

Sylvia's Story

Without The Denise House I'd be in a mental hospital.

We were together 14 years.

We became Born Again Christians in 2008 and he went off the deep end with demons, etc.

He gave away all our money.

He was charismatic, ambitious, lots of attention when we met. (Feb); we moved in together in April; married in December. This was too fast for me but people said butterflies were normal. I realize now it was a signal that I ignored. I also broke my own rule/values about living with/sex before marriage.

The first year was great, then things went downhill. People said it was normal, that it was just the honeymoon phase ending.

We combined bank accounts. I didn't want to but our Christian faith advised it. He would buy things and not tell me.

Then he got into porn, videos and emails with women. He became furious when I confronted him. He kicked furniture, not me. His abuse was always emotional, but the fear of him grew to where I was afraid physical abuse would follow. His anger was out of control; I remember times when I felt he was close to pushing me down the stairs.

I stayed because of my wedding vows to God.

He overspent on houses and always wanted more than we could afford. We lived in some incredible houses, like model homes, until we had no money again and then moved into a Travelodge or other motel or stayed with family.

My parents died when I was young. I spent my childhood caring for them. My mother had depression. No siblings. I went to parties and cried because of how free and happy other kids were. No one knew the burden (of parental care) that I carried. My mother would tell me it was my duty, that she gave up a good job when she had me. So... lots of guilt.

All my life I imagined a fantasy marriage, I idolized it.

I lived in Montreal until I was 29. Studied at college, went into the banking industry. Considered securities, but the exams were too hard.

Then to North York to live with an aunt and uncle for 3 months. This was my happiest time. Freedom! Friends! Eventually I was asked to go take care of my grandparents but I said no.

About that time I met my ex and we moved to Grimsby. I realize now that he didn't want me to feel free or happy or have friends, that he was isolating me from the beginning.

We were both making good money but he wasted it on high end showy furniture and appliances, gadgets, things we didn't need.

Eventually we went bankrupt and though we still had the house, we had to sell every bit of furniture. So imagine, this palace with no furniture in it. It was so sad. I could hardly bear it. We had kids by then and I bought a plastic picnic table, a tiny toy one, for the kids so they'd have something to sit down on when they ate. This is one of the hardest memories for me.

For him there was always a big plan, to live grand. And every time we were worse off. Eventually we moved to his brother's house in Oshawa.

Things got worse and worse, emotionally, between us. I wasn't allowed to voice my opinion out loud so I wrote my thoughts on scraps of paper and gave them to him. He crumpled them up and threw at me without reading.

I kept thinking he'd change so I made excuses for his actions.

He called me the Spirit of Jezebel. (His motto: god is the head of Christ; Christ is the head of man; man is the head of woman) Religion was a BIG part of our situation. (He had also done heavy drugs before he met me and went Christian and it's possible his mind was affected or that he was schizophrenic. He was not diagnosed.)

I wanted birth control or my tubes tied. He wouldn't allow it.

I needed a C section for health reasons. He refused to allow it. He took my OHIP cards and threw them out, said doctors were the devil.

I went to live with his parents at one point and he showed up one night and was wild, accusing me of devil actions. His parents told him to get lost. I went to a shelter in Peterborough. His parents told him I'd gone to Montreal.

But I gave him another chance. And I got pregnant again and I didn't want to be a single mum. He promised to end his connection to his religious mentor, John S. Crable in Arizona. I'm saying his name so other people will NOT fall into this trap. I truly believed that would solve our problems.

One day my sister in law dropped by to say hello. I burst into tears because of how unexpected it was, how nice. I could never believe how nice people were... The couple next door were nice to me and to the kids. I cry when I think of it. It was so weird seeing a father being kind.

I wasn't used to it, I didn't have a lot of experience with niceness.

I used to take the kids out a lot, just to have something to do. I cleaned a lot. He wouldn't let me do much else.

When kids were sick he blamed me, and I had to beg to allow them to go to hospital.

I didn't like to argue. I was too afraid to argue.

If I ever made a friend, I wasn't allowed to have them over. Pretty soon I had no friends.

He was domineering.

We ended up living on Welfare.

I started thinking about leaving but didn't know how to do it. I didn't tell anyone about my situation or how scared I was. I was afraid to say it out loud to someone because I wasn't sure what their reaction would be. The best thing anyone could have done for me at that time would have to ask ME if I wanted to leave. I would have said yes. I would have accepted help.

When we moved to motels, Travelodge, etc., I told the kids it was an adventure. I lied to the school, told them we were in a motel because we were waiting to move into a new house. But there was no house. We had no money. The stuff we couldn't sell was in a storage unit. And even then my ex kept talking about how one day they'd have a big house. We were living in a motel with nothing and we went to open houses for million dollar properties.

It was at the Pine Ridge Motel on Hwy 2 that I hit bottom. It was the bottom of the barrel. We were living on pizza from the spaghetti place next door. I did dishes in the bathroom sink. My ex gave me \$60 one day and I spent it on food for the mini fridge and he went crazy that I spent it ALL. It didn't matter that it was on food. But I had to spend it all or he would have wasted it. One night when he was out I left the kids inside and went out behind the motel and screamed and screamed and cried and cried and cried.

The next day in the park I met a woman, Wendy, and as I'd reached my breaking point the night before, I opened up and just told Wendy my story and Wendy listened and then she told me to call shelters.

I did.

Wendy helped me pack, made the kids lunch and kept them busy colouring while I called school, and this time I didn't lie. I told them I was leaving my crazy husband. My new rule was Truth. No more lies.

