able to communicate my situation. The recommendations were, in general, favourable to me and the children. No abuse was ever mentioned. In the lobby, outside the courtroom, the lawyers worked out on paper the paragraphs in the court order document. The children and I had one and a half years to get out of our home and I had custody and support. My ex got access, according to schedule.

It is now two years later, and I have been to court and won the right to buy my ex out and become sole owner of my \$160,000 home. My budget is extremely tight. I may be forced financially to give up my home and lose half my investment, as well, since I ended up getting a mortgage to buy out my ex. I believe that it is a small risk to take for the well being of my children. I know stability and continuity are the only things that will see my children become happy, healthy and well-adjusted adults.

This is a time of insecurity for me. I am alone. The burden is totally on my shoulders. My family can support me only so far.



They and many others do not understand the journey I am on. Emotionally I am healing but I have a long way to go before I will be able to relate to another man in my life. I am trying to get a job. I have had many opportunities, but the testing required to prove your abilities seems to be an obstacle for me. I will not give up. I know that self-sufficiency will help my self-esteem enormously.

I know there will be difficult decisions in the future, but my loneliness now is nothing compared to the loneliness I experienced while being married. Although, I endured many countless hours of sleepless nights and despair in the past, I know that my dignity never left me and that many other women have experienced and endured the same as I have, and have shown "great strength and courage". I still need role models to continue healing.

When I finished my college course after the first 3 months of separation, I bought a school ring to remind me of that time of my life and how I overcame great personal loss and overwhelming obstacles. I had no idea how that ring would help me through the many more difficult times ahead. When a woman is faced with her own spiritual death, only true grit or what I call "blue steel strength", and reaching out for help will enable her to endure. I look at my ring every day and it reminds me that I possess that kind of strength. I have learned that "we only have today, the past is gone, and what we do today will affect our future." I know that I have the right to Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.

By writing my story, I seek to enlighten those who have knowledge but who do not understand. I know this "storm" will not go away and I will be in it for the rest of my life. I can only try to detach and be present for my children. He may take me back to court at any time. Will I have the money and support I have now to be able to speak out? Will the terrible memories ever fade away so that I can be as I was before this experience of abuse and once again have great expectations? Only time will tell. I know writing my story has been a healing journey for me. The therapists say it's up to me. I think "today" is what I have and "today is unfolding as it should". I have spoken out and I AM.

Thank you for listening.

Susan's Story

I was in my relationship for just under two years. He was my boss at the store where I worked. I'll call him Dave. Dave brought me things and took me out to dinner almost nightly, always complimenting me and making me laugh. Then, about four months after we were together, we were coming home from a dance. He had been drinking so I was driving. He started yelling hysterically and getting so agitated and he wasn't making any sense to me. It was raining and I was so confused and scared I could hardly drive. He told me to pull up in front of his store and he took my purse and dumped it out of the truck door into the rain and then he got out and went inside of his store.

I sat in the truck like I was in shock. I don't know how much time passed but I finally got out and tried to pick everything up and then I went into the store to see why he was just standing there staring at me. I kept thinking he would realize how he was behaving but when I stepped inside, he grabbed me and threw me outside against the window of the Becker's store next door to his and then threw me into the side of the truck. I was too stunned and scared to cry. I got into the truck and drove home without him and locked myself in a bedroom. He didn't come home that night but he would call on the phone over and over and just hang up until I finally unplugged the phones. The next day he was so sorry and said he had never done anything like that before and would never again.

Over the next two years I was with him the abuse continued. He abused me verbally, emotionally, physically and sexually. I left him many times. In fact, I would say almost half of that time I was away. I always returned hoping I could change him or that he would follow up on his promise to go to counselling for his anger. Once, in his own words, he kidnapped me. For the most part, I had to sit naked or in my underwear while he yelled and grabbed me by the throat or punched the wall beside my head or spit on my face. This would go on for over an hour. I wasn't allowed to react. If I did cry or shake he became even

angrier and if I didn't, he was degrading and even angrier.

The turning point came when I was pregnant with my son. The abuse escalated and yet I kept returning to him thinking that even though he treated me this way he might be good to the baby. The day before I gave birth he took me out in the truck and started to drive like a maniac saying he wanted to kill me and the baby. We somehow survived the truck ride. Later that night he kept circling the bed threatening to kill me and his mother who has always lived with him, and wouldn't let me leave. After about two hours, I said I had to go to the bathroom and he let me go. I went out and laid on the floor beside his mother who was sleeping on the couch that night. The next day, Jason was born.

When Jason was seven days old Dave became very agitated and he and his mom decided to go out drinking at the bar. Before they went out the door, he started yelling and calling me f'ing lazy bitch whore, slut, etc. and then left. I know what would happen when he got home, especially after drinking and I was scared for the baby. I called both my brothers to come and get us because I was afraid he would kill me if he came home and caught me leaving.

I went into hiding for twelve days. I called The Denise House for help. They were full in Oshawa but said they would try and find me a place somewhere else. I ended up hiding at my brother's house. Dave left horrible messages on my mother's answering machine. I went to the courthouse to start something but I didn't know what to ask for. I was represented by duty council.

The court appointed me and his mother supervisor of the visits, knowing that he had already abused me. I had to take Jason to Dave's house and stay there to make sure Jason was safe for the supervised visit. With each visit the verbal abuse got worse and he would call me slut, whore, etc...and said that I would pay.

On one visit he became so angry that I wanted to call the police. He pulled the phone out of the wall and grabbed me by the hair and shook me across the kitchen. I had the baby in my arms. His mother tried to get between us but he shoved her across the kitchen. He still had me by the hair and shook me until Jason hit his head on the patio doors. His mother finally convinced him to go downstairs and she would bring Jason down to him. Jason was screaming hysterically when his mother grabbed him out of my arms and took him downstairs. Dave came upstairs and chased me outside. They couldn't calm the baby down so his mother finally handed him out the door to me. Dave was yelling that he was going to kill me no matter how long it took. I went straight to the police, they said they would arrest him but I panicked because I thought that he would kill me. The police went to talk to them but his mother only recalled a lot of yelling going on. I never pressed charges.

We went back to court in November when Jason was 3 months old, and Dave was given unsupervised visits at his home with his mother doing the exchange. The Judge said that my presence was what was probably provoking Dave and for both parents to shape up.

In April '94, the court ordered an assessment. Dave refused to co-operate for 4 months. The report came out in November of that year. Dave sent a letter to my lawyer intimidating and threatening her. The recommendations were that he has access but no overnights, and the exchange be done at a supervised access centre. Dave was to resume counselling for stress and anger and be re-evaluated if he resumed harassment of me.

Following this assessment the court ordered he be given access with no overnights and the exchange at the Access Centre. Jason always cried when Dave picked him up. Jason was returned with a bleeding scratch on his bum on one occasion and bumps and bruises on others. I took him to the hospital and Doctor Smith said that it was either abuse or neglect and that I would be hearing from Children's Aid. I never did so I called them. CAS said that Doctor Smith said that it wasn't consistent with pinching and hitting. I called Doctor Smith and said that it was neglect and abuse. Nothing came of it.

Dave took it back to court wanting at least 24 hour visits every weekend. The court then ordered day visits on alternating weekends plus 3 hours during the week. He never attended the recommended stress and anger course. Dave brought another motion to the court and was granted overnight providing his mother was at the home at night. Dave requested it be

changed again and his mother not be in attendance. Shortly after the overnights began when Jason was about a year and a half, he started what seemed to be sexual behaviour, like humping, groaning, moaning, mimicking French kissing, vaginal and anal intercourse. On the advice of my lawyer and with great reluctance I videotaped his behaviour. I took Jason to see a therapist who saw the tape and we went to the police. An investigation was started but my son was too young to disclose and it was put on hold. Children's Aid was informed but they were unable to confirm or deny sexual abuse because of his age, but they noted his behaviour was of concern and clearly showed me he was afraid of Dave.

