

How One Woman Transformed Her Life with the Support of



Suzanne, right, and Leah are all smiles with their Transitional Living advocate Deb during a visit to The Shelter for Abused Women & Children.

Here in the United States, intimate partner violence affects more than 12 million people every year. During October, The Shelter for Abused Women & Children in Naples joins thousands of emergency shelters throughout the country to raise awareness of the impact these crimes have on survivors and the entire community. The following is the story of one woman who found her way out. The names have been changed to protect her identity.

Suzanne worked for the Tanzanian government when she met Aadan online in 2012. He lived in Atlanta and the pair would correspond and visit back and forth between countries for two years. In 2014, Suzanne learned she was pregnant. She returned to the U.S. on a visa with plans to marry and start a new life with Aadan.

Soon after moving in with him, she started seeing red flags in the relationship. Aadan kept an iron grip on the finances and had little interest in marriage or helping her secure her residency. Unwilling to pay any expenses for the birth of their child, he sent Suzanne to his mother in Florida. There she applied for public assistance and gave birth to Leah in December 2014. She remained in Florida for two years, always planning to return to Atlanta.

"I was a hard worker. I wanted to work. I wanted to do something with my life," she says.

In 2016, she and Leah returned to Atlanta, but without a job, family, friends, or transportation, and a toddler to care for, she found herself trapped. Aadan controlled every aspect of her life. She couldn't even buy a birthday card to send to her mother.

As the abuse escalated, Suzanne began to form an escape plan. She contacted a distant cousin, who bought one-way plane tickets for her and Leah to fly to Southwest Florida. Although Aadan demanded they return in three weeks, she had no intention of ever coming back.

Suzanne found The Shelter for Abused Women & Children in Naples online and in March 2018, she and Leah entered the emergency shelter.

"I felt like I could finally breathe," she recalls of her first night in shelter. "I slept without worry that someone would do something to me."

Suzanne is reluctant to talk about the violence that was perpetrated against her by her abuser or the impact that violence had on her daughter. She prefers to talk about The Shelter and how she was empowered to fulfill her dream of personal and financial independence.

"Most people need to hear the words, 'You can do it!'" she says. "I told the ladies my plans and goals and they all said, 'You can do it!'"

At The Shelter, Suzanne worked with her advocate and took part in every program offered to her. She was extremely motivated and determined to create a good life for herself and her daughter. With the help of The Shelter's legal services, she secured her green card and got a job. Through The Shelter's Economic Empowerment program, she opened a line of credit and learned about credit scores and how to build her credit. She set a goal of one day buying her own home.

"They helped me take the word impossible out of my vocabulary," she says of Shelter advocates.

The Shelter for Abused Women & Children

By Kaydee Tuff

Suzanne secured a job as a receptionist at a business near Lorenzo Walker Technical College. Since the school was close to her work, she enrolled in vocational courses and earned certification in phlebotomy and as a certified nursing assistant.

At 4 years old, Leah spoke only a few words. The violence she had witnessed impacted not only her speech, but her social and academic development as well. She attended The Shelter's daycare and within months, she was talking, counting, and eager to learn. Today, at age 9, she enjoys classic novels, and her favorite author is Charles Dickens.

When the time came to leave emergency shelter, Suzanne was accepted into The Shelter's Transitional Living program, which provides two years of housing on a sliding scale as participants work toward independent living. She recalls the day

she and Leah walked into the TL cottage that they would call home.

"I cried and cried," Suzanne said. "For the first time, we had a house of our own — our own bedrooms, our own kitchen. Leah was extremely happy. It was wonderful seeing her like that."

After months of walking to work and school, The Shelter helped Suzanne get a driver's license and buy a used car with a grant from the Fresh Start for Survivors of Abuse fund. This program helps Collier County women and their children who have left violent homes become financially independent. With her new wheels, she was able to find better employment and worked hard to earn her licensed practical nursing certification.

After leaving Transitional Living, Suzanne used all that she had learned to pursue the goals she set for herself.

Today, she holds down two jobs and recently achieved her dream of owning her own home. Despite being very hesitant to open her life to another relationship, she met a kind and gentle man, who is devoted to her and Leah.

What's next? Suzanne says she is unsure, but she faces the future with hope and optimism and wishes the same for other survivors of domestic violence.

"My journey has not been easy," she says, "but The Shelter reminded me that I can do it and I started tackling my goals like a hungry lioness! Everything is doable if you put your mind and soul to it."

Kaydee Tuff is an award-winning writer with over 25 years in the newspaper industry. She has served as communications manager at The Shelter for Abused Women & Children since 2014.

OCTOBER IS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AWARENESS MONTH

Join Us for a
Candlelight Vigil in
remembrance of lives
taken by domestic violence
in our community



6 p.m. • Wednesday, Oct. 16, 2024
Cambier Park
755 8th Ave South in Naples