That was 2014. I went to the Muslim Women's Shelter but they weren't accommodating to kids and so I kept calling around until Amanda at The Denise House said on the 16th of September a room would be free. When I arrived it felt like the Taj Mahal. Me and my three kids, we had our own room.

I left my ex a letter: *I love you. I can't live like this. We're safe.* That's all I said.

He texted me but I ignored him. I could feel myself moving forward and I liked that feeling. I still had no idea I'd been abused... that didn't sink in until I did the checklist at The Denise House.

I was so happy to be at shelter. Everyone was friendly, open and inviting. One of the first things I remember is seeing the hands painted on the wall, in the shape of a heart. And the gifts they gave my son on his birthday shortly after we arrived. My kids were happy. That was everything

In the kitchen I was overwhelmed when anyone was kind, when they said hello or put a hand on my shoulder. I cried constantly, with relief and gratitude, but also I think I was releasing so much I'd held in for so long. I cried and cried.

I had been reading the bible since I was 21 and now I couldn't because he'd twisted it so much that I couldn't hear the words without hearing his. But I continued talking to God, that never stopped.

He made me fast on a regular basis, to expel demons. No eating, and all I was allowed to drink was tea. I sneaked food in the bathroom. Just thinking of it makes me cry.

One day at The Denise House Wendy took the kids so I could have a day to myself. I remember drinking hot chocolate and thinking how luxurious it was to sit outside and drink hot chocolate. I felt a deep peace come over me. This simple thing was so nice.

How The Denise House Helped, Services, etc.

The Denise House showed me how to take care of myself again. I took time for showers, nails, pampering. It was only when I began to 'see' myself again, that I noticed my glasses were crooked. No idea for how long. I can't recall having looked in a mirror for ages, maybe years.

All of it seems like a lifetime ago. It was 4 years ago.

When I arrived at The Denise House I spoke a lot about strongholds and binding spirits. This was his language, the brainwashing.

The Denise House helped me a lot. I accepted all resources, even though I was scared.

Children's Aid Society was great.

The Denise House gave me permission to say that I was angry. It was hard to say, but I did it. I wasn't used to it. It had never been okay for me to be angry, not with my ex, and not growing up with a mother who was unbalanced so she could only say nice things, to keep things calm.

I'm crying at the memory of how it felt when The Denise House gave us toothbrushes, toys, towels and amenities. For no reason.

Family Catholic Services, you don't have to be Catholic. Counseling, but not religious.

Legal Aid is like liquid gold.

Safety Planning is important.

I used to lie down in bus shelters to hide in case he drove by.

My Community Support Worker through The Denise House, Margaret, has been a godsend. She went to court with me when I was vibrating with panic and fear from head to foot. She will offer help if no one else can.

The Denise House helped find me a place, which was so valuable. Also really helpful is the list of needs/wants I was able to fill through the donation centre.

Another important thing The Denise House did was offer advice. As when my ex wanted to meet at the storage place (because I wanted to get my stuff when I was getting ready to move into my own place). The Denise House advised against going. They suggested friends go instead (or with me). Which they did. And we got my stuff. The Denise House told me the most dangerous time is after a woman has left her ex. My ex was sending me texts, videos, music... he was sobbing on all his messages and she kept them and DH asked why, why keep them? They said *be free, delete*. And I did.

I had a few pots and pans in storage, a few toys and clothes. Nothing else. The Denise House gave me everything else. And they introduced me to co-op housing.

At Family Catholic Services I learned a lot about grounding and anxiety, especially around lots of people, and men. I was taught a technique to create a bubble around myself, to notice the sun on my face, to be present, to focus. I was taught that at court, to picture my ex as a balloon that I could pop and watch disappear and lose all power.

I was afraid to go to food bank, but Margaret took me. And once at the mall I had a debilitating anxiety attack. I called Margaret who came and helped me through it. This was just after I left The Denise House, the early days of me and the kids living on our own. Margaret continues to be someone on 'my' side.

The arrival at The Denise House was happy, a sense of safety, a huge relief. Then it hits you... the reality of everything, of what you've lived through and the question of what next.

How Life Has Changed

4 years ago I sat in the journal writing workshop at The Denise House and described my ideal life as me and my kids all having our own bedrooms, a bathroom, making pancakes and cookies in our own kitchen, to have a backyard, maybe an aquarium. Now I have all of that (except the aquarium... we got a six year old cat from the Humane Society instead, a lovely addition to our family). The kids are in a great school and go to summer camp. I love our neighbourhood, it's very convenient to everything. I used to be afraid to take buses, now I take them everywhere. (DH encouraged me, they gave me faith in myself. Now I'm not scared.)

I got my Positive Parenting certificate. I am really proud of that.

And I finally did my bankruptcy papers. We had a business at one point, and we did Amway at one point... I thought those people were my friends but they weren't. Both of those things ended in disaster.

But guess what?? I now have my OWN phone! In MY name! This was a first for me.

AND I'm so happy to say I'm getting divorced!

And I'm working to get the credentials I need to be employed again.

I've passed a police check and I'm building credit again (I bought meat in bulk for her freezer and I'm paying in instalments).

In my former life I was just existing. Now I have control over my life. It was hard work, but worth it.

My Advice to Women:

Call shelters.

Take all the help offered. Women who don't open up to help don't get the same advantages from the system.

Go out every day, even if you're scared, look for places to live, see the lawyers and doctors and other services. Take the help. Take the help. Take the help.

Take that first step. Ask yourself what's the worst thing that could happen.

Celebrate *every little success...*

The thing that amazes me the most is that I was abused and didn't know it.

The thing I'm most proud of is that I left.