A second assessment by the Family Court Clinic was ordered. This assessment recommended shorter visits, no overnights and access be supervised by professionals and they recommended play therapy to address his sexual behaviour. There was a follow-up letter to say not to have grandma (Dave's mother) supervise. The judge ordered the grandma to supervise because "grandmas don't do bad things".

A second police investigation ensued. The officer expressed a concern but was unable to act on it because Jason was unable to give a disclosure.

In the spring of 1996, Jason disclosed to his therapist over several weeks. We called CAS. The intake worker investigated and Jason disclosed to the CAS worker on two occasions. The CAS worker went to court to get interim supervised access by CAS pending a S.C.A.N. report. The intake worker reported that Dave refused to co-operate. Dave was angry about the change in the access order and left a series of threatening calls on CAS voice mail. The CAS supervisor informed my child's therapist of the phone calls and was distressed over the content of the calls. The CAS supervisor was encouraged by the therapist to tape the calls and make the S.C.A.N. team aware of their existence. This was never done.

The case was assigned to a CAS family worker, who interviewed me in the presence of Jason. The CAS family worker went to court altering the order for Dave's mother to supervise again. The worker said this was a custody access case. I could be misinterpreting everything and suggested that I take a parenting course. Jason told the therapist that Dave wasn't hurting him anymore. The CAS worker took it back to court and had my son's therapist stopped. He wasn't allowed a final visit or closure and asked for her for several months. My lawyer received a threatening call from Dave, which she has on tape and left a lengthy message describing what a "pedophile" is.

The judge granted visits with Dave's mother supervising and make-up time for time Dave missed, when he refused to keep his access visits at the CAS. The S.C.A.N. team began their investigating. They called to set up an appointment with me because Dave had insisted he speak with them prior to the investigation. This had never been done before, but they made an exception for him. Shortly after the investigation started Jason's play therapist from S.C.A.N. up and quit without any notice or closure for Jason. S.C.A.N. said that they had done enough and that they could make their report right there. We asked if the S.C.A.N. supervisor could interview Jason.

All of the lawyers involved, CAS, myself and Dave were called into a meeting. The S.C.A.N. assessment had been stopped by Dave and we learned that extremely threatening calls had been left on S.C.A.N. voice mail by Dave. The S.C.A.N. team wasn't sure they could continue. They said that they had to try and put his threats aside if they were to continue and they weren't sure they could, due to the severity of the threats. They did continue the investigation. Dave then forbid one of the workers to interview his mother. A pathological assessment was not done on him. The S.C.A.N. at one point told me that Dave was more afraid of me than I was of him. One of their recommendations was for me to go to counselling for assertiveness training so I could better deal with Dave on a one-to-one basis.

Jason disclosed to the supervisor that his daddy put his finger in Jason's bum and he demonstrated on a teddy bear. This was explained away when they said that in their opinion Jason had obsessed about lightning and he was probably obsessing about this too. The report came back inconclusive, which ties my hands legally. The S.C.A.N. recommended bi-monthly meetings with Jason after the investigation was finished. Then the supervisor quit. I was recently informed that there will be no follow-up visits for Jason, because the second worker had just quit. Currently Dave has been given unsupervised access, Friday to Sunday for two consecutive weekends and then the Sunday of

the following weekend, two weeks in the summer, Christmas, etc...I understand that he is now trying to sue CAS. I am facing another court date in April where he plans to sue me for his court costs. It has been five years in court and over \$20,000.00 in costs for me to date.

Jason is now 5 years old. He suffers from headaches, stomachaches and nightmares. He is not allowed to see a therapist without Dave's written consent or the consent of the courts.

Mary's Story

The climax of my experience began in 1996. I had become ill with a thyroid condition. The first physical attack by my husband occurred two weeks before I found out I was pregnant. The second, the day after the first. Immediately I started to put a separation and safety plan into action. I sent my oldest son Jake, from a previous 10 year relationship, to live with my parents almost 3,000 miles away. The separation from him was devastating but I felt it was necessary for him to be safe.

After I knew my son was safe, I called the police to see what could be done. By then two weeks had passed and I was told that because I had waited so long it could look like revenge.

I thought I had done everything the right way:

- my son was safe
- I left after the first attacks
- and I called the police

Now as I look back at the experience, the lack of help and understanding set the stage on how the law and the Family Court system deals with domestic violence.

In the weeks that followed I would have to face:

- learning I was pregnant and already 3 months along
- that the previous medications I had been taking during my first trimester could have caused birth defects and/or disabilities
- that my thyroid was cancerous and would require surgery
- that I would have to deal with Rick who had major issues with control and anger which ultimately leads to violence

So I decided to trust God where my unborn child was concerned, and to trust the Family Court system where Rick was concerned. Throughout the pregnancy I had to deal with increasing health concerns, related to my thyroid condition and pregnancy. I rarely saw Rick, and when I did he just made a bad situation worse. One time during the pregnancy he was yelling at me so loudly a concerned neighbour came out of his home across the street to see if I needed help and asked Rick what he was doing yelling at a pregnant woman. Rick verbally attacked him. The fact that Nathan was born is a miracle, to be whole and normal is a blessing.

At one point while I was pregnant I offered to go to a lawyer and have papers written up to relieve him of any responsibility, for two reasons: (1) I was extremely concerned of the type of influence that Rick would have on Nathan. (2) He was being very vocal to anyone who would listen that Nathan wasn't his. Rick's response to this was "I want a war". These four words would describe his attitude towards me from that point on. As time went on I was becoming very concerned about going to court. I had heard and seen horrors from friends who had taken this course of action. So I tried to come up with some out of court agreement that would be satisfactory to both of us, and most importantly, what would be best for Nathan. This was to no avail. In Rick's words, no one was going to tell him what to do. After Nathan was born things started to intensify with Rick. He threatened to make Jake, who is now 10 years old, an orphan. He threatened to beat me in many different ways. Nathan



was two weeks old and a month premature at the time. Unfortunately I had to serve him the custody papers the next day. When I tried to set this up Rick threatened to kill me. Without hesitation I called the police. When the police officer arrived he asked me, before he took my statement, if I was pressing charges so it would help me in court. When I explained to him that one had nothing to do with the other he proceeded to take my statement.

Rick was charged with threatening death, threatening bodily harm and threatening a minor. I was shocked to find out that because Rick didn't directly threaten Nathan he still could have access. Rick was ordered to stay away from Jake and myself for one year and one year probation.

When we made our first appearance in court all of this information was available to the court. Rick asked for supervised visits and agreed to give me sole custody. By the time our next court date came, Rick had been asked to leave the supervised access program for losing his temper and disrupting the visitations that were being held that day. Rick claimed he had been misled by the duty counsel, explaining why he agreed to give me sole custody. He refused to talk to the duty council anymore and spoke on his own behalf, so the court got to see what he was really like up close and personal. I was strongly encouraged to allow Rick's mother to do the access visits, after he was asked to leave the access program, on a three-month trial basis so it wouldn't seem like I was being unreasonable. My frustration was increasing because he was not being made accountable and the courts were bending to accommodate him. I was told that I shouldn't let my emotions show because it wouldn't look good in court.

Meanwhile, Jake was witnessing my stress and helplessness to protect his baby brother. He took on the protector role in the family. He went as far as insisting he go on an access visit so he could be sure Nathan was safe. Jake was also witnessing the financial strains that were increasing in our family. Thankfully I received legal aid, but still this did not cover costs for supervised access or transportation. I was also getting no child support because he lied on several occasions about his income and didn't comply with the court orders to bring in his financial records. This went on for 8-9 months.

