

A charcoal and pastel drawing of a dark interior. On the left, a window with a grid pattern is visible, casting light into the room. The walls and floor are rendered in dark, textured charcoal. A large, abstract, colorful shape, resembling a cloud or a splash of paint, dominates the right side of the image. This shape is composed of various colors including pinks, oranges, yellows, and greys, with a soft, ethereal quality. The overall mood is somber yet hopeful, with the light from the window and the vibrant colors of the abstract shape providing a contrast to the dark surroundings.

Margaret's
story

*Those
are clouds
that are
covering the sun.*

*I remember seeing
Mum lying flat on the floor,
having been knocked out
– several times.*

Dad would stop at the pub on the way home, and then there'd be arguments that would become quite violent. Dad would call Mum names like "black bitch" because she was Maori and he was Pakeha. The shouting and yelling was always frightening, and we never stopped feeling fearful – not for ourselves, but for Mum.

My eldest sister would herd the other six of us out on to the lawn and run over to the neighbours and call the police. They'd come round, two of them, and talk my father down, and then just leave. No one intervened. It was very much 'this is private'. People didn't think it was their business, or perhaps they were afraid that if they intervened, they'd get it.

I suspect both sides of the family knew about the violence but I don't recall anyone ever coming round to support Mum. Her family was quite estranged. Her mother had died as a result of family violence. She had been regularly horsewhipped, and her husband had given her a beating when she was heavily pregnant with my mother. She had run off into the bush where she went into labour and died giving birth.

My mother and her siblings were fostered but the foster family was only doing it for the money and treated the children like slaves. My mother was raped by one of the uncles. She went out to the toilet at night and he grabbed her. Her older brother found her and cleaned her up. The response from the foster family was that it was over and done with and no one was going to talk about it again, but the uncle was not allowed back into the house. I was in my thirties when I found out that my mother had been raped as a child and I thought, "My poor mother – did anyone do anything for you except your older brother?"

Their father was away working but when he visited he beat the kids. He used to horsewhip one of the older girls and I think the trauma of that created the mental instability she suffered from, but I suspect she was also raped at the foster home.

Mum was quite a strong woman with strong opinions, and she wasn't diminished by the beatings my father gave her. She would argue back. She'd challenge Dad about his drinking and say that we couldn't afford it as a family. We thought it was the right thing to tell Mum that we'd seen Dad's car outside the pub, but we soon learnt to shut up about that.

She kicked Dad out when I was about four or five. He used to come round and visit. At one point he threatened to commit suicide and Mum said "go do it" – so that tactic didn't work. I'm not sure what led to their getting back together, but this was before the DPB and Mum only had the Child Benefit, which wasn't much.

One day during an argument Mum picked up a broomstick and hit Dad over the head. She also smashed his car windscreen, possibly during the same argument. After that the beatings stopped, but nothing else did. There was still the shouting, the yelling, the name calling.

We got thrashings from Mum. My sister and I would go to school with black welts on our legs from the jug cord. Sometimes Mum would make us go out to the hedge and choose a stick to be beaten with. If the stick was too thin or broke you got a worse hiding. We'd all get hidings until someone confessed to taking the biscuits or whatever it was. I used to wonder why Mum beat us so badly – whether it was a consequence of what happened to her as a child, or because of her relationship with Dad, or whether she just saw it as normal.



As a result of what Dad used to do to Mum, I made a conscious decision before I was even a teenager that I was never going to let any guy hit me. But what happened to my elder sister had a greater impact on me, although I didn't make the link 'til much later.

My sister had a different father. I recall several times, when she was about twelve and I was about seven, waking up in the middle of the night and hearing noises coming from the kitchen. One time I heard her pleading with Dad not to touch her. I knocked on the door and opened it and saw my sister standing with her back against the kitchen bench with her hands crossed against her chest as if she was protecting herself. Dad was standing over her. I think he was coaxing her to let him touch her. Of course, this happened when Mum wasn't in the house.

On one occasion, my sister almost promised Dad that she'd let him do it next time if he didn't do it this time. Then she told Mum that Dad had been trying to touch her breasts, and Mum asked me what I knew. After that I was afraid of being in the same room as Dad, but Mum said, "It's okay. Your Dad would never do that to you because you are his daughter."

That aversion to Dad dissipated, but I had a deep distrust of men. I thought the only reason they'd go out with you was because they wanted to have sex with you. I was about 21 when I was first asked out on a date. I said yes, and then a day later I panicked and made an excuse.

I went to Britain in my early twenties. There were more invitations and again it was panic stations – "yes ... no!"

*I was also aware that if
I heard little children squealing,
I immediately imagined
that someone was doing
something bad to them,
maybe sexually abusing them,
even when they might have been squealing with joy.
My mind instantly leapt to
the negative.*

I used to mull over why it was that I didn't trust men and it wasn't till years later that I made the connection with what had happened to my sister.

