

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.

SHARON:

Sharon identifies as a white, pansexual, 44-year-old non-binary individual and a proud parent. Sharon advocates for compassion and understanding regarding IPV-related brain injuries and is committed to fostering healthy relationships.

Tell me about yourself:

I was born in a city and raised about an hour just outside of the city, a very back country kind of place in '79. So, like a one room schoolhouse kind of thing. And when I was seven, we moved up here. When I was three, I received my first brain injury while I was down there, but that wasn't violence or anything. I tried to slide down a banister and failed. I went over. So, I do have brain injury or brain injury issues right from the start. But they definitely got worse after what I experienced through IPV. I came up here with my mom and my sister when I was about seven and a half, and I've been here ever since. I have been to pretty much every high school except [school name]. Lots of [city] really looks like [another city]. If you really, really look at the architecture, everything is the same. The backwoods feel is still there in some parts, it's nice. And I've always been an outdoors, crafty kind of person. Give me a drill, I'll build boxes or furniture. I'll upholster it and I'll paint the fabric that I'm using to upholster it. I love doing everything myself, whether it's baking bread or building a house. I want to do it myself. I'm very handy yeah. Being ambidextrous helps with that. I've always been a happy person plagued with emotional regulation problems. So, it's been rocky and bumpy. I'm a lot of Degrassi junior high episodes. I've lived the entire series back to front. I focus on the good parts and the happy parts, and I always want to bring sunshine and happiness to people. I always want to make people smile. I don't want to sell the things I make. I want to give them to the people that I love and even just a stranger on the street. I'm happiest when I can tell somebody, "I love your dress or your shoes," or something like that. I get in trouble from my fiancé about it all the time, because you never know who you're talking to nowadays. It's not always safe. But I was bad for that when we first got to the city too. My mom had to tell me some pretty bad horror stories before I realized, no, you don't talk to strangers.

But I like to have fun.

I like fantasy stories, ancient Celtic and Nordic histories. All the histories of the different cultures of the world. I'm just fascinated by how an idea can turn into a religion inside of a culture based on the lens of that culture. And so, I dug deep into history, I wanted to be an archaeologist at one point as well. I just wanted to be a professional student. If there's a university course, I've wanted to take it at one point in time or another. If I had the money, it's what I would have done because right from when I came up here, books were my family. I had me and my sister. My sister was 6 months old when I was seven and a half. So not really a friend to play with. So, I went to school. Well, I went to one school, but my mom took me out of there because the boys kept beating me up. They were in grade eight, and I had a very... I didn't have my two front teeth because of that fall, and I had a very thick Eastern accent. So, nobody could understand what I said. So, I would come home bloody a lot. And so, she went and told the principal, and the principal was like, "Oh, boys will be boys." So, she's like, "All right public school." So, when I went to another school, I remember I read every book in the library. And when I couldn't get any more out of that library, the librarian said, "Well, there's a bigger one downtown," and I had my mom take me. I've still been trying to read all the way through that library. Hasn't managed it yet, because they keep bringing new books in right. People keep writing things. Another thing I wanted to read... So, I just I like to have fun. I like to play video games. I like to hang out with friends. I'm a very big cannabis supporter and user, because it has dealt with my particular brain injuries in such a way that I'm able to function. I don't have to mask; I can just relax. So yeah, I'm a lot of things.

Favourite place:

[Name of Place]. There's nothing like it. The sand is so soft and warm. And sure, you've got your rocks and your shells, and you have to watch out. You will slice your foot, but just the sound of the ocean and the feeling of the waves, and just even the fact that it's a public beach. And there's tons of other, hundreds of other people there, I still feel like I'm on my own there. It's where my family has gone to the beach in [province] for generations. The last time I was there was in August, and then the last time before that was 25 years before. Yeah, I don't get to go often. It's my happy place. It's where I go all the time during meditation. If you get out that way again, you've got to go. So, the way that we drove in when I was little was not the way we drove in in August. Also, Hurricane Katrina completely changed the shore. There used to be all kinds of tall, tall grasses right before the sand starts, and they would be growing out of the sand. And I just loved the grasses, they were so soft, and now all that grass is gone. Now it's all buried.

Favourite song:

Something that strikes in an emotional chord with me. The genre doesn't matter. Classical, canon in D, heavy metal, a disturbed song, the sound of silence... And are you ready? Country! Is it whiskey sleeps? Something like, I have one for every one of them. I listen to them all. I have thousands on my Spotify from different genres. So, I can't really name just one. But my favorite is... It has to touch an emotional chord or taught me something.