The judge at one point told Rick that he was domineering, arrogant and resorted to intimidation tactics in order to get his own way and these were not qualities he should pass on to Nathan. The judge strongly suggested Rick get help. The judge stated that he understood why I didn't want anything to do with Rick and if he were me he wouldn't want anything to do with Rick either. Rick even came out and told the judge that if he didn't get his own way he would not obey the judge's court orders. Even the judge repeated what Rick had said to make sure he had heard Rick correctly. Rick was fined with contempt of court but still has access to Nathan.

What was it going to take for the courts to tell Rick that until he gets help with his attitude, his anger, that he was not productive in Nathan's life and was a threat to his well being? I ask you, where is the best interest of the child taken into consideration? I discovered I was dealing with a conflict of interest.

It is difficult enough to get out of an abusive relationship, then the very system that is set up to protect you and your children fails you. This makes the journey towards building a safe and healthy environment for your family very difficult. Today we live in a society where women and children are being killed. This is the time for action because we all know that children do as they are taught.

The 4th of March was our final day in court. Rick was awarded unsupervised visits twice a week with limited restrictions. I received final sole custody and am back to having to deal with Rick on my own. I finally started to receive child support in the last four months. I received the word in December that my cancer is gone after a year of radiation treatments. I just need to go for checkups for the next five years before I am truly off the hook. My children and I are getting on with our lives the best we can and we have chosen not to live our lives as victims. Jake is now 11 and Nathan is 19 months and just taking his first steps. They say wisdom is a gift to the old - my grandmother would say just because someone can make a baby, doesn't mean they will make a good parent.

Thank you for listening.



Paula's Story

My name is Paula, and I'm very honoured to be participating in the focus groups. For my story to be heard after all this time will be a healing in itself. I met and married Richard after 9 months, in 1973. He was 21 and I was 19 years of age. After our first son was born he punched me in the face where I fell off the sidewalk and into the ditch where he left me. His abuse increased and started being directed also at our now three children -severe disciplining - throwing them up against the wall and holding them at eye level - punching my son in the face- holding me down - degrading - swearing - lies about finances and loans he took out - kicking the pets for no reason. I asked him to leave in 1991 for the second time, at the encouragement of a girlfriend who witnessed his abuse and was afraid for my life and the safety of the children. She said to me, "You've come to think this is the normal". It had happened so gradually. He'd installed such fear in me and it gave him power. We tried counselling. He bragged to a friend about not paying attention or listening, he was just going to make me happy. We tried the marriage again but it just got worse. The more he told me I was worthless and couldn't make decisions the more I seemed to believe it. I thought I was dying, more spiritually and emotionally than physically. I started to withdraw and everything seemed to take so much energy. I asked him to leave and he did.

When we separated for the last time it was quiet and peaceful, we could breath without getting yelled at or worrying what would happen, we could sleep better. I started to get a bit of strength back and realized that it was him, not me that was the problem. My self worth and confidence? Well that was a struggle for a long time. He told a friend, "I'll give her a couple of months and she'll come begging back and it will be on my terms." **I knew I could never go back and put my kids through anything like that again.**

Finally the realization came that he had no respect for us. We were better to have peace and no fear than to have an abusive father around, and we deserved more. The harassment began full force by my ex when I started dating 3 to 4 months after the separation. In various conversations with people he'd say, "I'll destroy her financially. She'll be lucky to be alive. I'll slowly drive her into the ground, not giving her money. I'll make her life miserable. I'll take the kids away because that would do her in. She'll never see any money, I'll hide it in another country and even go bankrupt if I have to. I've met people in jail and could have her knocked off anytime I want." Things became very scary with threats against one of his partners, my friend, and myself. I had to be stronger, and determined to fight for my kids and my sanity. I have never gone through so much terror and hell from Sept. '95, when he left, until the day he killed himself in April '97. I had been married 22 years, and had known him 25.

I can now see some of the early signs like his jealousy, his uncontrollable anger, no coping abilities to deal with stressful situations, constantly getting caught in lies with no remorse. I can also see where I fed into it. I made excuses for him - "It's his work, it's stressing him out." or " They say you hurt the one you love." I believed the promises of "It would be better when he changed jobs." or, "If only I would be more understanding, offer more sex, keep the kids quiet." I never told anyone what I was going through. I didn't want my family and friends to hate him. They never knew. I should have protected my children better by leaving, but would they be okay without a father? You think he'll change if you just love him a little more. I got so I could block it out and forget it ever happened, because if I didn't, how could I go on. Until the next time!

I lost 25 lbs. I looked 20 years older. I lost my self-confidence, my self worth, my sanity, my laughter, my sense of fun and adventure. It affected my work, always worried how my kids were, were they safe, were they happy. The children became withdrawn, never knowing what to expect, fearing reprisal on them or even afraid for their mother's life, not knowing who to believe, their mother, or their father who made it sound convincing.

My daughter wrote in a school journal, "I might run away because of my dad, because he throws me against the wall some times and he hits me so I might run away and I'm not having a good life." She was about 6 years old. He had threatened them into not telling me things.

My oldest son withdrew, socially and emotionally, it was the beginning of many problems at school. In high school he lost a whole year. He was constantly getting into trouble with the law, and taking drugs. I see some of the signs in my son. Has he



become like his father? What if I'd only left earlier? My daughter became ill. Her father had told her that he would kill himself on Christmas day, to never see her grow up. He then returned the Christmas gift she'd given to him. Her illness became worse, sleeping, with no interest in friends, at times she could hardly walk. School or life for that matter, was no longer important. She had wanted to die. The fear became paralyzing.

Threats like: "I'd like to kill you, watch your back. If I can't have you no one will. If I leave this world I'll be taking some one with me." Mine and the children's friends were afraid to come over in case he had retaliation on them. My adrenaline was constantly in over drive. Our social life was becoming nil. We were increasingly isolated. The nightmares. It was all I could do to stay above water. I had to do it for my children.

When he died I really didn't know what to do. There were no panic situations, nothing to deal with. I could not believe he had engaged so much of my energy and time.

My ex was a time bomb. There were 14 counts laid in Scarborough and many more charges laid here in Whitby. Failure to comply recognizances, mischief, dangerous weapons, assault with a weapon, and criminal harassment were a few. He was finally caught and jailed for two months, one of which was spent at the Queen St. Mental Health Centre in Toronto, to do an assessment on his mental ability to stand trial. This is the diagnosis the psychiatrist gave him - he had a personality disorder with narcissistic and antisocial features. This essentially means that such people are self-centered, manipulative and prone to criminal activities. They tend to blame others for their difficulties and shirk responsibility. They are in repeated conflict with the law. The more intelligent ones seem to evade the law successfully. This was what she told me. I don't think anyone could fight that on their own. In an anger management program, he'd bragged about the things he was doing to me. I had to be persistent and keep pressing charges, trying to make the police listen.

Some of the police were great but court orders weren't followed up on. I finally went to the Chief of Police and said, "I have rights too as a human being and I should not have to live like this." It seemed then at least I was listened to.

Most of my time and energy went to focus on surviving and protecting my family, working to keep an income, and dealing with anything my ex decided to throw my way. It is so draining. Not a lot of time for your children, to make sure they are coping, getting hugs and attention from their mother. It tore me apart because this is when my kids needed me the most.

After he had taken his life, the psychiatrist told me I was lucky. She felt he was a dangerous man with a lot of anger. His diagnosis would have only gotten worse with his age. The abuse and harassment never stopped until the day he died, and I don't really believe it would have if he'd lived and to some extent still continues to this day.

