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AS TOLD TO JANE GILMORE APRIL 19 2017

SAVE PRINT

To the lawyer who saved my family from our abusive dad: thank you

Anna*

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My dad has been violent for as long as I can remember. I think I was about five years old when we moved into our house. My mum's disability means there's lots of things she can't do and he'd get so angry with her. That night my dad had my mum on the floor, strangling her. I could hear her trying to scream.

When I was in my last year at school things got really bad. My mum was so sick and I didn't understand her illness or how to help her. That was when he finally moved out, but he kept coming back. And he called me all the time. I had to answer the phone, he'd come over and scream and swear so much if I didn't. Sometimes words hurt more than being beaten.



"I don't even want to think about where we'd be without the pro bono lawyers and the CLC." Photo: Stocksy

Bruises go away but words don't, they stay with you.



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He sent my mum divorce papers. We didn't know what it meant; everything was in his name, he told us he was going to send my mum back to her home country and sell our house.

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One night he came over again, some of my friends were there and he was swearing and yelling at all of us because I wasn't allowed to have friends at the house. He tried to hurt one of them so they called the police and he was arrested.

The police gave us an interim intervention order, I didn't know what it was. It said he wasn't supposed to come within 200 metres of our home, but he was constantly coming back. He'd come into the house when we weren't home, money went missing, things were moved.



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Another night I heard the front door bang and I called the police again, they came and found him in my mum's room, the door was locked and I don't know what he did to her, but they arrested him again.

Then I had to go the Magistrate's Court for the intervention order hearing. Sitting in court was so intimidating, he was there and I was so scared I couldn't breathe, so the police put me in a private room and they asked me if I wanted legal advice. That's when I first met the lawyer from the Community Legal Centre (CLC). She explained the intervention order and the process. I was so thankful, I was only 18 and I didn't know what was going on.

She represented us in court that day so we got the intervention order, and she asked me about our family. I told her about the divorce and how mum was so sick and that he kept coming back to the house.

I didn't even know it was that serious. Being yelled at all the time and the abuse and not being allowed to have any money, we thought that's just how life is, but she told me it was really violent and that we needed help.

It was the first time I understood that it wasn't normal to live like that.

My dad had all mum's bank cards so we had no access to money and we had so many bills. The CLC referred me to a law firm that does pro bono work, they helped me go to apply for guardianship of my mum and my sisters so we could stay together. And we got administrative orders for my mum, which meant I could go to the bank and ask them to cancel the card my dad had and give us another one so he couldn't take her money. It also meant I could talk to her doctors and to my sisters' school and teachers.

We were in different courts all the time, for the intervention orders and the divorce and the criminal charges and the administrative orders. It all took

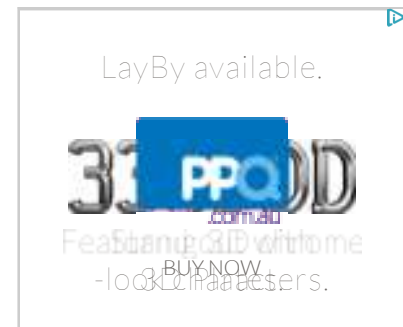
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about two years while I was doing year 12 and my first year at university. I had to keep taking days off to go to court, and take my sisters out of school to bring them to court. I was so confused and lost.

But it all slowly got sorted out, the pro bono lawyers did the divorce settlement for us so we could stay in our house and they got my mum's passport back so he couldn't send her home. Another service helped us get disability pension for my mum and carer's allowance for me.

There's no way I would have known how to do all that without help.

The guardianship and administrative orders expire every six months and every time we go back my dad fights it. Even after the divorce, he's still what they call an interested party because he's our father, so he's allowed to come and dispute the orders. And that will keep going on with my mum, even after my sisters turn 18.

But life is so much better now. When you're so on edge and scared all the time and you have just that one moment where you can breathe, I can't describe what that's like.

My sisters are still at school and they're doing really well. If we have any spare money left over we go to the movies or go shopping, I try to make the house as normal as I can, but it probably isn't.

I feel bad for them. They never had a real childhood, and now they have to come home from school and do all the chores or cook dinner if I'm working late. But they can do things like sport and music classes now, my dad would never let us do anything like that. And they can have a life and go to parties and have friends, and even keep our dog.

My dad hated animals. He used to kick our dog and tell us we had to get rid of him, but now he's gone our dog is safe too.

I don't even want to think about where we'd be without the pro bono lawyers and the CLC. They helped us so much, I am so thankful.

I'm close to finishing my degree too, I can't wait to start work and be able to help other people like me, because I know how much difference it can make.

Anna is 23 years old. Since she was 18 she's been caring for her disabled mother and two teenage sisters. She has a job, she's nearly finished a law degree and she volunteers three hours a week at her local community legal centre. She also survived a lifetime of horrific family violence.*

There is danger in inspirational survivor stories, the "why can't you be a good survivor like the lovely young girl who became a lawyer" trope. But while Anna is an extraordinary person, her story is not an inspirational survivor story, it's a story of what can happen if someone is given the help they need, when they need it, and in all the ways they need it.

The inspiration is not for other survivors, it's for those of us who can to fight for the services that saved Anna's family and may soon disappear.

The CLC that helped Anna is in a high needs area, so they were given extra funding by the Gillard government. When that funding ends in June this year, they will lose 70 per cent of their income. The lawyer who met Anna five years ago will not be in court every day and the connection to other services won't be there for the thousands of other families like hers.

We may never know what will happen to those people, but we do know they won't have the help that changed the lives of Anna's whole family.

* Names and some details changed to prevent identification

Those in need of help dealing with domestic violence can call 1800 RESPECT.

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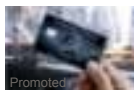
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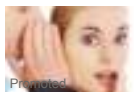
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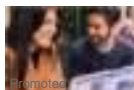
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