Before I met my husband I used to think I was going to be an aunt to my nieces and nephews and never get married. I got to know him as a friend first. I think if he'd tried to come on to me with a more sexual approach I would have just run away.

He was a Muslim, from the Middle East. Before we got married he seemed like a happy go lucky person, and there was no violence or shouting or anger. I did tell him if he ever hit me, I was out of there. I don't think he took it as a threat; that's just the way it was.

There was one incident before we were married that was a clue to his later behaviour, but I didn't pick it up at the time. We were on a train and a man tried to engage me in conversation. I tried to bring my partner into it, but this guy kept cutting him out. When we got off the train my partner jumped on this man's back and started pounding him.

I was in shock at the violence he displayed, and really embarrassed. I took the message that talking to other men could result in violence. But the message I didn't pick up on at the time was that if he could do that to a complete stranger twice his size, what would he do to me if I got on the wrong side of him? In one of the first incidents I would now call abuse, he spat in my face. That was within the first year of marriage, and it, too, really shocked me.





We came back to New Zealand after we'd been married for about three years. My husband was struggling to establish himself and the anger, intimidation and aggression escalated under financial pressure and stress. Because I'd warned him about not hitting me, he'd just bang me with his body or push and shove me. He'd shout and yell at a high pitch and slam doors and bang things. But just his threatening look made me back down.

He made it clear that things had to suit him. If they didn't we'd get into arguments. And then out would come all the dirt on my family. Things I'd told him to give him a better understanding of me and where I was coming from were used against me.

We were living in Auckland and he'd opened a restaurant in Hamilton with a business partner. He'd be down there six days a week and home for one day. I dreaded those days. If the tiniest thing went wrong there was instant rage. He'd accuse me of saying things the wrong way, but if I didn't say anything in order to keep the peace I'd get into trouble for that too. I was always walking on eggshells.

I did the accounts for his business and if I got anything wrong I'd be in big trouble. Once he phoned me when I was at my job because a creditor had called about an unpaid bill. He lost it big time – screaming and swearing – and I was in tears on the phone.

One morning he was going to the fruit and vegetable auctions before heading back to Hamilton. I'd tried to wake him but by the time he got out of bed I was ready to go to work and take our daughter to child care. He demanded my help to find

something and I made a comment he didn't like – to look for it himself perhaps – and he punched me on the arm three times. I was seven months pregnant and I just became hysterical. I drove into the city to work and I was still hysterical when I got there. He hadn't physically hurt me, it was more the shock of him punching me in a fit of rage. When he came home a week later, it wasn't talked about. Years later, when I mentioned it, he said he couldn't remember the incident and he denied ever having hit me.

He used to say if I did what I was told he wouldn't get angry, and for a long time I believed that. But I finally realised that it didn't matter what I did, he'd still get angry. I did try to talk to one of my brothers but he spoke to my husband and then I got into trouble for having talked about our problems. So I learnt not to do that.

After about a year of my husband commuting to Hamilton, we moved there. I didn't want to, because I no longer loved him. I was getting angry by then and starting to shout back. I think my husband was quite shocked by that. He said "if you shout at me, I'll shout louder". When he really lost it, I'd say "well, hit me – because you know I'm going to be gone". So he was reminded that there was a line in the sand – and he'd never go there.

*But the other stuff was just as destructive –
the shouting and yelling,
the intimidation,
the looks,
and the way he would keep tabs on me.*

*Even if I'd only been out for half an hour it would be,
"Where have you been?
I've been worried about you.
Why didn't you ring?
Why did you take so long?"*

I didn't identify that stuff as family violence. I did have a sense that he was trying to control me and that I was trying to resist. But I didn't fully appreciate that the control and domination he was practising was abusive – or that it was having an effect on me.

*I had made a personal commitment
not to treat my children as I had been treated –
with hidings and fear.*

But not long after we moved to Hamilton there was an incident in which I hit my daughter. My husband and I had had a big argument. He always got what he wanted, and I was angry about it. Then my daughter, who was six, did something naughty and I over-reacted. I got a school ruler and hit her several times and left little nick marks on her arms. I knew that was completely wrong and I instantly regretted it and promised myself I was never going to do it again.

The arguments must have affected my children too – my daughter more than my son, as he was just a baby. When I think back, I don't know where she was during the arguments. There were times when we would take the argument out into the garage, particularly when it was about breaking up. We'd go "this isn't working, we need to finish it", but then we would agree to try a little bit longer. I told him that as I didn't want to sleep with him, I didn't mind if he found someone else. But he pushed for intimacy with me, and there was always an element of coercion in it after that.

