

# Advocate Leads through Grief

Domestic abuse survivor shares message to escape safely.



“It could have been us.”

Those words struck Christy Carpenter after the shock of learning her ex-husband had killed his wife and stepdaughter then turned the gun on himself on Sept. 23, 2018. Carpenter got the phone call around 11 p.m. that evening.

“At first, I was shocked. Then, I was scared. I kept screaming, ‘Oh my God.’ I couldn’t process the fact that he was actually dead. I thought he was coming for me and my sons,” Carpenter recalls, “As the reality set in, it dawned on me that I would have to tell my sons that their father was dead and what he had done.”

For Carpenter, this unthinkable act was the ending to a story that began in 1994. She was a college student when she met her future husband. He was the manager of the restaurant where she worked.

“He was funny, kind and I thought, ‘Wow, what a great guy.’ I liked the way he treated his staff,” she recalls.

They married, and it wasn’t long before his sense of humor turned ugly. The jokes that were once clever and funny turned sharp and demeaning. His constant criticism made her insecure, and she began to doubt herself. She wondered what happened to the loving man she had married and what she could do to bring him back. Despite her efforts, 15 months into their marriage, he grabbed her by the throat during an argument and pushed her up against the wall, her legs dangling.

Carpenter blamed herself. Perhaps she antagonized him. Perhaps he drank too much. She learned how to navigate his erratic

Christy Carpenter continues to support other women, and The Shelter for Abused Women & Children, while grieving from recent domestic gun violence.

CREDIT: LISETTE MORALES

outbursts to avoid physical violence most of the time. But inside she was constantly black and blue.

She was eight months pregnant with her second son when he came home late one night, drunk and angry. Knowing from past experience what lay ahead, she began to pack a bag to leave, but he stopped her at the door. He grabbed her by the throat and began to strangle her. She literally fought for her life, leaving scratches up and down his arms. She knew she needed to leave, but the next day he pointed to the scratches and told her that he had taken photos. If she tried to leave or tell anyone, he would tell the police that she attacked him. He had the proof. He would get custody of the children and she would never see them again.

She believed him.

So, she stayed. A month later, when her parents came to meet their second grandchild, she shared her fears with them. With their intervention, her husband agreed to enter treatment for alcoholism. Upon completing the program, he suggested they move to Florida. He would live in a sober house while she lived with the boys. Against her family's advice, she agreed to the move, hoping that sobriety and a fresh start would bring back the man she loved.

They settled on the East Coast. Plans for him to stay at a sober house never materialized. She found herself isolated with no friends or family nearby. Although he remained sober, the abuse got worse. Not long after the move, she found herself pregnant again. Four months into her pregnancy, she miscarried. Secretly she was relieved.

He repeatedly accused her of deliberately losing the child. The blaming, threats and abuse continued to escalate.

One weekend, her husband took the boys to visit family in Boston and Carpenter's best friend, Meg, came to visit. When she arrived, Carpenter suggested they spend the weekend in Naples because she didn't feel safe staying at her house. She said her husband had been acting strangely and she couldn't shake an eerie feeling that he might have hired someone to harm her while he was away.

"Are you listening to yourself? People in healthy relationships don't say things like that," Meg said incredulously.

They decided to go to Naples, where Carpenter's mother was visiting. Confronted with the lethality of her situation, although

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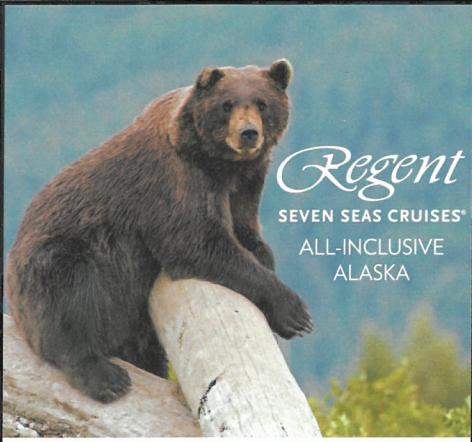
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she felt she was being overly dramatic, the three packed some bags and formed an escape plan to get Carpenter and the boys out of the home safely.

Upon her husband's return, Carpenter offered to take the boys to McDonalds, so he could relax. They were halfway across Alligator Alley when he noticed her pillow was missing. Over the next hour, she received 55 threatening voice mails.

Carpenter's parents put her up in a Naples hotel under a fake name. She was unsure what to do and feared legal action from her husband. When her mother suggested she seek help from The Shelter for Abused Women & Children, Carpenter was indignant.

"That's not me! I'm not a victim of domestic violence," she recalls telling her mother. "I did not think I was experiencing domestic violence. I felt confused and terrified. He was constantly threatening that he would charge me with kidnapping, and I would lose my boys."

So, with nowhere else to turn, Carpenter arrived at The Shelter seeking legal assistance. When the gates closed behind her, she felt truly safe.

"For the first time, I realized the gravity of my situation. Knowing I was safe, I could take a deep breath and talk about it," she says. "You go from being a strong independent woman to the point where you don't even know who you are anymore. I was very angry with myself. How could I have let this happen?"

With the help of The Shelter, Carpenter got the restraining order as well as individual and group counseling that opened her eyes to see the abuse was not her fault. She began to take

back her power and regain control of her life. Carpenter would go on to serve on The Shelter's Board of Directors and use her voice to speak publicly about domestic violence.

Three months after their divorce, her ex-husband married again. Over the next 10 years, he would marry three more times, convincing each woman that she was saving him from the last. Each relationship would end in threats and violence until his final act of power and control that took three lives.

"I was not surprised, but I was horrified," she says. "I thought about that poor woman and her child and the terror they must have felt. In a way, I felt validated. He really was that unsafe. As women, we are not always believed at face value. We begin to question and doubt our own experience. We leave our truth behind."

As Carpenter and her sons work through their grief, she wants to dedicate herself to reaching out to young women and teens to recognize the signs of abuse and how to safely get out of an unhealthy relationship. The most dangerous time for women and their children is when they let their abuser know they want out.

"There is a safe way to leave," she says. "Even one visit with a shelter might have made a difference in the outcome of this story. These are strong women, but they have had their power taken away. The Shelter can help them find their way back." ❁

*Kaydee Tuff, communications manager for The Shelter for Abused Women & Children in Naples, has more than 30 years of experience in writing, editing and public relations for profit and nonprofit agencies.*