

YOURSTORY

Changing the course of a life

OLGATRUJILLO


When I came to know Doña Ester, I was three. She was seventy-two. She was from El Salvador and had little formal education. She would change the course of my life.

My family lived in one half of a duplex in Washington, D.C. Doña Ester lived in the other half. When my mom started working, she asked Doña Ester to take care of me. I learned to love my time with her.

Our days were simple. Doña Ester made breakfast—perhaps *pupusas* or *arroz con frijoles*—and listened as I talked endlessly. We walked to church every morning, and she taught me to pray the rosary. She didn't entertain me. I simply spent her day with her and soaked in her love.

And there was a lot of love. Each day started and ended with a huge hug—I could lose myself in those hugs! She looked at me with complete affection, repeatedly told me I was smart and creative, and laughed at my words. She was gentle and constant, and I felt entirely safe with her.

Over time, Doña Ester somehow let me know that she was aware of what was happening on my family's side of the duplex. She never put into words that she knew my father was physically abusing us and daily sexually abusing me. Instead she taught me that God loved me, God hated what was happening to me, and none of it was my fault. She didn't comment when she saw bruises, she just was more affectionate.

Instinctively and without training, Doña Ester created a safety plan with me. She taught me to hide and pray the rosary when I was scared. She told me to think of hiding places and tell her about them. So she was able to tell me that the oven was not a good choice (!) and the closet was better.

I now recognize my mother's wisdom in putting me in the care of this amazing woman. Doña Ester instilled resilience in me and showed me the good she saw in me. She was a constant connection for me—even when I was filled with terror—and I felt she was watching over me.

I would not be who I am today without Doña Ester. I would not be doing the work I do today.

Anyone can do what Doña Ester did. We don't have to be trained in domestic violence or sexual abuse. We can reach out, love, listen, and change someone's life.

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This article first appeared in *Abriendo Puertas*, Casa de Esperanza's newsletter, summer 2009.

Casa de Esperanza is a Latina organization whose mission is to mobilize Latinas and Latino communities to end domestic violence. Read more about its work at www.casadeesperanza.org.

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Tell us your story.

We're always interested to hear from readers who want to write for us. Some of the most articulate writing we've published comes from women who don't consider themselves writers.

If you feel strongly about your work, an issue, or a life experience, please tell us about it.

YourStory: Tell us about an experience you've had that might strike a chord with other women. 450 word maximum.

OnYourMind: This is the place to share your strong opinion about an issue. 450 word maximum.

LaughingMatters: You bet it does! Who said feminists can't be funny? 450 words maximum.

BookShelf: Books on a theme and five that you'd recommend? 450 words maximum + book list.