

Helena's Story

She was the oldest of seven children in a devout Catholic family. He was the son of a Methodist minister. They met in high school, dated for two years, then married before he joined the Navy so they could be together.

They were married six weeks, stationed in Chicago, living in a basement apartment and she had prepared a romantic dinner. He usually came home at 4 pm, but as the evening wore on and he didn't arrive, she became increasingly worried.

"It was before cell phones and I was frantic," Helena explained. "I didn't know what to do and called the hospitals to see if there had been an accident. Finally, at 8:30 he came home and I explained how distraught I was. He punched me in the face, broke my nose and refused to take me to the ER. He cried and promised it would never happen again. But it continued."

The abuse was verbal, psychological and physical.

"There had never been a divorce in my family and I knew nothing about violence in relationships," she shared.

They were transferred to San Diego and then transferred again to Washington state where he was deployed for six months and she went home to her parents. They were transferred again to Rhode Island and the ship was out often so she had some relief.

They decided to start a family in the hope it would make things better, but suffered three miscarriages before their daughter was born. By this time, he was out of the Navy and resting for six months before looking for work.

"The baby was sick and I had her in the tub to lower the fever," Helena remembered. "He came in and told me the dryer had stopped. I explained I would take care of it when I finished with the baby. He yelled at me that he told me to never let the clothes stay in the dryer. He took the clothes out, threw them on the floor, then took the dinner that was cooking on the stove, threw it onto the clothes, pushed me to the floor and put my face in the mess before storming out of the house. I called his parents. They came over and stayed until he returned home drunk. I left with the baby and went home to my mother."

With both sets of parents now knowing the truth, he decided to go to counseling with her, but after the first visit said he wasn't crazy and wouldn't return.

"I went to our priest and he explained that the Church didn't expect me to stay in an abusive marriage," Helena said. "I tried to be a good Catholic and never get divorced. I was married five and a half years, but the Church helped me with my divorce and then annulment."

Helena got a good job in accounting at an auto manufacturing company and was able to support herself and her daughter. She became friends with a kind man at work and eventually they dated. He loved her daughter and asked if he could adopt her when they were married.

“My daughter’s father had been granted visitation but in the three years we had been divorced, he rarely used it,” Helena explained. “So, I called him and asked if he would relinquish parental rights so she could be adopted. He asked, ‘What’s in it for me?’ I told him back child support would be erased and there would be no responsibilities going forward. He simply said, ‘send me the papers.’”

Helena has been happily married to her best friend for 47 years. They have three grandchildren and seven great grandchildren.

She has transformed the trauma and experience of her own domestic abuse into life-changing work for others. She became a volunteer - writing grants for a shelter for abused women and ultimately became its Executive Director.

She was trained by Dr. Jacqueline C. Campbell, PhD, RN, FAAN from Johns Hopkins University, founder of The Danger Assessment to administer the tool to determine a person’s risk of severe danger, extreme danger and death. It has been widely used since 1986 by law enforcement, health care professionals and advocates to assist victims of domestic violence to seek safety and recovery. She has testified in several child abuse cases and two murder trials.

“Recovery is a lifetime exercise. The experience of domestic violence rears its ugly head when you least expect it. You learn to live with it, but something unexpected can trigger it. We work a lifetime to recover. By helping others, it’s a gift to me in my own recovery.”

Helena has also served as an Executive Director and on the boards of the State Coalitions for Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault and worked with other organizations to develop legislation and obtain funding from the state for domestic violence agencies.

“We’re far more educated now than we were when I started 40 years ago, but domestic violence continues to be a major issue. There isn’t yet the concrete understanding that this is a community issue, not just a personal one. We need to continue to educate communities to support victims and hold abusers accountable. God was using the experience I had to help others. It became my passion, my ministry, my life’s work.”

She retired at the end of last year, but her work continues.

“My relationship with Our Lord drives my work. Without God, I might not be here. My faith guides everything that I do. After I retired, I joined a prayer group and one of the members told me about Catholics for Family Peace. I work with them now so I get to do work using both my faith and my life’s work. God works in mysterious ways.”