



# The ART of Healing

## A Local Woman's Story of Surviving Domestic Abuse

By Andrea Stetson

**T**he moment Vivianne realized that she and her daughters were no longer safe was the moment she decided to leave her husband. She tried to calm her husband by being quiet and non-confrontational, but it didn't work that time. "I turned to walk away, and he kicked me," Vivianne described. "He broke my coccyx bone. The girls were scared. My daughter shouted, 'Mommy are you OK?'"

She knew then what she had to do, but it wasn't easy.

"I was scared to call 911," she recalled. "If I call, he will hear me and might do something worse, but I could not leave the girls with him. I just prayed 'Please don't kill me. I need to live for my girls.' God heard my prayers, and thank God I could get out. I was so scared."

### **'THIS CANNOT HAPPEN TO ME.'**

Vivianne, 44, who did not want her last name used, thought domestic

abuse would never happen to her. She was an educated woman and had worked as a psychologist in her native country of Bolivia, and even worked with victims of domestic violence.

Vivianne said her husband never abused her daughters, ages 12 and 7, but they heard the violence being directed toward her and saw the aftermath of their battered mother.

"My older girl was afraid for me," Vivianne said.

She didn't want her children growing up in that toxic environment, and she wanted to be a strong, healthy mother for her daughters.

Vivianne felt like she had no support. At first, she was too ashamed to tell her family back in Bolivia. She had been living in the U.S. for several years and had been with her husband for 17 years.

Her husband had her passport and all her legal papers. Vivianne didn't know if anyone would believe her. She didn't know where to go. First, she went to a hotel.

"When I was at the hotel, I was scared. He (her husband) told my daughter she was being kidnapped. He called me to say he was going to the police to tell them I was kidnapping the girls. I was scared the police would stop me and take my girls from me. I was scared, I was sad."

### **A SAFE PLACE**

Then she found the Shelter for Abused Women & Children in Naples. She and her daughters and their dog spent five days in the emergency shelter in May, and experts helped them with everything from counseling to legal issues. Most of all, Vivianne and her daughters had a safe place to stay.

"When I came here, I just cried, cried," Vivianne described. "They had people with patience to hear me. They gave me so much support."

The moment Vivianne saw the big gates around the shelter lock and the locked doors in the building, she knew she was finally safe. At the shel-

ter she found comfort in knowing she was not alone. She also felt stronger knowing that people there believed her. Since her husband denied the abuse, it became a "he said, she said" issue. Vivianne said the judge never asked her daughters what they saw and heard. But she did have medical records.

"You have to go to the police, to the judge, and you have to show you are not lying," she explained. "And it doesn't feel good. Nobody would lie about something this painful." The shelter also helped her find legal counsel to get her back home and her husband out of the house. "The only place I could express myself was here. They had the patience to hear me and to explain what was happening in my head."

"It is so difficult to start again," she admitted. "If you don't feel strong enough it is easy to come back to the same place. I want to tell people that they are not alone. There is a safe place where you can find help."

Last year there were 1,693 calls to 911 for domestic violence offenses in Collier County. Thousands more incidents went unreported. From July 2022 to June 2023 the shelter helped 1,181 women and 385 children. The shelter operates a 24-hour crisis line, and two 60-bed emergency shelters,



Musical instruments are one of Vivianne's favorite things at the Healing Arts Program. Photo by Andrea Stetson.

one in Naples and another in Immokalee. There are also nine transitional living cottages. All in-house and outreach programs and services, train-

ing, and education are free of charge.

Most of the women at the shelter don't like to talk about their experiences, but Vivianne believes that by telling her story, she can help other women and children.

She also realizes now that there is no shame in what happened to her. It was not her fault. But it took a long time for her to understand this.

"I thought it can never happen to me, and it did," she stressed. "It is very difficult to accept, and it is difficult to try to get out. I can understand why many girls go back. Every woman wants a family for her kids. You think things will get better, but they get worse and worse, and you think 'How did I accept that bad behavior? How could I make that rational in my head. I thought it was OK. I just have to be quiet. I just have to be calm. Sometimes I want to say 'Enough! Let's be together again.' But I have to think about my daughters. I have to be strong enough to start over."

## RECONNECTING

It is still not easy for her even now, six months after leaving her husband. But with the support of her daughters, the shelter and her church, she is forging ahead with her new life. She continues to get counseling and legal help at the shelter. Twice a week she and her daughters attend the Healing Arts Program. They paint, draw, play music, use sound bowls, practice yoga, meditation, write in a journal, and more.

"I like the bells," Vivianne said. "It makes you feel peaceful and relaxed. You just forget all the bad things you have been through."

Lisette Morales McCabe runs that program and says it has been very helpful for Vivianne, her daughters, and hundreds of others.

"We provide a nurturing and safe environment for our survivors to explore and process trauma and their feelings," she said. "A lot of our participants carry a lot of burdens and complex feelings like shame, and a



Vivianne's 7-year-old daughter enjoys painting at the Healing Arts Program. Photo by Andrea Stetson.

lot of time they can't verbalize it, so we provide ways for them to express their feelings and emotions."

McCabe said the sessions help the women and children reconnect to the person they were before the trauma.

"They were so controlled, they could not choose the color of their car, or the color of their house, or their clothes, or jewelry," McCabe explained. "Connecting to colors helps them reconnect to who they were before all this happened. It gives hope and intentional direction."

Vivianne's 12-year-old daughter says she would rather be home studying than attending the programs. The gifted student loves school and excels in all her classes. But she is also very aware of what has happened, and she wants to help her mother. Vivianne's 7-year-old said she was "happy, but a little sad" when they first came to live at the shelter. She said having her dog with her made things much better. Now that she just comes to the shelter for Healing Arts, she likes it even more.

Vivianne tried to hold back the tears as she described their experiences, but eventually the tears dripped down her cheeks and she grabbed a tissue. She admits she still cries, but she knows she did the right thing.

"It is not easier yet, but it is going to be," she said. "It is better than before, because I am not crying all day every day, and I have to think about the future. We just want to be together. The only thing we want is to be together and feel safe." ☀️

For help call/text the 24-hour crisis line or go to [naplesshelter.org](http://naplesshelter.org).