

This story came from the volunteers' own words during individual storytelling sessions which were part of a larger research project on IPV-related brain injury and new relationships for survivors. These stories were transcribed from a storytelling session and reflect the volunteers' natural speaking styles. They have been edited for context, clarity, and syntax by both the researcher and the volunteers. However, the stories remain a text version of oral storytelling and may flow differently when written. Please consider this when reading the text. All identifying elements have been redacted to protect anonymity. Furthermore, the volunteers were given the opportunity to re-edit, add, or remove content before the final versions were posted.

Each story is unique and varies in detail. The interviewer followed the volunteers' story until they reached a natural close, even if the narrative shifted in an unexpected direction. You may notice that some stories end abruptly; this is because we excluded conversational "pleasantries" and because these stories represent only a specific period in the volunteers' ongoing lives. The volunteers' stories are not over. As researchers, we consider it a privilege to bear witness to these subsections of their evolving experiences.

ASHA:

Asha identifies as a bisexual, South Asian/British woman in her 50s. She is married with a son and is an activist committed to creating a better future for both women and men.

Tell me about yourself:

I'm from one city and I lived in many other cities. And I now make artwork. That's what I do. As of two years ago. So, I really shifted my professional life. But now it's like that is kind of what I'm doing, but it also gives me lots of peace and joy. And what else about me? Let's see, before that, I was in the domestic violence prevention field. I worked in shelters, which is why I connected with this in terms of storytelling and sharing your story. So, this is very important to me. But I did, after being in the field for a long time and talking about it, I was done. I was like, I can't do this anymore. So that's how I got into the artwork. I needed to do something completely different that was easy. It's not easy, actually, but it's different. And it makes me happy. I've always wanted to continue to be able to tell my story, but just a few times a year. So, when this came up, I thought, this can be one of the pieces that I do. Just to stay anchored to it. When I saw your thing and I was like, that's where I experienced it. Yeah, my best friend lives there. I love it. Yeah, that's a bit about me.

Favourite Place

I would say, [place name], going there with my family. I have a son who's 17, who just moved away three weeks ago for university. So, we just happen to love going to [place name], and we love the desert and the dry heat. And we're really into baseball. He plays baseball. So, we go there for spring training. And it's yeah, very joyful, peaceful, beautiful, beautiful, dreamy place. It is really hot I don't know how they do it!

Favourite Song:

I think it's by the Cure and it's called "Pictures of You." It's kind of a slow ballad, I love slow songs, I love sad songs. Oh, yeah. It's funny, because it goes right back to my teenagehood. That was my favorite song, and I still love it. I like lot of different genres. I even love country. I like

hip, hop, and I love... It's a range. But I do like across the board, even like heavy metal, when they do a slow ballad... Give me a slow, sad song or story, and I'm there.

What made you want to take part in the storytelling session?

Yeah, I think it's kind of what I was saying a little earlier is just that I really... I find it very important to share our stories. And I do believe, and I know that it has impact. I think because there's so many commonalities within stories. But there's also a lot of differences, and both those are validating to people. So, the more you share, you can either really relate to something, or you can be like, okay, mine was completely different. However, we have these things in common. So, I think, for me, the most important is just to validate other people's stories. Specifically, this one, though. And talking about brain injury, I've never done that before. Yeah, and it has always been on my mind since I experienced the abuse. I've been very silent about it, and it's kind of been heavy, and I know that there's been impact. I've never been diagnosed, etc. I don't even know if that's even possible. I feel like I'm in a place where I'm kind of eager to know, especially as I'm getting older, and things are happening and trying to relate on what is the long-term impact of the violence? Is it also perimenopause? Is it also just stress? So, it's hard to kind of, to kind of figure out what exactly is going on. But I feel like for me it's a very untapped area, and even with all the work that I did, it's something that hadn't been talked about. And I feel like that's a huge gap that needs to be done. It's, yeah. So, I'm very thankful that you're doing this.