The first time I entered the legal system was in May of '95 when I tried to have him removed from the home. He'd been in a rage since coming home that day. He dumped the pail of water I'd been using, all over the floor. He turned on pornographic films and when I complained about the children seeing them, he sent them to bed. It was only 7:00 p.m. He played his stereo at top volume for over 5 hours. The kids were crying and begging me to get him to stop, but when I tried to talk to him, he would pour his beer on the carpet, or urinate on the floor in front of me and swear and curse me. He'd come up to me, fists clenched like he wanted to hit me, but I'd stand still and just try to keep the fear out of my eyes. He ripped leaf by leaf off my plants, then threw them out the door. Finally, by midnight I couldn't take anymore. One child had a fever and another I later found in the closet. We were all emotionally drained and scared. I called the police.

Two officers came and when they entered, my ex told them they had no right to be in his home. He wanted their badge numbers. He said there's been no physical abuse only psychological. The officer asked him to repeat it but he was smart enough not to. They told me there was nothing they could do. I had to pick up three children in the middle of the night and seek safety and shelter at friends in Bowmanville.

He finally left, a legal separation drawn. I had sole custody of the children. He agreed to generous access. I realized after that he needed to have control over me, without the responsibility or care for the children. The assets weren't divided equally



and he threatened to keep it in the courts if I didn't settle. I settled. He didn't stick to it and there was no one to enforce it. Back to the courts, more enormous fees I couldn't afford. The money I needed to support my kids I was having to use to pay lawyers.

A little mistake by a lawyer in my separation agreement has cost me the last 2 years and about \$35,000.00 fighting with my ex brother-in-law. Still more lawyer fees. The first time I charged him criminally he got probation and bragged how he got away with it.

I charged further times for harassment and seldom felt like I was taken seriously. He scratched cars, caused flat tires, put Drano in gas tanks. He followed me, called at all hours, one 24-hour period having 19 calls. I was told by police I had to prove it was him before we could get a court order for the phone records. One night he called and I said I would just stay on the line until he wanted to talk. I put the phone down gently on the cupboard. I dashed out the door into my car and down Brock St. where he had been known to call from the phone booths. I desperately thought if I could catch him in a booth someone would listen to me.

He'd break windows. We were told we couldn't just identify the car but had to identify the driver as well. I finally hired a private investigator to help. I even sat out in a car one night in the freezing cold for 4 hours in January so I could honestly say I had seen him do it. I was desperate. I'd lay charges, he'd get probation with restrictions. I called when I found him breaking the probation. If a warrant would go out, it would be weeks before he was arrested. It was very difficult and disheartening learning about some of the laws and my feelings were there are more rights for the accused than for the victim.

I'd never had to rely on the law until about 4 years ago and I really didn't feel it was there to protect me or my kids. I always believed that justice would prevail. What a laugh, it's more like who gets the better lawyer, not what's right or wrong. If I sound angry maybe I still am because I wonder if anyone really had to die? What if he'd been made responsible right from the first incident and sentenced the first time, giving a clear message? What if when it was recommended to get psychological help, that it was followed up on? What if it had been followed up when he broke probation so many times? What if the F.A.C. license, a gun license that he was told not to possess by court order, had been confiscated. Would he have managed to get that gun that killed him or could have killed myself or even others? What if he lived? Would I have ever had peace or justice done? Would my children and I have ever been safe or healing at this time?

There are some great officers out there, and I met lots. I met caring, knowledgeable, and truly helpful people. They all helped me survive, be strong and deal with what was happening in my life and in my children's life. However, there were those who neglected to understand, have compassion, or just wouldn't listen to the seriousness of it, and closed doors. I wish there were better laws to protect women and children who are being abused and harassed. We can't do it on our own.

He called the night before he died, suicidal and wanting me to meet with him. I almost did. He sounded in such turmoil and emotional pain. I tried to help and talked for almost 2 hours, but when I refused to tell him I was going back to him his anger returned. I was afraid for him and me. I called the police and they tried to find him. He was found the morning of April 10, 1997 dead by gunshot to the head. He had a gun in his car when he had called. What if I'd went? The next morning at approximately 8:30 am, I was sitting at the kitchen table with my sister and good friend, making arrangements. The phone rang and I answered only to have no response from the other end after I had said several hellos. My first gut feeling was it was him. The blood rushed from my head as FEAR went through my body and mind, thinking 'he's not really dead' 'oh, my god, what if it really wasn't him all this time', 'oh my god, its not really over', and I sank to the floor. We later found out it was a friend who had a bad connection.

Now, after two years, I can say we are starting to heal and seem like a normal household. I don't tense when the phone rings, or at the sight of a similar car. I don't get the knot in my stomach or feel sick before I go home, wondering what I'll have to deal with - the flashbacks are fading. I know my children are as safe as can be and won't be kidnapped from school or whisked out of the country, or worse he'd kill them to get at me. I can go to work and not worry he may be waiting for me some night or find my tires slashed. My daughter has finally settled and has a good report on her illness. Even hope of



remission. The oldest straightened out and is off to college. He has two part-time jobs. The middle one is doing well at school and working also. We are at peace with our surroundings at last.

There's been some counselling but who can tell the long-term effects. My children are not so withdrawn, they have friends who like to come over and whose parents don't have to fear for their child. One son is on his own since I've made it quite clear there will be no tolerance of any kind of abuse. I've gotten stronger. He's welcome back when he seeks help. He has to want to do it. We still have a loving relationship with boundaries. We laugh and play around again. I'm finding out who I am. I try to help build their self-esteem and encourage taking responsibility for their actions. I hug them every day and say " I love you" and thank God we survived. I have my own business, which I love and I work part time at Whitby Mental Health as a nurse. At last I feel like a whole person worthy of rights, of being safe and happy. I can have a social life and not carry a whole lot of baggage with me. I've managed to keep my children, my house and my sanity. WE WERE THE LUCKY ONES.

I really had to think hard about taking part here today. It has opened a can of worms I'd rather keep on the shelf, for even after two years it floods back memories, anger, sadness and fear. It will have been worth it, if it can touch one heart, educate one mind, help one person to understand how fear can paralyse and that we can't do it alone. WHERE AM I NOW- trying to make a difference!

Lesley's Story

My story is a long one. I left my abusive spouse on February 2, 1995. I called my father and told him that my father-in-law had physically assaulted me the night before. It had been my birthday and I had stayed out till about 9 p.m. with my two male children, 4 years and 2 1/2 years. I entered the house to find my husband, a friend and my in-laws sitting in the living room. They had been drinking and waiting for me to return. I immediately put the children to bed. I opened my gifts and then everyone but my husband left.

This is when the fighting and arguing started. It was so loud the children were able to hear. I called my in-laws, who lived next door. I told them I needed help, and they quickly came over. I told them I was worried, and afraid of my spouse. I desperately asked their help in trying to get counselling. This fighting was ongoing and regular. Then my father-in-law pushed me across the kitchen. Everyone saw. Everyone denied. My mother-in-law grabbed her spouse and decided it was best to leave before things really got out of hand. When the door opened, as my in-laws left, my spouse shoved me outside in the cold of winter with no shoes on. My mother-in-law said "Get back into the house and mend things with your husband." Scared, I did return into the house where I went to bed and did not sleep. The next morning I called my dad.

Upon hearing my story, my dad waited to talk to my spouse. Afterwards my dad said, "You have no choice, you must leave. He does not see anything wrong and things will never change." I had 20 minutes to collect the children, some clothes and toys, and I was gone from the house forever.