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

Not enough people realize just how hard it is. It's an invisible illness. People look at you, and they have no idea. They think, "oh, I'm a normal person. So, this is a normal person standing in front of me. I don't see any issues in the face. I don't see any slackness in the eyes. I don't see any slowness or physical disabilities. So therefore, they have the same mental capacities as I do." And that is not true. And I have faced so many obstacles because people don't understand. Well,

yes, I can communicate great professionally. I worked at call centers for years. Exemplary customer service. I was awarded for it. I tried to be a trainer. Attendance is a problem. But the attendance comes from the brain injury problems and the abuse problems. So, I wanted to do this because this is something that people need to be aware of just as much as they are a twisted ankle.

The process of leaving:

My partner of 13 years. I was with a man who exhibited all the signs of a narcissist, but I didn't know what that was at the time. I was [age], still very naive, still very much with the brain of maybe a 12-year-old at that point in time. My decision-making capabilities, my prioritizing, my analyzing of what's around me is all about 12 years old at that point. I had my first three children with my husband, and then a man entered in my life who I left my husband for because he was so charming, and he made me feel so special. I know those are the two things: he was so charming, and he made me feel so nice. That's how they get you. And around year seven was when I finally broke and I couldn't keep myself anymore. And he was able to mold me into what he wanted, and that was someone who hated her children and kept them away at all times. And that's not the mother I wanted to be. My daughters were 18 months and 6 months old at that time. My sorry, all four of my children I had had at this point, because those two were my two youngest and the two oldest, were two years and three years older than that. So, around year 10 he struck the oldest of the two that was living with me. He spent a good hour and 45 mins convincing me that it was an accident, and I knew it wasn't. So, after an hour and a half I finally dropped it, and I said I knew I had to go I have to get out of here.

I thought I could handle what was going on. I thought I was protecting my girls and shielding them from the worst of him. But I wasn't. And when he felt safe enough to slap her across the face at 10 years old... And then confident enough to try and convince me that it didn't happen. The gaslighting. I didn't know what gaslighting was back then. It took me three years to get the strength up but finally [date, month and year], sometime. No. Yeah. [year]. I sorry [year]. I said that already earlier. It was [year]. I have troubles with numbers. I knew I couldn't handle another Christmas with him. And so, it was [date]. Something when I told them, no, you got to go. We're done; I'm not doing this. Take your shit and leave. Sorry. I don't know if I'm supposed to swear!

He responded by holding me captive in the basement for two days. I wasn't able to leave. I wasn't able to look in on my children. I wasn't able to talk to anybody. He barred the door. He kept everybody away and I wasn't able to get out. But I didn't give in, and after two days he finally left. I went through all of his stuff that he had packed up, and he had taken back a decade of Christmas gifts to me and my children. He had stolen some of my daughter's clothes. I've since learned, apparently, he's transgender, and so I guess that was the start of it. He wanted clothes that fit him. He was about the same size as my 10-year-old daughter. Other things that I had bought that meant something to me but were still valuable for education, like all the classics, or my encyclopedias. I have an anthology of all of Shakespeare's works in a gigantic 20-pound gold leaf etched tome. He tried to take that. So, things like that. I took all that stuff back. And I found out afterwards he stayed in our carport for three or four days when I wasn't around. He would hide from me. The girls would come home in the evening after being outside with their friends, and they tell me, "Oh. I think he's in the carport, and I'd go and look, and nobody was there.

So, I immediately jumped into a relationship with the man who I thought had taught me what I needed to learn to leave him. And it turns out he was just another narcissist who saw an easy ride and wanted to take it from one who already had. So, he helped me leave my ex and then immediately turned into him. And when those tactics didn't work on me at two and a half years in, that's when he turned to drugs and he orchestrated many gaslights and manipulated situations where my options were to participate or sit and watch, but not leave. And after a few of those you're just like. "Oh, like, come on, I just I want to get out of here like. What do I have to do to get out of here? Fine! Fine! I'll do it. Just let me go right."