The Process of Leaving:

So I was with my ex, for just over two years. I was 16, and he was a year and a half older. We were very young. We lived together very quickly, soon after we met, on our own. So, it was hard. We were going to high school. And I had a job. It was a lot and so part of it was, I didn't feel like I could leave even when I wanted to. A lot of it was financial even though I was working. He was on social assistance. I couldn't be for some reason. Even though I had a huge family at the time, I was so isolated, completely isolated from everybody. And I was embarrassed and ashamed. There were so many things going on in terms of why I didn't feel like I could leave or ask for support to leave. It was intervention, is what happened. Yeah, this is kind of amazing to me. It always gives me goosebumps. Some people saw things, neighbors saw things, adults saw things. No one did anything. The people who did were a few kids in high school when I moved to a new city with my ex. And there were a few young men who knew my ex. I would be there, but I was never allowed to interact with them. And sometimes I wasn't really supposed to even say "Hi" to them. And they noticed and they were just like, "What the hell's going on?" And there were two of them separately that came up to me when we were changing classes and, I'll never forget, one of them was just like, "Hey, Asha!" I remember just looking around and then looking at him, saying, "Hi! I'm so sorry I can't talk to you." and then I kept running because if [my ex] saw me, this would be a nightmare. And then that same person after school one day kind of came up to me and just said, "Listen, I don't entirely know what's going on, but if you need anyone to talk to, I'm here." and I again, I was frantic, and I was like, "You've got to go. You got to go. I can't talk to you."

And then a third time, that same person approached me very friendly. He said, "This is not okay. You don't have to accept this. You don't have to be in this situation." No one had ever said that. And I was sort of looking at him like, "What are you talking about, what do you mean?" But he just said, "You don't deserve this. You can get out of this." I had never thought of that in the

whole relationship. And that just sat with me. And then that same person, they became part of my ex's group, and I was always there. And they all kind of were very careful and unbelievably wise, in my opinion for being 17-year-olds. So, what ended up happening is, I ended up sort of falling for one of them. I had a crush on one of them, and that same person had a crush on me. So, I was able to kind of shift that and realized I wanted to be with this person who seems so kind and respectful. But, as you can imagine, it got very messy and unsafe. But I honestly believe that for me that's what it took sadly. I needed to be with somebody, and I needed somebody else to come into my life. I don't feel like that now as an adult, I wouldn't have needed to have that relationship to leave now, but I did then. And I think it's the only thing that helped me leave was having this other person who cared for me. And for a few years, and he's amazing. I still adore him. I'll always love him. But yeah, so that's how I left was by falling in love with somebody else.

And it's interesting because we actually didn't overlap. So, I actually ended up breaking up with [ex-partner] before I ended up with [new partner]. There was so much happening, and it was everything happened quickly. As soon as I broke up with him, I was like, "I want to be with you." But the violence still happened after you know I left him. We all have these assumptions about young men that are toxic. Which exists, I understand, but you don't get to hear these stories about men who intervene. So yeah, it's very cool.

Services accessed when leaving:

Well, the services that weren't there, one was within the schools. I had one guidance counselor that was putting the pieces together, and who I think did the best that she could at the time. But I do believe services that would have been beneficial would be if we had had somebody to help us both when we were young in school, that would have been nice. The teachers, for example. We would get suspended because we would come in late all the time, and then my ex would be mouthy to the principal, and then we get suspended again. Which meant more violence for me. We would see the guidance counselor. She would give us bus tickets and stuff. She was trying to help in that way. But if there had been some type of therapist for us together. Because the reality is I wanted to be with him, as many of us do, and to have access to a therapist while we're in the situation, you know, especially with teenagers, where you can unlearn behaviors. Like for me, that is key. Even a restorative justice type of approach. Somebody within the school system would have been helpful. I did not reach out to any women's organization or shelters. I didn't actually know back then that they existed. I do believe if I had known shelters existed, that I would have used them. And once I left so... And the other, I guess, resources... The police were called a few times. But it was at a point back then when they asked you if you wanted to charge, it wasn't automatic. They both have their advantages and disadvantages, but there was no way because he was always there when they asked. And once I had left him, and another experience of violence happened, I went to the police station because I wanted something to be done.