That day I went to the police station to lay charges against my father-in-law. The police station was under construction, so they sent me home and told me someone would call. I was staying at my sister's home. Someone did call and the response was "Sounds like your husband is the problem and not your father-in-law! Are you sure you want to press charges?" Confused and hurt, I was not sure. I had no guidance, no support. So I left it as it was.

My mom lived about 500 miles away, and when she heard, she invited us to stay with her. So, I took the long drive with my children and headed north. I at least felt somewhat safe. My focus was to get a lawyer. Lawyer #1, did not want to get things rolling as quickly as I wanted so after about 6-8 weeks I got lawyer #2. Lawyer #2 was fantastic. I got interim custody and then decided to travel to Oshawa for Easter. The ex needed access time so an order was written. Supervised access was carried out at a friend's home. This went smoothly, but the day I was to return up north all hell broke loose. I stopped at a bank where a friend worked. She had let the ex know I was stopping by. He was waiting there. He grabbed my 4 year old and ran to his truck. I went to call the police. They would not help. I decided to go to the farm. The ex's sister attacked me, and

tried to stop me from entering the house. I wanted my son, and was not stopping until I got him. I pounded on the door and they called the police. When the police arrived, they looked at the court order and said everything looks legitimate and my son was returned. My ex's response was "I just wanted a visit and the police let me have one." My son witnessed this, which was very traumatic.

In the fall of 1995, I decided to return to Oshawa. My children missed their father and during the summer they had had 2 one-week visitations. Needless to say, I had to drive halfway and did most of the transportation during the summer. I returned to Oshawa and The abuse, although indirect, continued.

Here comes lawyer #3. I did not receive child support. Lawyer #2's child support payments were connected to the family car. The ex paid car payments and I had the car. The ex found my residence in Oshawa and took the car. The car was never returned to me nor was I ever compensated. The ex received access every other weekend. It was written in a letter, not an order. During this time, my ex was abusive, controlling, changed pick up and drop off times, worked around himself and was not considerate or compromising.

During an access visit in the summer of 1996, instead of returning the children the ex asked for some extra time. I okayed but wanted the children for a theatre production that I had tickets to see. I went to pick them up and he would not let me take them. It was not convenient for him. I had to wait 1 1/2 hours. When he finally let me take them, they were upset with me. They wanted to stay. I then decided to deny access until I had an official court order granting access visits.

When you change lawyers, it takes them time to review your file. Dealing with Legal Aid takes its toll also. At this time, I had an RSP that Legal Aid wanted me to cash, so I decided if I had to spend my money I would use it to get a better lawyer. I still had no child support, no access order and no sole custody order. This was in the fall of 1996. I was now at lawyer #4.

In December 1996, I finally got a custody order, much to the disappointment of my ex. He was not in court that day. I also received an access order, very standard; every other weekend, 3 weeks in the summer. So access commenced once again, but I never received a copy of the order. In January 1997, we had a four-way settlement meeting to discuss child support. Remember, I left in February 1995, with only the family car, which the ex took in September 1995. This is now 2 years later. We signed an agreement that the ex never upheld. In other words, I still had no child support.

In July 1997, the ex took the children for summer holidays. He wanted their health cards, just in case, since he was going to a cottage. So, I gave them to him. When he returned the children, no health cards. Again, I denied access. Still no official custody order, or access order. I was told they were in the legal paper stream somewhere. Since, I did not possess these papers, the police couldn't help if the ex decided not to return the children to me. I believe had the ex known he had the power to keep them, he would have as pay-back for non access in July '96 - Dec. '96. Remember he is abusive and controlling. My lawyer #4 decided to quit practicing because of health reasons. This was in the fall of 1998, and the advice given me was to go to Legal Aid and get a new lawyer, #5. Just at this point the ex got a new lawyer and we had a court date. I was unaware and had no representation. The ex got an order for access visits and I had to pay court costs. Lawyer #5 found out about 1/2 hour before court and could not attend. Meanwhile, my ex had been seeing the children on an ongoing basis regular every other weekend on advice from lawyer #5. Lawyer #5 was extremely abusive to me and we were in a continuous battle. I always left the office crying.

I was in constant conflict with lawyer #5, so I wrote to Legal Aid, and they denied a change of solicitor. A couple of months later, I wrote Legal Aid again, and this time they granted me a new lawyer's certificate.

I tried to find another lawyer. The ex has seen some --conflict of interest. I worked with The Denise House but to no avail. Lawyer #6 did not understand issues of abuse but was the only lawyer who would take Legal Aid in Provincial Court and I had a history of being in the system for 4 years. There must have been a problem with me as I had had so many lawyers. It could not have possibly been the lawyers!!



Finally in January 1999, I received the order for sole custody and the access order. It took 2 years to get this document. In the summer of 1999, I went to court and my lawyer's advice was to take whatever child support the ex offered. I had wanted representation. I had wanted my story told. I had wanted justice. I had to settle for whatever the ex was willing to give me. My patience for 4 1/2 years went unnoticed. I was not compensated, and no one cared. The only thing that was reinforced many times by both lawyers #5 & #6 was that I could no longer deny access. Otherwise my children would be taken from me and given to my ex, no questions asked. My thoughts on this are that, granted, I did deny access, but if the positions had been reversed I would have been in court within days. The first time it took him 6 months and the second time over a year. I do not believe the denying of access hurt him a great deal.

I have never been in front of a judge. I have never received my half of 8 1/2 years of marriage. I have never gotten back my personal belongings. I receive barely enough money to feed my children every month. I've had to start over with nothing.

In September 1999, I filed for a divorce. Guess what, the abuser still wanted a battle. I have initiated the divorce, but it sits in limbo because the ex wants custody. I could eventually get a divorce but I do not want to fight in court again, at the expense of my sanity and my well being. I do not want the mental torture. Will he ever get on with his life?

In January 2000, the new millennium, it still hadn't ended. The ex was supposed to return the children on Saturday, January 8, 2000 at 7:00 p.m. I called at 7:45 p.m. and the ex told me he was not returning them. I threatened to call the police. He still did not plan to return them. I then called the police who met me at the farm at 9:00 p.m. The police told me that they could not remove the children if the ex did not wish to let them go. They need an order within 24 hours that states the children must be removed. But the police did go into the house and talk to him. The ex decided to let the children go on advice from the police. But the children started to cry. At this point, the officer returned to me where I was waiting in the car outside. The officer said that the children started to cry, and asked if they really had to leave. I felt guilty, and the officer asked again if it was necessary. I said "yes". Did the police not realize that if it was not necessary, I would not have called in the first place? I hate dealing with the system? the police, the courts, the lawyers. No one ever seems to get it.

I am surviving, and my children are now 9 1/2 and 8 years old. They are waiting for the day they can live with their abusive father. He has promised so much. He says, "Come live with me, it's only fair, equal time with both parents. You don't have to go to school, it's all fun and games." He has the money, the better toys, bikes, Play Station, the outdoor life, animals, farm, etc. The ex has no education and is a fairly successful dairy farmer. Mom has been a struggling student for the past 4 years. We live in a small two bedroom apartment. We manage, but have few luxuries. Hopefully, one day soon I will have a good job that will provide the things that will keep my children wanting to stay with me.

Devon's Story

In the summer of 1988 I was introduced to Calton by his sister. I had been single for over four years after the accidental death of my first husband. When I met Calton I thought he was a quiet, even shy, charming man. I knew that he was relatively new to Canada and saw in him a hard working person who had put himself through university to obtain a better job here. Although I was the one who asked him if he would like to go to a movie sometime, our relationship developed very quickly after our first date as he seemed very intense about pursuing me. It was what I've heard called a "whirlwind courtship". He would call frequently at work to ask me how my day was going. He would meet me after work every night so we could take the train home together. We often met for lunch during the week, and on weekends he would call early in the morning to tell me what plans he had for our days. Once or twice he took me shopping to buy me some clothes. I felt like a pampered woman. I couldn't believe how attentive he was to every little detail of my life. What I didn't know is that he was trying to possess me, and these things were actually consuming all my attention and isolating me from everything and everyone else. I had no idea that it would end once he had achieved his goal of making me his possession through marriage.

