

Surviving...being sexually abused as a child

I was 7 years old and dressed in my Communion gown, looking excitedly out the window, waiting for my tias to come over for my first Communion. My father called for me to come upstairs. He had a gift for me. But once we were in my bedroom, he locked the door and raped me.

By this point in my life, I knew

not to fight back. I would only get hurt more. I simply cleaned myself up and went off to church with my familia, acting as if nothing had happened.

My father abused Mami, my two brothers and me for as long as I can remember. When I was 3 years old, I walked into my parents' bedroom as he was raping my mom. When I tried to stop him, he

Olga Rose Trujillo
at a playground near
her home in Virginia.

PHOTOGRAPH: LISA SILVESTRI



“They banged my head into the wall until I lost consciousness. When I came to, they raped me.”

raped me. He later told me, more than once, he'd stop hurting my mother if he could just do it to me. Wanting to protect Mami, I always agreed.

How did I survive emotionally? Decades later, I learned that during each rape, I went into what experts call a dissociative state. This means I'd psychologically leave my body during a rape. And then, afterwards, I'd lock away the memory of the rape. I had no recollection—zero—of the rapes in my day-to-day life. I couldn't live with the knowledge.

Once, when I was 7, Papi was beating Mami particularly badly. I called 911 because a police officer had visited our school earlier in the week and told us to call the police whenever we saw trouble. But the cops made the massive mistake of asking me what was wrong in front of my father. With him glaring at me, I told them I just wanted to see if they would come.

After they left, he killed my dog in front of me. The message was clear: If I told anyone again, he would kill me.

Si, I believe Mami knew what Papi was doing behind locked doors. But she never talked about it. It took me years to understand, but she was a victim, too. My father had raped and abused her my whole life. She was doing everything she could to survive and protect us. Sometimes she'd jump in front of my father and punish us, just because she knew she'd spank us more gently than he would.

It wasn't just my father who sexually abused me. When I turned 8, he forced my brothers, who were 9 and 11 at the time, to do the same. They didn't want to, but they had no choice. They were as terrified of him as I was.

Three years later, on Halloween, my father died of a heart attack. My brothers and I were more upset we couldn't go trick-or-treating than we were about his death. Even though I wouldn't allow myself to consciously think about the rapes, I remember that I felt some sense of relief when he died.

Little did I know, the violence wasn't over.

On my 12th birthday, I was doing laundry in the basement of our apartment building. Suddenly one of my brothers and his friend appeared. They banged my head into the wall until I lost consciousness. When I came to, they raped me. That same summer, my other brother and his friends lured me to a cemetery near our apartment and raped me. My mom didn't know what they were doing, and because I was still disassociating, I couldn't tell her.

Eventually, one brother went off to college, and the other joined the Navy. I went to college and, later, law school. I met a man who made me the center of his world. We got married, and later I landed a job as the General Counsel at the Department of Justice (I was the youngest person to ever hold that title, and the only Latina).

Then one night, when I was 31, my husband and I went to see the movie *Thelma & Louise*. In it, Geena Davis's character is almost raped. I had a full-blown panic attack right in my seat. The memories started

flooding back. I began seeing a psychiatrist, and realized these were memories of what happened to me as a child. I called my mom to tell her what I was remembering; she said she was not surprised. I called my brothers and told them some of what I had remembered. They responded with shock and denial. After a few months of my family trying to convince me to drop the subject, I wrote letters to each of them, explaining that if they wanted to remain in contact with me, I needed them to understand and admit what happened to me—to us—and support me in working through it. But I never heard from any of them again, not even Mami. You have no idea how much that hurt me.

I started spending two hours a day in sessions with my psychiatrist. My husband was very supportive. When I felt like I couldn't sleep in bed with him, he'd lay on the floor next to me while I slept on the couch. But the process eventually took a toll, and we divorced. I considered filing charges against my brothers, but as a lawyer I knew I'd never win a case based on memories alone.

Twelve years passed. I finally felt healed enough to only visit my psychiatrist twice per year. I even fell in love with another person (and we're still together!). In 2001, realizing that I was lucky to have survived all I did and feeling the need to help others, I started O.R.T. Solutions Inc. (O.R.T. are my initials). Now, I work with communities across the country, helping victims-service providers and criminal-justice professionals to better understand survivors of sexual abuse. I stress that they shouldn't question possible child-abuse victims in front of their parents. I educate teachers on what signs child-abuse victims may exhibit. But above all, by refusing to stay quiet about what happened to me, I force this topic out into the open, out of the shameful silence. This year, I received an award from the National Children's Alliance for my work. And when I walked on stage to accept it, I remembered that there's more to survival than simply realizing you're not at fault. You can be a survivor and help people, too.

—As told to Patty Lambert

If you were a victim

of sexual abuse or know someone who is being sexually abused, contact Child Help at 800/4-A-CHILD or childhelp.org.