In my mind only a physical beating, a good hiding, would allow me to give myself permission to leave my marriage. My religious beliefs also kept me in there. The Bible encourages us to try and be a good example if we've got an unbelieving husband. I believed that if I was a better wife and more forgiving, I might win him over. It wasn't till I left the marriage that it dawned on me that those Christian principles could only be successful in the context of a healthy relationship where both partners were applying them.



I heard that you could go to the Family Court and be sent to counselling, so I did that. The counsellor asked a lot of questions and then said, "You haven't gone through the grieving stage yet. Perhaps the grieving stage has been suspended." She didn't explain what she meant and I left thinking "what was that all about?" and didn't go back.

About a year later we agreed to separate. By then the restaurant had been sold to my husband's business partner. They had got into violent confrontations so they had to end it. After that, my husband refused to work for anyone else. One of us had to have a job, so I was working – but then I'd always worked, even when my children were very young.

We were finishing off our house so we decided to live in it, but as flatmates. My husband kept thinking there was hope, and suggesting counselling at that point. But it was too late to build on anything. I told him, "There's nothing to rejuvenate. The roots of the tree are dead."

Because much of the tension had gone by then, we got on okay. But there was one violent incident during which my husband picked up the huge glass fish tank and threatened to smash it. What sparked it off was me cleaning the fish tank. My husband had told me that I was not to clean it – even though I was the one who kept fish and loved cleaning the tank and seeing it sparkling. One day when he was out, I did clean it, and when he came home he went ballistic.

*We kicked my brand new coffee table
upside down and then he picked up
the fish tank,
full of water and fish,
and threatened to throw it
through the patio doors.*

At the time I just thought I'd done something my husband had told me not to do, but looking back on it now it is so obvious that it was a control issue.

We rented out the house and I bought another house. My husband planned to go overseas so I suggested he stay with us so he could have regular contact with the kids before he went. Two weeks turned to four months. When I suggested he move out, he just hung on. The arguments got worse. In fact, that was the worst period of all. I'm surprised none of us broke out in stress rashes.



It was a huge relief when he finally moved out and that huge ball of tension shrank. I wasn't a bit sad. It would seem that I had gone through that grieving process already. It was sink or swim after that as I rebuilt my life. When my son started school he was way behind in the things he should have been doing at five, and I realised we had been so wound up in arguments that he had been forgotten about. I felt guilty that we had failed him. Even though I was working full-time I used to go to the school once a week and help with extra classes, and soon he was up to speed.

One of my husband's reactions to the split up was to go back to his religion. He had only practiced once a year before, during Ramadan. But after we split up he started praying five times a day and going to the mosque on Fridays. I think it was his saving grace, because he found solace in it.

My intention was never to take the children away from my husband or stop them having contact with him – they spent time at his house and my house. But then he got a job offer in Auckland and he wanted to take the kids with him. I said no; I was happy to take them up there and bring them back but they were established at school and their friends were here. But he was claiming the DPB for my son, and he told me that meant he had custody of him and that I couldn't do anything about it if he took our son to Auckland. I thought if they went to Auckland, the Muslim community might hide my son and his father might take him back to his own country, because he had said that he wanted to do that; I was panicking.

Then one day he came to my house. He wanted something from inside. I said I would get it for him, but he pushed me aside and walked in. I wasn't hurt, but I thought "if you can push me aside like that, I'm quite helpless". That's when I

applied for a protection order and was advised to go for interim custody of the children and apply for court orders to stop them being taken out of the city or the country.

After that my husband would say things to the children like "your mother's taking me to court", and they would come home and accuse me of things. My initial reaction was to say, "I'm not doing that, I'm just doing this ...". But I realised he was using the kids to attack me, and decided I wasn't going to play that game, so I stopped being pulled into it.

My husband suggested that I take our daughter and he take our son. But I said, "No. Just because we've split up, we cannot split our children up. I don't care how convenient it is, they've got to stay together."

My husband's return to his religion impacted on our daughter, who was then about 11. He wanted her to wear the hijab and go to the mosque and she didn't want to. I tried to help her walk the fine line between being obedient to her Dad and also being strong. She needed to be an obedient and respectful daughter but she didn't have to wear the hijab or go to the mosque if she didn't want to.

*Sometimes
she'd be in tears
on the phone, traumatised
by his yelling and blaming.*

There were times when he had her in such an emotionally devastated state that I'd take the phone off her and say to him, "That's all! You've done enough damage now. I'm not going to let you do this to her any more." It would take her two or three days to recover. He would sulk for a couple of months and not talk to her and then re-establish contact.

When she was about 13 he was really on at her. She had a number of conversations with him, but nothing was hitting home, so I suggested she write a letter. I delivered it to him while she was staying with me and we both expected fireworks, but he didn't react immediately. He blamed me.