We became sexually active at his insistence, although at the time I didn't think of it as being anything other than another



indication of how much he wanted me. I knew that it was contrary to my religious beliefs to have pre-marital sex but I was so enamoured by the whole relationship that I acquiesced rather easily to his seemingly gentle pressure. Birth control was, for him, my responsibility and not something a man like him would concern himself about. He certainly didn't want to use a condom, and he didn't like the thought of me using a diaphragm because he said those things weren't natural. I was unable to use oral contraceptives because of my thyroid condition so, not surprisingly as a result of not using any birth control, I became pregnant by the time we had been together for about five months. When I told him his response was that "destiny had brought us together" and he suggested that we get married as quickly as possible. I really believed that my life was unfolding just as it should, just as I wanted it to happen. I didn't know how radically it would change, almost overnight, into a marriage in which I would be abused psychologically, sexually, emotionally, financially, and physically.

I found out four days after our wedding, while on honeymoon in his native Jamaica. Calton got involved in an argument with a local fish merchant (who happened to be a woman) about which I became very embarrassed. I went to sit in the car to wait and when Calton returned I could tell he was furious. I asked him what had happened, how had things got so out of control over the price of a fish. He turned to me and said "I knew that this f---ing marriage was a mistake, and you're going to pay for it". From that moment on it was as if I had become his enemy and he was going to let me know how much he hated me.

Vanessa, my daughter, was born in the following May. Calton didn't want to come to the hospital for her birth because he told me he was afraid that I "may lose control" during the delivery and he wouldn't be able to deal with it. He had vacillated back and forth about whether or not he would be there so that I really didn't know what was going to happen right up until the moment I went into the hospital. It was a difficult labour with Vanessa, and I recall that at one point during the night Calton decided to go home to get some sleep, leaving me by myself alone and scared. It was not the loving, happy time I had dreamed it would be but I was ecstatic when she was born anyway.

From then on I remained at home to be a full-time mom to Vanessa I worked a part time job for the first few months, then took in full time day care children to help out with the finances. Calton accused me of "freeloading" and "having an extended holiday" and "living off [his] back" in spite of my efforts. He kept track of every penny I spent on his computer and would yell at me for how badly off we were financially. Meanwhile, he was charging everything to the credit cards so that there was always a huge balance to be paid. I found myself scrimping together money to buy groceries, learning to bake bread to save money, making gifts for people rather than buying them - all skills I'm glad I learned, but not under those circumstances. I'm sure people thought I was just cheap. He told me to cash in all of my investments, about \$12,000, to go to school since he "wasn't going to pay for it". When I did eventually return to university to finish my degree he made it extremely difficult to attend classes by refusing to come home from work on time to look after the children. He would leave the house on the weekends so that I wouldn't have any time to study or finish assignments.

After just a year of living with Calton I was convinced that there was something decidedly abnormal about him, and our marriage. He had no friends, and would not associate with anybody except his mother and sister, and I noticed that he seemed to treat them with a veiled contempt when speaking to them. He had effectively isolated me from my friends and, more significantly, my family. He said things that were frightening to me like that he wished my "parents would die", probably because he knew that they were aware of what kind of relationship I was living in. They had encountered it directly one evening when he tried to back the car down their driveway while I was in its path while trying to get Vanessa out of the car seat. He was angry that time about me having pictures taken for a church directory without him (after he had been deliberately late for our appointment). He had driven wildly on the way back to my parents' home where we had been invited to have supper and had steered the car directly toward a telephone pole where it would have hit my side of the car. He swerved to avoid it just seconds before we hit it. I was badly scared and wanted to get myself and Vanessa out of the car rather than allow him to drive us home. After that incident Calton would take the car to work every morning (leaving it parked at the train station) so that it wasn't available for me to go and visit my parents. He told me not to use the telephone to call "those people" and reminded me that he didn't want them in his house. I had to go behind his back to get the car from the train station where it was parked so I could drive out to my parents' home. While I was there I felt normal again and would often gain a clearer perspective, which strengthened me. He was never happy about it when I would meet him at



the train station but the silent treatment I received was always preferable to an interrogation. He told me once that he didn't care if I went to my parents' but that I wasn't to take the children there. He said the he didn't want the children "exposed" to my family.

I remember one night after a very bad argument in which I became very afraid I left the house. I returned home to an empty, dark house. Not understanding what was happening I called out to Calton, who did not answer. After about two hours I went to bed. Then I heard the doorbell and someone knocking on the door, loudly. I went downstairs to find Calton standing outside, dressed like he was going on an Arctic expedition wearing a heavy coat and hat pulled down around his ears. He was obviously very cold because it had been a cold evening. He said nothing. The next day while I was outside I discovered a metal pole, about four feet long in a bush next to our driveway. I knew that I had placed it in our shed earlier that fall so I couldn't figure out why it was there. It only occurred to me later that he had been hanging out in the bush intending to use the pole on anybody who had come back to the house with me. I'm sure he expected someone to try to intervene eventually and was prepared to harm them if they tried. Thankfully, I hadn't come home with anyone else. It seemed he was always accusing me of doing something to him, even when I made the slightest mistake, he would insist that I had done it purposely. I realized that I was spending a tremendous amount of energy trying to avoid any misstep that would evoke another tirade of accusations and condemnation. It was almost a relief when he would give me the silent treatment for three or four days at a time, even though I ached emotionally. I tried to talk to him about some of our problems during those "honeymoon" times of the abuse cycle and suggested that there wasn't anything we wouldn't be able to work out if we tried. I tried to remind him that we hadn't been together for very long, it had been less than two years that had been full of some major life changes, and I suggested marriage counselling. He dismissed the possibility. The last time I asked him about it his response was "we don't have any problems, you're the problem". After that I didn't mention it again.

Throughout all this time Calton would occasionally threaten to leave me and take the baby with him, but I would plead with him not to because I wanted our marriage to work out, somehow. On other occasions he would get really angry and turn very white, then grab me by the collar and squeeze while he yelled in my face. A lot of the time he ignored both Vanessa and myself, spending most of his time at work in spite of my pleas that he come home and be with us. When he got home he would get his supper off the stove, then go downstairs to the computer where he would remain until long after I had gone to bed. I tried to spend time with him down there but he would just ignore me. Then, he would come into the bedroom and wake me up to have sex. He would never kiss me because he said that I would "contaminate" him. He always, always approached me from behind to have sex after we were married and would climb on my back like an animal. He would cover my mouth with his hand so I couldn't make any sound and often repeated "you're disgusting" to me while he did what he did to me.

Mark, my baby boy, was born in the summer of 1991. He was the little boy I prayed for not only because I wanted a son, but because I thought that it would please Calton if I had a boy. When he was born his father accused me of sleeping around because Mark had blond hair, and Calton had dark hair. It seemed like not even giving Calton a son was good enough. Mark became very ill with a respiratory virus after his first Christmas and required hospitalization. I spent four days and nights there with him because he was still nursing on demand. On the day I called Calton to tell him that I had to take Mark to the hospital he refused to come home from work. I called my parents to ask them to please come and look after Vanessa so I could go to the hospital. When Calton showed up at the hospital later he informed me that he had thrown my parents out of the house because he didn't want them there. He had brought his own mother to look after Vanessa. Three days later, when I came home from the hospital with Mark I confronted Calton about what he had done to my parents. After a bitter argument he told me that he didn't care what I said, he wasn't interested in being married to me any more. That was the end for me. I agreed that it was probably the best thing, and told him I expected him to pack his bags and leave since he had threatened to do it so often. He threatened me then that he would see to it that I "would never have the children". I resolved not to take any more of his nonsense and began focussing on the children and myself. For the next three months there was virtually no communication between he and I until the evening I offered to babysit my cousin's two children, in March of 1992.