Services accessed when leaving:

No, no, I didn't. He was successful. I turned into quite the addict. I've been clean six months now, but it took the last seven years from me. I'm just getting my life back now, and I am very glad to see the sunshine again and to have its light on me, because I was in darkness for a very long time. He also kept me captive when I made him leave. He had to one up the previous one, and he held me for four days. My mom helped me escape that one. I was able to get a text message out to her without him knowing and she came and got me. So, he is no longer a part of my life as of six years ago this June and I've spent the last six years, five of which being an adult addict, and this year being clean and getting my life back. And even in those fove years that I was still an addict, I was still at every point fighting it and trying to get back and make healthy relationships. So, trying to make amends with my family, trying to make amends with my daughters, trying to have a healthy relationship with my then boyfriend, that kind of thing. I am a serial monogamist. I don't think I have been single since I was 12 years old. I can't do it. I'm too scared, but that was that was how I left.

Honestly, they [organization] were not any help. I've called a few times, and not once have I been able to receive help from them beyond: "Can you go to the library and get out a book. Can you leave your boyfriend? Can you get a job?" No, I can't. You're supposed to tell me how I'm supposed to do this. But because I only have access to certain amounts of therapy, or certain types of therapy, at certain amounts of times, they've never been able to do anything for me. And in the last 25 years I have done every program the [region] has offered when it comes to mental illness and time management, or things like that. And there's nothing that can help me now except actual, I may pronounce this wrong or right I hope I'm saying the right word, but psychotherapy. But I can't afford it. The most generous sliding scale is still more expensive than what I can afford on ODSP. I can't even afford a dollar towards it. So, I do my best and I research on my own and I read medical journals, and I basically became my own psychotherapist. I helped myself, and I talk to myself as if I was a professional and I answered myself as I was and it was a long process. But I learned how to love myself just by doing it myself.

Support that would have help the process of leaving:

But it doesn't exist, at least as far as I know it doesn't. A team of people willing to come in help you pack all your shit up and all your kids shit up and get out within hours and take you to a shelter where you're safe, and he can't find you. I don't think there's anything like that. I've certainly never heard of it. The closest I've seen is [organization], but you have to get yourself there and that's very difficult to do when they convince you that you can't even leave a house without them. Actually, maybe I can set that up. Yes, ODSP has funding for business opportunities, and they have a class that teaches you how to run a business. It doesn't have to be

a for-profit business. We might be on to something! Yes. Well, that's how you make millions in the industry. Right? You find a problem, and you solve it. Find a need and you fill it.

Leaving barriers:

And it's very stigmatized as well. My mother spent 10 years telling me to leave him, and finally at the 10th year, when I said, "Okay, I want to leave. Can you help me?" She said, "You made your bed. You laid in it. You can lay in it. I tried to help you leave for the last 10 years. You told me no, everything's fine. Now you want to leave. Find a way to do it. I'm not helping you." So, when your own mother is already biased against you for staying. I don't blame anybody who stays. Even if you go back, honey, as many times as you have to go back until you hate him, and you hate yourself with him enough that that gives you the strength to leave. However, many times it takes. And hopefully they stay alive to learn it.

Relationships, challenges, and views after IPV-BI:

I think it's a double-edged sword. It's a rose with thorns. Because on this side, having gone through the transition, I'm very positive. I boil it down to being healthy and happy. That's all you need in a relationship. Healthiness and happiness. Doesn't matter what the healthiness is if it's healthy communication, healthy balance of time, management, healthy balance of house chores, healthy balance of responsibilities, healthy balance of affection... It's all in healthy and happy. And so that's my goal. That has been my driving force is, I want nothing but to be healthy and happy.

I am engaged right now. We just got my ring yesterday. We've been engaged for a couple of years now, but, well, when you don't have a lot of money you try to find cheaper ways to get things, but with cheaper ways to get things come cheaper materials and ways of building things. And so, they just don't stand up. So, I went through 3 different rings that all broke on me in different ways. One, the ring was too thin, another one all the stones fell out because they weren't attached properly, and the last one, the sterling silver, wasn't pure sterling, and so it pitted. So, we got rid of all of them, and we went to Pandora. I love everything in there. So yeah, we've been together now... It'll be six years soon. We have had this argument every year. Neither one of us remember whether it's the 25th or the 28th. We just know it is either the 25th or the 28. And Facebook reminds us. It's so terrible we don't know what year we got together. But when you're that deep into being an addict, you really don't know what time of day it is. You don't know what day the month it is. You don't even know what month it is. I knew it was winter, there was snow on the ground. But now we well, he's going back to work finally. He's only been out of work because OW won't deal with his forklift because I'm on ODSP. We ran into a red tape wall that nobody realized was around when you're on ODSP, but you're not disabled, you're supposed to be on OW and it gives you all its stuff. But with everything that's happened since Covid, OW Says, "No, you're on ODSP, you're getting money for him on ODSP, you're not eligible for any one of our programs." So, we've been fighting a battle for the last 4 years between OW and ODSP to get this forklift training paid for. We've decided screw it. At the end of this month on the 31st, we're getting his forklift, and he's going back to work. He's tired of waiting for the region. So, and I don't blame him. It's been ridiculous. The reasons we have been told no have been so discriminatory. Because I have brain injuries, and mental illness severe enough that I cannot have a "normal" life, he's not eligible for something. I even asked the worker, "So if he and I broke up, and he moved back to his mother's would he be allowed to?" She said, "Yes." The discrimination