So, I talked to a justice of peace after an incident, the next morning, actually, and this justice of peace was awful... It was one of the worst experiences ever, and I'll never forget it. He had no empathy. He was sort of mocking me, and basically was like, "Next time it happens, there has to be witnesses," even though I had physical signs [motions to neck]. That was a very maddening experience. And so, I think of that, and how it could have been different. And even if nothing had happened to my ex in terms of being charged, or that type of punishment, which is not something

I would have wanted at the time. I needed safety because he was coming after me. So that's why I went there. I was like, "I need to be safe, and he's not stopping. I've left him. I'm not with him." And then this man was just like, [shrugging motion]. It was shocking. However, I know it's also very common. Still, sadly. But those were the only types of services. We were very poor, so we did access the food bank once in a while. Just for basic needs. But it wasn't often, and it wasn't easy back then, either, to access. I do believe if I had known that more existed, I'm pretty sure that I would have used the resources. I think so.

Relationships, challenges, and views after IPV-BI:

So, I am married to a wonderful man. We've been together 20 years. Yup, so I guess what that abusive relationship taught me, is what I didn't want. Moving forward I think we talk a lot about unhealthy relationships, even when I think about high school. But we don't really talk about what is a healthy relationship in my view. And so, what does that look like? And I feel like I knew after that relationship. And that doesn't mean that I didn't enter relationships that weren't healthy again. Nothing to that extent. But as soon as I could feel that imbalance and the red flags were there, I was gone in a second. In a second. There were two relationships where we'd been dating for months, and it was the way that they each said something, the tone, and what it was about, and I looked at them and I went, "Oh. yep, I'm done!" They were shocked. I would do it differently now. But I did. I was just like, "Nope." It's over and see you.

And it felt so good. It felt empowering. But I just knew! I was like, "I know what this is, and I know where it's going to lead. I've seen it, and I'm not doing this." Which is incredible to me to come out of that relationship for two years as a teenager right, but having a good partner after those two years who was just very kind, very sweet, very loving, who had witnessed the abuse, who knew everything, was just unbelievable. Also, for him to have experienced all of that as a young man. But I got the two experiences. What love could be like and what someone who cares for you is like, someone who gets happy for you, someone who's rooting for you, and someone who encourages you. All of those things, and someone who isn't jealous. And so, it was kind of amazing to go from something that was so dark to something that had so much light.

However, I can't believe all the stuff I must have been dealing with in that relationship. I remember always wondering why he wanted to be with me. I couldn't understand that. After I left my ex, the new relationship was like, "What is this? Why does he love me so much? Why is he? I didn't trust it." Because my self-esteem was gone, confidence was gone. So, I kind of entered this relationship questioning everything and not believing that the things he said about me were true. Over time, with maturity, and through just doing a lot of work on myself I did. But also going to school having to do with domestic violence. I took education from a counseling program here, and going to university and doing women's studies, there was many things that helped shape my relationships, my personal relationships. Education was a huge piece. Very big piece... The relationships in my thirties and stuff up until my sweetheart now were really positive.

However, even though they were positive, they're incredible people, I was constantly dealing with stuff. Even to think of the sexual abuse that I did experience as well in those two years. Not surprising since we were living together and there was serious abuse. I still deal with that, you know, and just, I don't even know what that means. "Like I'm dealing with it." I just know that there's a heaviness around it. Even though I don't talk about it within the relationship, all my

partners have known that I experienced it. You know I was raped and sexually assaulted a lot. You know it's not something that I talk with my partners about all the time. It's not an ongoing conversation. But the times I think of it is obviously in the sexual aspects of the relationship but also getting physical exams. And I know they're very different. I just had to have an internal ultrasound last week. And I just cried, the entire time. And the woman is just like, "What can I do?" And I'm crying. "Are you okay?" I was like, "No, but I know this needs to get done. So, let's do it." I'm not okay. I can't handle this at all, and I know it's related. Like there's no doubt in my mind, you know that it's related is not having that control. So that is the one of the bigger areas for me. That I think, is significant, but I don't have the words for it yet, and I haven't figured that part out. And it used to be even with my husband, who I'm married to... At the beginning and up until not that long ago.

Even with my son, there were things... And I don't know if this is what you're still talking about, but in terms of relationships I don't know if this makes sense to you... But I always was very kind of like aware of my surroundings, and any slight movement, I'll jump out of my skin. A little kid who loves to hide and then pop out, or he would come and hug me from behind. There are things that were so loving that a child does innocently where I was just like, "You can't. I'm so sorry, love. You cannot put your hands around my neck. Or you can't jump out on me. That can't happen." And so those pieces stayed with me as well. It's just that unpredictability. Hypervigilance. That's right. And that happened with my partners. And all of them knew that you can't go near my neck. It just sucks. It's just something where you're just reminded in times that are actually quite loving, or someone just kind of hugs you from behind in a sweet way. With my healthy relationships that I had longer term relationships with, none of them ever wanted to make me feel like that. And same with my son as well. I tell him, "This is why." He gets teary eyed. I don't go into too much detail, even though he's older now. But enough where he would just be like, "Oh, mom, yeah. Of course I won't do that."