Calton had been insistent that he didn't want anybody in the house but I had reminded him that he was supposed to be

leaving. My cousin arrived while Calton was still at work. We had a nice supper, talked and spent the evening together. Everyone went to bed around 11 p.m., Calton had still not arrived home. He must have arrived sometime around midnight because I remember looking at the clock at some point during the assault and noticed that it was after twelve. He came into our bedroom and switched on the light. I woke up and turned over. He grabbed me by the hair and began shaking me violently, spitting in my face and swearing. I answered his questions about why the children were sleeping in different beds just so he would let go, and then I told him he couldn't treat me like that. He grabbed me by the throat and began strangling me with my nightgown. I guess it was at that point that my cousin must have heard the commotion and came upstairs and yelled at him to stop. Calton became even more angry but he let go of me and swung his hand around to smash everything on top of my dresser. When he did that he cut his hand open and when he realized he was bleeding he began to flick the blood at me and all over the bedroom. After that I only remember screaming and running downstairs to call 911. The police came and told me that if I wanted to leave the house I would have to leave the children behind since he was refusing to allow them to be removed. I left because I was terrified for my life. The next morning I went to the police station to get an escort to remove my children and my belongings and it was then that they decided that a charge of assault should have been laid during the night. They accompanied me to the house and arrested Calton. That day, as I was cleaning up the bedroom, and looking for Mark's soother, I discovered a machete under the bed. I do not know how long it had been there. I know now that he would have killed me with it and I wouldn't have known what hit me.

The crown attorney was wonderful with me. He explained everything about the criminal court proceedings and reassured me that I would be safe with a restraining order placed on Calton. What he couldn't account for was that Calton was going to begin the process of following through on his threat to take the children away from me. I received several phone calls, some from complete strangers, telling me that I had to let him have the children. The police had told me to begin the process of establishing custody and access as soon as possible and warned me not to allow the children to leave until that had been done. It took me thirteen days to find a lawyer and obtain a court order for custody. In it, I allowed for Calton to have access two weekends out of three so that I could continue to work part-time on the weekends to support them. No one said anything to me at that time about supervision for my children being even a possibility after what had happened to me.

The restraining order placed on Calton kept him away from me only when he wasn't picking up or dropping off the children, which were the only times he came around anyway so it had no power. Once he broke the door down trying to get Vanessa when I had told him that she had bronchitis and the doctor had ordered her to remain inside. I called the police and when they came they told me that he wanted to see her. I asked them about the door being broken, and told them that there was a restraining order against him because of the assault, but they just told me that he admitted he had a problem with anger. I remember being told to get the door fixed and give him the bill, but that the children had to go with him because it was his access time. Calton increasingly used his access visits to control my movement, often arriving way too early or late, without giving me any notice. If I decided to visit with my parents and notified Calton to pick the children up there he would call the police and I would receive either a visit or a call from them to ask why I wasn't at home where he could pick the children up. It seemed to me that the police were there to help him, rather than me. There were so many times when the children told me that they didn't want to go with their father and wouldn't go out to him. He would then call the police and when they arrived the police would literally remove them from my arms to carry them out to him. The awful thing is that I never received reciprocal treatment when he decided to withhold the children after an access visit, which happened at least ten times. I was told every time that there was nothing they could do and I would have to see a lawyer as soon as possible.

The process of settling custody and access issues has been a long and tortuous odyssey. Each time there was a court appearance on any matter, such as the vacations, Calton would also make a motion to increase his access. By the time it reached trial the interim order was for him to have access with the children three weekends out of four each month as well as every Wednesday afternoon from after school until 7 p.m., three weeks summer vacation, none of it supervised. There have been two assessments done on the family situation. At each one the assessor has been aware of the nature of Calton's abusive behaviour and yet did not refer to it in their report. Each time a recommendation of sole custody to me has been rendered, but always with liberal access for Calton as if what happened to me did not, nor would it, affect the children. Calton has used the legal system, and its loopholes, to harass me. Not long after the separation he stopped paying child

support for over ten months until the mortgage on the house we owned fell into arrears and the bank was threatening to force the sale of the house. I had to use up my RRSP and borrow money from my parents to pay for food and the legal bills I incurred trying to have him found in contempt of court. He was never forced to pay the back child support. The judge refused to find him in contempt stating that "no bank was going to evict a woman and children". Apparently that judge was wrong because I received a notice of eviction from the sheriff's office a few weeks later on the very same day that I had, by the grace of God, signed an agreement of purchase and sale to sell the house in trust. Since then Calton has ignored the court orders that have been made to pay child support in a timely manner, always paying late but making sure the date on the cheque is for the first of the month. Even at this writing the final order for child support is still outstanding because of his lawyer's refusal to approve the draft which has been sent to him. Until he does approve the draft the order cannot be filed with the Office of Family Responsibility. Calton has started sending cheques late, and sometimes not at all since May, 2000.

I have been asked, and asked myself, why it took so long to settle the issues. The answer is that there were so many legal "hoops" to jump through such as discoveries, assessments, the pre-trial hearing and a failed mediation attempt, all before being put on a waiting list for trial. For all of these steps there was either a long waiting list or Calton would delay the process using a variety of means. Some of the time he had representation, other times he represented himself so that there were always delays as he made the changeover. The lawyer Calton used was a specialist in family law, as well as a fathers' rights advocate, and apparently knew how far he could push the envelope before he had to comply with the rules. His lawyer simply didn't respond to correspondence for weeks at a time and then would threaten to make a motion if I didn't agree to the terms of whatever the issue was at the time. I'm certain now that the suggestion, made by his lawyer, for mediation was just to buy himself time to prepare for the trial, since Calton withdrew from the process before it was completed.

In all there were twelve motions made to the court. Over half of them were initiated by Calton while the others were initiated by me when it was necessary to protect my interests, or those of the children. For example, most summers Calton argued that I didn't deserve vacation time because I was with the children during the day. He would wait until he knew what my holiday plans were and then submit his dates to overlap with mine, thereby creating a conflict over which he would make a motion to the court to get his dates. I was in court every summer for six years over that issue. Then, after appearing in court, he would delay the processing of orders which entitled me to vacation time by refusing to approve them as to form and content. I learned that it was only after being entered on the books that a person can be found in contempt of court for failure to comply with an order and so it was for that reason that he did it.

The trial finally took place in 1999, seven years after the separation. It was one of the most anxious times of my life as I wondered how it would all turn out. It took nine days of evidence, spread over three sessions of three days each, over three months. Then there was an agonizing waiting period of two months while the judge entertained written arguments and arrived at his decision. After that there was another month before he arrived at his decision regarding costs. In total, the trial was spread over six months. It was obvious that Calton's intention at trial was to defame and discredit me, any witness I called and the mediator's assessment report that had been produced. His lawyer was very aggressive toward me, often insulting me or ridiculing me while I answered questions he put to me. Everything that ever happened between Calton and I was turned around so that I appeared to be the aggressor, rather than responding to being abused. All my actions to protect and defend my children were portrayed as interference because the abuse I had suffered and wanted to protect them from was not made a relevant issue to the issue of custody and access. In fact, it was barely mentioned, except for one question my lawyer asked me about whether I had been physically abused since the separation. The judge ignored any references made by witnesses to my involvement with the children's school, Beaver and Girl Guide clubs, and my background in child psychology. He picked up every reference, no matter how obscure, to Calton taking a parenting course, or assisting the school with some computer work (not in the children's classrooms).

