

I am Responsible for my Life

By Anna Cruz

I am 43-year-old Latina woman. I was born here in MA and raised in Puerto Rico & for the first 17 years of my life I was sexually molested by my mother's father. That experience had a profound impact in my life. I often wonder how different my life would've been if that didn't happen.

The fact that the molestation came from my grandfather, a man who was well respected in the community really put a lot of confusion on my mind growing up. Building up the courage to expose the acts and not get the support needed from my mother and family just added to the trauma. I know understand that all the plants that sprouted from the top of my head throughout my life were rooted on those 17 years I lived next door to my abuser. All those years, I was forced to act like my relationship with him was normal, when it wasn't. Can you imagine the burden?

After my father suddenly passed away when I was about to turn 18, I was finally able to let others know and runaway far away from that place. Only to realize that the real damage was inside of me. Sexual molestation can and will damage you in so many ways. It crushes your self-esteem; it knocks down all boundaries.

I moved from house I grew up to attend college but failed to graduate due to heavy drinking. I lived an irresponsible promiscuous which led me to homelessness. As a result of that at the age of 19, I moved in with a man 11 years older than me. A former police officer who was injured while in service and was now a quadriplegic. I lived alienated from friends, family and neighbors for the next 6 years. Yes, somehow, I decided that would be better than returning home to live with my mother next door to his house.

For six years, I didn't work, I didn't study, I barely saw my family and I was prohibited from having friends or interact with neighbors. I cleaned, I cooked, I became this man's personal care attendant. Every day, I helped him managed bowel movements, I showered and dressed him. Most days, I also endured physical and psychological abuse. I vivid recall biting my nails nonstop to the point that my nails start bleeding and I couldn't sleep because of the throbbing pain. For 6 years, I settled. I somehow came to terms with living on surviving mode but here and there I came across neighbors who asked me: Are you the girl who lives at the 38th Street QQ13? Why do you stay there? Do you not have any family? You need to leave!

Ultimately, it was the next-door neighbor at the time (older religious woman, her name was Sonia) who established a friendship with me talking through our windows. (Yes, she literally called my name and checked on me whenever she would see him leaving.) She was the one who decided it was time for me to go. At the time I was numbed and traumatized that was unable to decide for myself BUT one day, he left to run errands and she yelled my name. Anna!! Anna!! How are you? How's the baby? Anna, when are you leaving? You know you must leave ... what about today? I've been praying for you. Start packing ... Today is the day. And I did. I packed some essentials and handed it to her over the fence while her granddaughter served as a lookout ... And I left and never went back. That part of my story ended in April 2003. I was 26.

After that, the abuse ended but my struggle continued. I soon had another child and once again found myself with no place to live. And that's how I ended in the US. I came here in 2004 with two babies, two bags and less than \$300. Today, I have a stable job and I own a small condo where I live with my two sons. One is 18 and the other is soon to be 17. Life has changed a lot for me. I'm thrilled to share that I no longer bite my nails and maybe 10 years ago, I realized that I am solely responsible for my life. I cannot erase my past, the hurt and the experiences I had; I can only reframe them. The triggers will always be there, the nightmares will always show up. The startle reaction is an everyday thing.

For the last 11 years, I've lived with my sons dedicating a lot of time to nurture myself (spirit included) I enjoy gardening (ferns and sunflowers are my favorite), hiking, bird watching and do-it-yourself projects. I also enjoy solo travel, there's

something I find quite fascinating about exploring new states and talking to strangers. I hope to someday be able to help other women. I believe women should support and empower each other ...