

National Library of Medicine- “Johnny’s Story” Speech

Name: Johnny Bueno

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My experience with abuse was confusing as a child. It takes a long time to realize that its not about you. As a kid, you spend so much time wondering, “What did I do wrong?”; “What did mom do wrong?”; “How can we all be different so that it doesn’t happen again?” The abuse scarred my mother. It scarred my brother and my sisters. It scarred me.

In reality, my father was the most scarred. He carried his experience of abuse in his parents' home with him every day and never conquered his demons. Instead, he projected them on all of us. Violence in my family just seemed normal growing up. It never felt okay or seemed right, but nobody ever talked about it.

I remember being scared, really scared, and trying to intervene or call 911. For some reason, I could never keep quiet. Of course I would run, cry, and hide like my siblings, but when my mom was assaulted, I couldn’t resist defending her. Defending my mom would make my father furious, and he would come at me even harder. What’s interesting is that I actually remember my mom defending me as much as I defended her. She always tried to protect me, and that made it worse for both of us.

The verbal abuse was just as powerful, if not worse than the physical abuse. Words are strong and hurtful to a child—they stick. In fact, his words and his threats scared me more than anything else. Listening to my dad vividly describe what he might do to my mom painted a clear picture of horror in my mind; the threat seemed real whether it was acted out or not.

And then one day, a family member picked my siblings up, and me from school and took us to a shelter where my mom was waiting. Over the next six months, we lived in shelters and eventually moved to my aunt and uncle’s house, until my mom felt that it was safe for us to return home.

Much of that experience is now a blur, but I remember feeling relieved—we were safe and my mom was healing. I prayed every day that my mom would leave my dad. It wasn’t easy and it took many years, but when she finally said goodbye to him, I have never been so proud.

Today, I am a businessman standing here in front of you. After many years of my own

hard work, I have processed my experience of abuse, I am able to accept and forgive, but I will never forget. I can't forget. There are families being abused right now. It is important for me to share my experience, talk about them, and continue to stand up for those who are wounded. I can help by reminding others who were raised in homes like mine that domestic violence is never ok, it is never your fault.

Unfortunately, domestic violence is a problem that still affects many people today. It extends way beyond the individuals directly involved and the discreet moments of an abusive explosion of words or fists. It can impact families and communities for generations.

If you didn't grow up with abuse, you may take non-violence for granted. If that was your normal, be grateful; it wasn't mine. It's much easier to repeat what you see or experience than to change it. But, that is exactly why I am standing here in front of you. My dad failed to stop the cycle in his life, and it pains me to know that as a result, domestic violence is real and still persists in the next generation of my own family.

For me, the buck stops here. It is obvious and essential that the cycle of violence must be broken. I hope I can be a calming voice and that my experience can help others. What about you?

The work that La Casa de las Madres is doing provides crucial and often life-saving support to women and children, similar to the support my family and I received many years ago. La Casa de las Madres also takes critical steps toward preventing abuse from happening in the first place. There is still much to do, so many people who need to hear the message, so many people who need organizations like La Casa de las Madres.

I was faced with a choice: accept domestic violence as an okay part of my life, or say no and do something about it.

I'm proud of the commitment I have made to step out against domestic violence, and I ask you to join me in supporting this cause. I believe that together we can break the cycle of violence. No amount of time or money is too little, just get involved.