Calton submitted three different financial statements which all contained different versions of his financial information. However, in each one he claimed some money (over \$16,000) which had belonged to me as his own because I had endorsed a cheque which he put into his chequing account before we were married to make the downpayment on the house. The



judge ignored my evidence of the documentation of it being my money. He also ignored the evidence I had of Calton putting a downpayment on his new house with the exact amount of money he owed in back child support.

The outcome of the trial was even more horrible than the process. In the judge's reasons for making his order I was labelled as a manipulative, aggressive woman who had interfered with the relationship between the children and their father. The judge alluded to vacillating between awarding sole custody to their father and joint custody. Although taken into evidence, the report from the Official Guardian (now the Office of the Children's Lawyer) was never referred to in the judge's twelve pages of findings. In the end he settled on joint custody, while leaving the access time in place so that the children continue to spend every Wednesday evening and 3 out of 4 weekends with their father, plus extra vacation time, plus Christmas holiday time, March breaks, and additional special weekends. I really only see my children through the week on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday, during the few hours after school before bedtime. They want to spend more time at home but have been forced to go so often with him that they no longer attempt to refuse. Their voices, although purportedly heard through the mediator's report, were never referred to in the findings.

Calton was successful in diminishing everyone else's voice and making his own heard, very clearly. I often said that Calton wanted to make a precedent of this situation, and I believe he succeeded. Certainly he has been empowered by his experience of the legal process, up to and including the final judgement. Although the order is for joint custody, he has threatened me with further legal action if I fail to comply with him in settling issues regarding the children, such as holidays and dental care. Essentially my hands have been tied by the courts so that I can no longer stand up for my children without being perceived as interfering and suffering the complete loss of custody as a consequence. I no longer argue with him. I have to wait until the children are old enough to make their own decisions but whether they will is another matter. The legal process has been financially draining, which is as much a part of the ongoing abuse as anything. As of 1992 I have spent approximately \$100,000 trying to settle the issues and be able to get on with my life, but that figure will go on even higher as I face the appeal. Calton was not satisfied with the final order, in spite of getting everything he wanted, and has appealed the order, now seeking sole custody of both children, child support from me, as well as costs of the trial.

When Calton tried to run me over with the car in my parents' driveway and they confronted him and threatened to call the police he said "she's my wife". When my cousin told him to let me go as he was strangling me that night he said "she's my wife". When the judge at his criminal trial asked him what he thought he was doing by assaulting me he said "she's my wife". I know that he holds the belief that his rights are more important than anybody else's. Somehow in his perception of the world, I believe, he felt that he had some right to behave the way he did because I was his wife. He didn't say it, or if he did I don't recall it yet, but I believe he felt that I deserved it. I am not his wife any more and yet he continues to behave abusively toward me, and now toward my children.

Ever since she was little Vanessa has been afraid of her father. She has told me many times that she is "afraid when he gets mad because he turns white and starts to shake and I don't know what he will do" and Mark says that "he looks like smoke will come out of his ears". I recognize those feelings all too well. Vanessa's method of dealing with it has been to be as compliant as possible but as she has grown older she has discovered avoiding him by playing with her friends is even better. What she cannot do is stop the inevitable, she is growing up into a young woman. As she does, her father is becoming increasingly more emotionally abusive toward her. She has been disclosing more and more that "he bugs" her, and "makes her do things" that she doesn't want to do. Thankfully what she describes does not sound like she is being abused sexually, but I worry that it may yet happen to her, and her brother. For as long as they have been spending the weekends with their father they have told me that the sleeping arrangement there is a large mattress pulled down into the living room where they all three sleep together. I recall one occasion when I woke up and found Calton rubbing and squeezing my breast hard saying "mama, mama". I don't want Vanessa to wake up one night to find her father doing some of the same things to her as he did to me. The issue of him sleeping with the children was brought out in the mediator's evidence, but was not addressed in the trial, nor in the judge's findings. Again, it seemed that all evidence from my witnesses was discredited or ignored by the judge, whereas his was given preferential treatment.

Vanessa has often told me that she gets in more trouble with her father than her brother does, and that she believes that

her father hates her. Recently she described an incident of being emotionally and physically abused by her father when he became very angry over her borrowing a tent from our house to have a sleepover party with her friends there. She said that he swore at her, called her names, and smashed some of her belongings. When she returned home after that vacation period with him she asked me if I thought he would try to kill her, like he had done to me. She knows that I was in terrible danger because she told me that she heard what happened on the night of the assault and subsequently attended a program for children who have witnessed violence. Now she is.

afraid that the same violence will be directed at herself because, as she says, she's a girl. I no longer fear very much for myself, but I certainly have concerns and fears for both my children. I know that I have survived that relationship with Calton and I do not have to continue to be involved with him emotionally. Vanessa does not have that option, yet. She is almost of the age where she will be able to make her own decisions and somebody, other than me, will listen to her - but not yet. She is terrified of disclosing what is happening to her because she is afraid that her father will find out and cause her even greater harm, like he did to me. She is afraid to break away from him because she fears he will follow her.

My hands are tied by the court from saying anything to anyone for fear of "interfering". I do not want her to grow up as a victim of woman abuse and believe that is what life is like. All that is left for both she and I to do is for me to educate her about emotional abuse and provide her with opportunities that will strengthen her confidence in herself. I want to give her all the safety, happiness, love and peace I have found in my life. I know how good it is to be away from Calton's deviance and have a normal, healthy relationship with my present husband, C. I pray for the same things for my daughter because I know she deserves it. I also pray that my son will not grow up to think that his father's values are the right ones because no woman deserves it. Mark spends a great deal of time with his father and receives the lion's share of the attention, while Vanessa is ignored. He says that sometimes his father yells at him, but not as much as he does to Vanessa. He has said more than once that he thinks his father is giving him the wrong example of being a man. I wondered how he could figure that out on his own. His explanation was that he compares what he sees his father doing to what he sees his step-dad (and myself) doing at home and thinks our example is better. I try to remind him of who he is, to remember what he believes in, and that he should be there for his sister instead of being part of whatever else is going on.

I have often asked myself what I did wrong, how things could have happened the way they did and turn out so badly at the trial. I realize now that it wasn't what I did, but more of what I didn't do. What I did was believe that the legal system to serve my children's best interests as well as my own. I trusted three lawyers and thirteen judges who have received so much education to be better informed about woman abuse and its dynamics. I believed that I would be represented well and judged fairly on the principles of justice. What I didn't do was insist that the abuse I had experienced was relevant to the issues of custody and access, and how it would affect the children. By the time I had reached the trial date my lawyer didn't want to bring up the abuse issue because he said it "would open a whole can of worms" and I suppose that I was too exhausted and intimidated by the whole process to argue with him.

In my search for protection and justice for my children and myself I have encountered some good people but also many people, some in key and influential places, who have remained uninformed about woman abuse. To me this speaks about the devaluation of women and children in our culture, in spite of the best efforts of women's groups. What it still comes down to is that our legal system, particularly as related to family law, is still based on patriarchal values which consider the rights of the men to be pre-eminent. It seems that financial and property matters are of more concern than the rights and safety of women and children. I hope that through this report, and the efforts of the Custody and Access Project that some changes can be made which will have a positive effect on the outcomes of custody and access issues for other woman abuse survivors and their children. If I can be a part of making that change I will feel privileged.