against people who have been abused, who are disabled. It's no fault of our own. Yes, we chose to stay. But we didn't choose this.

And I mean there are lots of people who will do things under the table or around the system, and that kind of thing. I'm not willing to do things like that. My ODSP is my lifeblood. That's my rent, that's my everything. And I'm not willing to risk that entitlement for a go around. I would rather them do what they're supposed to do. So, it was very devastating to us, and we went through another bout of down and depression before we came up into the sun again, and it took another, I would say six months of that. But now we've dealt with that depression, and the two of us are stronger than we've ever been. We know we've got each other's backs. We are both empathetic enough that we can feel the emotion rolling off of the other, no matter what it is. If I'm angry, he's angry. Even if he was happy five min ago. If I think of something that makes me angry right now. He'll be like, "What is going on," and shaking himself because he can feel it. So, I've got goosebumps right now just thinking, but I don't think I would be where I am right now without him. I think I would have died of an overdose. One of the reasons my ex was able to get me to become an addict so bad is because all four children cut off relationships with me. My first one cut, my oldest cut when she was 12, my second was adopted from birth, and it was 16 and 17 for the other ones. Having the strength to finally make him leave and then losing them. It devastated me in a way that I have never experienced. I mourned them. And still do as if they're dead, because that's what they want. I am dead to them. They have another mother. And she's better than I am. So, without him there wouldn't be very much happiness in my life. And so, the life that we are building together has become the focus and the goals. And combining that healthy and happy with his love and respect and my love and respect for him. This is what I held on for so long. A man who could put anger down.

The hardest part for me is slowing my reactions. I have an immediate emotional reaction that is never on the same level as what the situation is. I do have borderline personality disorder, so every goodbye feels like you're dead, every no feels like torture. And so, I've had to learn how to stop that reaction and allow the reality of the situation to take control and the rational mind to analyze it. And that's not something I've really learned how to do, except for in the last five or six years. So, I still find that very, very hard. What I find easy is telling someone I love them. Those words come very easy to me. I love very freely. I love fully and thoroughly and unconditionally whether it is a friend, a coworker, or family member. It doesn't matter. I think the words were agave, agape, and something else for Greek friend: soul, body and mind. And I really believe that there are people who you love because of your mental connection. There are people you love because of the soul connection, be it friend or lover, and there are people that you love for the body connection. Be that your parents, or something like that.

One of the things throughout my life that's been common is, I've always been considered less than my peers. Because I excel in certain things but the things I excel in are not things that a school really focuses on. And so, I was behind in a lot of things, except when it came to reading. And well, nerds never really got treated all that great in the 80's and 90's now, did they? No, and I was every nerd there was, whether it was science, English literature, music, home economics, and wood shop. We loved it. Having to jump up to the level to find a peer that would respect me for me was very difficult. A common thing, my parents would say to me when I was growing up, is, "Nobody with money is going to want somebody who's trashy and doesn't eat properly." And

so, I learned very early on appearances fake all. And I have never been very good at hygiene. I'm better at it now than I ever have been in my life. But I've never been very good at it. I didn't know body hair grew on girls, so I raised my hand with a short sleeve tank top on, and I got the name "Sasquatch," and you know things like that. So, I've always had the outcasts as my pool to pick from, so to speak, for my potential friends and partners. And so, I got used to looking at the outcasts a little more, and I learned there's a lot of good ones. But there's a lot of bad ones, too. And so that was definitely a barrier: my hygiene, my inability to compete with the normal kids, but still excelling enough in school. Those were definitely barriers. I sucked my thumb until I was, until I got my tongue pierced. I was 26, I think, when I got my tongue pierced. So, my lisp, my natural lisp, that's always been a barrier. I've never found that the people who I am intellectually or sexually or emotionally attracted to, enjoy to be around me. I'm too controversial. I'm too on edge. I can't settle down things like that. So, really just the way humanity judges itself is a barrier for people with brain injuries I found. I go to a day group with lots of people who have brain injuries, and you can very easily tell which people have friends. Which people are struggling because they're socialization isn't the same as when I go say to a bar or to an event or something. And that bothers me because I've always gone out of my way to be friends with them. I don't want to say people like that because I hate that. But I am referring to a specific demographic.