Well, this is a big aspect, too. The birth is a whole other conversation. But I did have, it might be called birth trauma, but it was incredibly bad. I had a birth where I did not take any drugs, which is one of my biggest regrets of my entire life. There was a point in the birth that happened, where something in my brain shifted. It reminded me... The pain was the same pain, and it reminded me of the sexual assaults. And it shifted, and I ended up with postpartum depression, for years. And I know it's directly related to the abuse. There's no doubt in mind. And so that is another area [I was looking at] the impact of. So, with my beautiful son, and the other thing is, when he came out, I was like, "Oh, I have a boy." The fear... My first thought when I held him was, "Please, please don't harm anyone." That was my first thought. And what an awful thought, it's such an awful first thought to have, but it was the reality, is "Please." Because we know how common it is. I'm going to do everything, but you still don't know because of this world. So, it's been very important to me, and my partner, who is part of the [IPV] campaign. [My son] has gone out every year with him to hand out the ribbons since he was little. And so that's kind of a part of the family were. He didn't understand back then. I told him it was about bullying, and it was about that, kind of, within relationships. So, I had to shift my language based on his age.

That part stresses me out, but it affects every relationship, it even affects your friendship. It affects my friendships depending on what people say around domestic violence or intimate partner violence. You can have a friend, and then they say something, and you're just like, "Oh,

my goodness, what are you saying, I can't believe you're saying this.” And yeah, how people talk about it and seeing other people's relationships... I'm very in tuned with a lot that's going around me... I still walk into a room, and I know where the exits are. All the spaces I know what's happening. I know where I am. Facing the door. I'm going to do all of these things. Just now it comes naturally. But it's a lot of strategy that still happens.

I have a large family, but I don't have relationships with most of them, and a lot stems from what happened.... Yeah, it's a big dysfunctional family. So, I'm just trying to maintain relationships with people who feel easier and caring and loving without drama, and that has whipped down the big family to just a few, sadly. A lot does stem from the relationship I had and who was there at that time, who intervened, and who didn't intervene. It's an intervention for me also happens afterwards. So, what happened after and who took it seriously, and who questioned it. Who continued to be like, “I can't believe you didn't leave,” and all that narrative. It affected a lot of my relationships within my family, because I still feel like the issue of intimate partner violence is not taken as seriously as it should be in my family. I don't understand.

I think the challenge in the relationship... It's just being, that feeling of just you feel like you're a little bit too much for people. There's a lot of care... Sometimes I use to sort of, I think, “Am I being like a princess right now?” I need all these things. I have to go to therapy, I have to get a massage, I have to do this, I have to do restorative yoga just to get up in the morning. Do you know what I mean? It's a lot and I understand that, but it's necessary. I do need them all. And you know I have chronic insomnia, and that's also related to the trauma. That's something I've always lived with, and I know I will always live with. But it's very impactful. Actually, it is a lot for my husband, even now to be with... It is a lot to be with me, because I mean, I guess everyone's a lot. But for me, specifically. There's so much that has happened to me, and I just know I need specific types of care. And I also need my freedom. “You want to do what you want, but you also want me to read your mind in terms of what you need.” Totally, this can't be that hard. So, it feels like... I sometimes feel like it's a lot to be with me.