*Whenever she tried to stand up for herself,
he'd say "you're just like
your mother".*



He has remarried a couple of times and our daughter has often played mediator between him and his new wives. He would be talking to her about their problems, and so would his wife. She also tried to take on the role of mediating between her Dad and me. When it came to the division of matrimonial property, my ex has always wanted to have the kids involved while I haven't. We still haven't resolved the property division – or that issue. We are finally going to court because I've waited for years, trying to come to an agreement. Neither of us wanted to go to court, but he won't sell the house. He feels it's his house, even though both our names are on it.

When we split up there wasn't anyone there for me really. I didn't have family around, and I didn't have time to have friends. I was busy working, studying and raising my kids. As a couple we had had joint friends, but because you don't want to put them in a situation where they might have to take sides, we gradually lost contact with all those people.

*I had a few years of
mistrusting relationships
after the break-up.
I was borderline on mistrusting men,
but I thought that was an extreme reaction.*

Then I got pregnant with my younger daughter. I had taken in boarders and I had a relationship with one that developed to where we became intimate. I went into shock when I realised I was pregnant. So did he. He showed early in the piece that he had power and control issues and there was no way I was going to entertain someone trying to control me again, so it died a quick death.

I had a feeling of shame about being pregnant and I was tempted by the idea of having an abortion, but that's against my beliefs. I was considering adoption and then, at my mother's funeral, my big sister said, "Don't do that. If I have to, I'll look after your baby 'til you get back on your feet." Just those words of encouragement were enough to make me decide I would see it through.

When I asked for maternity leave my job was disestablished. So after I had the baby I was forced to go on a benefit. When my daughter was six months old, I started applying for every job going.

The Hamilton Abuse Intervention Programme (HAIP) was advertising for a facilitator.

*Even at the interview I was thinking
"I don't know anything
about family violence".
It wasn't till much later that the realisation came that
I'd lived in it in
my childhood and my marriage.
I just hadn't ever identified it.*

Part of the training was participating in a women's support group on domestic violence issues. I thought, "Wow! I wish I'd known all this years back." For me, it named things – what had happened to me and the effect these things had had on me. It also helped me recognise the tactics my ex-husband had used and was still using when we had contact over the kids. I learnt terms like emotional abuse, coercion, minimising, denying and blaming.

After that I could look at his behaviour more clinically. When you are in it, you know it's happening but you don't know what it is. It's like you're looking at the sky and thinking "well, the sun's not there" but you're not identifying that those are clouds that are covering the sun until someone says "did you know those are clouds?" Once you are able to say "those are clouds" you can clearly identify them and go from there.

I learnt strategies so that I could challenge my ex in a way I hadn't been able to before. There were times when I'd be talking about something I was feeling and he'd dismiss it – as if to say “that's not as important as how I feel”. But now I'd take that conversation back and say, “I'm talking about my issue, I'm not talking about your issue. I don't need you to compare how you're feeling with how I'm feeling. My feelings are important in their own right.”

I believe we have to model good behaviour. We need to help kids know what is acceptable, healthy behaviour and what's abusive, controlling, bullying behaviour – by anybody, whether it's parents, friends, family. We need to help kids know that they don't have to accept that kind of behaviour and how they can convey that in their own language in a positive, respectful way. It's not about being disrespectful to their parents, but it is about holding their ground and even challenging their parents.

Typically, when I work with women, their reaction is “why didn't they teach this stuff at school?”

*As a society we don't teach our kids
how to have relationships
– how we respond to what people say,
especially things we disagree with,
how to assert ourselves respectfully but firmly,
and understanding why
we say what we do
and do what we do.*

That's what the youth we've worked with in HAIP aren't getting from anywhere else. Many don't have anyone to talk to about what is happening in their own families except their peers – who are as ill-informed as they are. So sometimes their solutions are outside of the law. Recently, several girls beat someone up at their school. One of their friends had been raped, and no one had done anything about it. They didn't have any faith in the police or society, so their response was to mete out their own kind of justice.



*We hear that many young people
who see their mothers being
beaten repeatedly
by their father or stepfather
are just biding their time,
waiting for their chance to kill him.*

I want to get the message out that we all have an obligation and that we can all make a difference. And that starts with our own behaviour, and modelling it and practicing it with our own children.

You often hear the term ‘early intervention’. But where does early intervention start? To me, it means starting right now. It could be working with a woman who has been a victim of violence. For her that might be an ambulance at the bottom of the cliff, but if she's able to look at how she interacts with her children and can encourage them to look at their relationships – that's early intervention.

People are now challenging it when they see violence. I don't necessarily mean personally intervening. But if you know there's something going on next door, call the police. It's better to be safe than overly cautious. Drink driving campaigns have made it totally unacceptable to drink and drive. Family violence has to be treated in the same way – because it is totally unacceptable.