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

Intelligent. Crafty. Loving. Giving. Excited. Chaotic. Sometimes temperamental. Very wordy. And maybe a little pretty. I never did [feel this way] until this year. I was 18 when I had my first, and I was 160 pounds. And I had five pregnancies in the span of six years, four live births, one miscarriage. And so, after that, in the 10 years after the last one, I got up to almost 300 pounds. One blessing of being a meth addict is the weight loss. Unfortunately, it's not how I would have wanted to lose the weight. I have to admit, I am a lot healthier and happier in this body than when I was in that one. I didn't know how to move that body, so I didn't move. I couldn't roller skate. I've been roller skating since I was seven. It was one of the first things I got into the city, was a pair, those fisher price fit tiers of roller skates, and I went down the street. And fell many times, I left so much blood on that sidewalk. I never stopped roller skating until the [place] shut down in the nineties. I went all the time. I tried to get on the roller Derby team when I was bigger, and I thought, "Oh, I've been roller skating my whole life, I can do this." I broke my tailbone the first time. Couldn't skate because I couldn't figure out the physics behind the weight of my body. And now that I have my body back, I can roller-skate, I can dance, I can move, I can breathe easier. So, I'm taking care of my body this time.

Before my intimate partner violence, I still didn't like myself very much. I was still the outcast, the smelly kid. I didn't shower all the time. I'd like to play in dirt with the boys. Get in there with the cars and the mechanics. I got oil under my fingernails instead of bows in my hair and stuff like that. So, I was confident in myself, though. I knew what I could and couldn't do. I was a feral child. I was a latchkey kid. You know we drank from the hose just like the meme says you know. 110-degree water, all the germs you can handle, but we never got sick until we had babies. So, I didn't really think about how I felt about myself at all. I was sad and upset about my environment and that's what made me bad with hygiene and whatnot. But it didn't reflect on me.

I always felt proud of my achievements. You know I was 11 when I read *The Hobbit* for the first time, and Tolkien has just become my absolute idol and mentor in life. I just never really had an idea of what my self-image was. After or through the IPV, that, of course, was torn down. And not only did I find that I used to have a very good positive self-image about myself. My self-image got worse and worse and worse, and the worse my self image got the worse my physical image got. And this year I've gone to the dentist and had my teeth fixed. I'm getting my eyes fixed because I do have eye problems from head injuries. My mom has taken me shopping because I've lost weight. So, I have clothes that I like, that I like the look of. When you're almost 300 pounds, Moomoos were all you got in the early 2000's, and I don't like Moomoos. Now I find I have a much better vision of myself. But that is part of how I broke the cycle of abuse. Because when I realized after taking all of those region classes in my early twenties, I had a very bad image of myself. I realized I had to try and love myself again. I didn't know how to do that for a long time. And then I don't know where I got the idea. It's like 10 years ago now. I decided, anytime I look at myself in the mirror, I'm going to tell myself, "I like you." Even when I don't like me, I hate me. But you know what? I'm going to lie to my face and tell me "I like you."

Mind over matter is a powerful thing, and I use it. I have no problems using it. I used it to quit smoking cold turkey after 25 years of smoking. I also used it to convince myself I love myself. First it took like a year and a half of "I like you," and like nothing happened. And I just kept doing it like whatever. I only have one mirror in my house, and it's only when I get on the toilet or off the toilet that I see it. So, it's no big deal. But I was programming myself. And one day I looked in the mirror and I went, "Oh, shit! I do like myself, girl, you good." I'm like, all right well, I got to up this. Then, if I've reached this pinnacle, I've got to go to the next one. What's the next one? Well, the next one is love. "Oh, I don't love myself yet. I'm not ready to go there. Well, you're going there." So, I changed it, and it was every time "I love you. I love you. I love you!" And it was during my years of an addict that I realized, nope, I do love myself, and I love myself better than this, and I don't have to do it in the mirror anymore. I don't even have to remind myself anymore, because it's just there. I love myself just as much as I love any of my children. That's not something I could have said before IPV. So as much as it is terrible in my case, at least, there has been some roses. But I guess you do need shit to grow roses. Fertilizer. Yes.