I did talk with the partner I had after my abusive partner, as adults. I talked to him, and I was like, “I'm really sorry, it must have been so hard to be with me. I know I remember being jealous after because I was insecure.” I didn't trust that he actually loved or cared for me. I couldn't understand why he was with me, and then I was jealous. Just, I wasn't well! I had just come out of this trauma, and I remember talking to him about it, and he was like, “No. I didn't feel those things at all. You weren't difficult, you weren't.” He's like, “We were teenagers. That was hard, but no you weren't bad.” I was like, “I think I was a pretty bad girlfriend,” and he's like “You weren't.” Maybe this is more just coming from me. But it's true. It is how I feel in terms of my relationship now. But I can be a lot and kind of hard to figure out. And I do struggle. You know I struggle. It's a struggle, and even though I still I feel happy. I feel at peace now especially coming out of the field of prevention. I do. A huge sense of calm, but I still am impacted. And there's no way that doesn't affect your relationships. And even with my son, I'm still thinking worst-case scenarios, which I think is educational. But he knows I'm like, “Oh, you're going out to a party?” And he's like, “All right, mom, two mins.” And for two min I was like, “You're going to watch your friends. You're going to specifically watch the young women. You're going to make sure there's no, you know? Where they're getting their drinks from. You go with someone to get them the drink from the bartender. You don't bring it to them.” All these safety precautions.

“You have to be aware.” He's like, “Oh, my God!” And it's a lot, but I have to do it, and they get that, right. It's just sort of an extra part of your brain that's constant.

You can't shut it off. You just want safety, and you want safety for others. And in my case, I want the people I'm with, my partner and my son, to be aware of who they are and how they impact other people like. Come on. Yeah, oh dear, it's a lot.

I think the only thing that I found easy was recognizing the red flags, recognizing the behaviors I didn't want in my relationships very quickly. I don't know why now. But it was just as soon as I left him, I was just like, okay, I know what I need, I know what I want, I know how I want to be cared for. I find that interesting. I do wonder why. What variables were there for me, because the cycle continues usually. I was like, “Nope!” It might have been being in women's studies at university and just starting to put language and theory behind everything. Kind of gave me that fire and that confidence.

How would you describe yourself? Did IPV-BI change that?:

I would say curious. I would say I'm an observer. I'm more of a listener. I'm not the one in the room who's generally doing the talking. Which is fine. I don't want to be that person. I do like to socialize a lot and go out and dance. I love to learn. I love learning new things. I had a friend tell me this once and it really resonates— is that I generally really like or dislike something. And eventually I'm going to love the thing that I disliked, or I'm going to study it. When I don't like something, I kind of become interested in it in a weird way. What is that? I would describe myself as quite fair. And I have maybe a little bit too much empathy sometimes. I'm a very positive person, but I also am the “worst-case scenario” person, I don't know what that means. And I think I'm easy to get along with. I have a strong sense of justice, but my idea of justice is different than what people normally think it is. So, I am very into talking with people who don't have the same views as me, or beliefs as me, or thinking about things in a different way. Even with this issue. You know, for example, I do believe that people who harm others need supports and need to be cared for. And we need to also have that focus in order to prevent this from happening. And so that is a big part of who I am. It is actually trying to figure out how to do that and treat people with humanity even when they've done absolutely inhumane thing. So that's sort of where the justice for me comes in.

It's really interesting. Because obviously like at the time. I probably wouldn't have mentioned any of those things. Because I had so little confidence and self-esteem. And you know, I feel like I lost who I was in that relationship and now I see it very clearly and I know who I am. Would that have happened anyway? I can't tell. I'm [age], so I don't know if that just happens over time. Where you get to know who you are. And I hear this happens, and by 60 it's just like you're on, you just know. So, I'm excited for that. So, it's hard. I don't know if it's in relation to the violence or the relationship. I don't. It's a really good question. I've never actually thought about that. I mean, the relationship definitely shaped me, absolutely. The moment I left him, I knew immediately that I was going to be working in this field— immediately. It shaped who I became, and professionally, but also being in the field, it affects your personal everything. The work itself, even as difficult as it is, I loved it. Even when I was working in the shelters, which is very hard. I loved the work. I absolutely loved it. The reality is, that relationship taught me about, this seems so cheesy, but about kindness, genuine kindness. And I feel like that's replicated with my son and I feel that even with my friends. I'm not going to talk bad about people and I'm going to

walk out of conversations if it feels like it makes me uncomfortable. Walking on the street, I interact with people. I notice people. I want to see people, and I think of back then, there were times I was up all night, and I was walking the streets because I wasn't allowed back home. So, the abuse would happen, I'd be kicked out of the house walking the streets, and no one sees you. No one helps you. No one intervenes. And so, that, I think, is a big part as well of who I am. And it's really important. And I've told even to my son; I tell him it's very important to notice people who don't get noticed. It's very important to look up. So, that is something I definitely feel proud of that definitely feels that I can link it to back then.