

# SMASHED DREAMS – A STORY OF ABUSE

I was married to my best friend when I was 18 years old. We lived life, I went to college and then law school. After law school, and after 15 years of marriage we had our daughter, Alex. During the course of our marriage I matured. Mike had trouble with that. He felt “displaced” as the child when Alex was born. He also had uncontrolled Type I Diabetes. I don’t know exactly what happened or why, but when Alex was two months old he called DFACS and “turned himself in” for child abuse. DFACS allowed me to take Alex, but only with the understanding I was not to go home and I was not to ever leave Alex alone with her Dad.

It took me three years to actually go through with the divorce. Mainly because I still loved Mike and because I felt strongly against divorce based upon my religious convictions. I didn’t believe it was right. But, I realized I couldn’t stay married to Mike for a boatload of reasons. He and I were able to resolve all issues dealing with the divorce and custody issues because we were both wanting to do what was best for Alex. During our separation, and after our divorce, Mike would spend his weekends with us, sleeping on the sofa, so we could both be active in Alex’s life.

Eventually, Mike moved back to live with his parents in another state due to severe health problems. Mike had even asked me to change Alex’s last name to mine, so she wouldn’t grow up with a name different than her mom’s. The divorce agreement required he pay child support because that is what Georgia law required, but he didn’t pay it and I didn’t go after it because I was able to support us.

After Mike moved, I had a friend that wanted to introduce me to a man she knew. I told her no for several weeks before I finally agreed to speak with him by phone. However, I made it very clear I could only speak to him after Alex had gone to bed, because I didn’t want to deprive Alex of my time.

Jim was charming over the phone. He was sweet and funny, and seemed to have similar values to me. (I didn’t realize he had quizzed my friend about me, seeking every detail of who I was from her.) He told me family was extremely important to him, as was his religious beliefs. He told me that our mutual friend had told him I attended church, not just regularly, but multiple times per week. He asked me if I believed the Bible and I told him I did. He asked if I felt the Bible was correct in saying that a woman should be submissive to a man, as the church was submissive to Christ, and I responded “yes, and the man should love his wife as Christ loved the church.” He told me he felt blessed that God had led him to a truly Christian woman.

After a few weeks of talking by phone in the evenings, he started pressing to meet in person. However, he did it in a charming, non-threatening way. My friend also was calling me telling me he kept calling her and thanking her for telling him about me. She said he told her he felt I was hesitant to meet him alone, so she proposed the three of us meet for dinner. I felt this was a safe option. Plus, she represented she had known him for a while and that he had always behaved like a gentleman.

We met for dinner and after we had eaten, my friend excused herself. He and I sat there for a couple more hours and talked before I told him I really needed to get going to pick my daughter up from my friend’s place.

He indicated he understood and pressed me about when I would see him again. I told him I couldn't go out in the evenings because I didn't want to leave Alex with sitters all the time. She was four, and I didn't want to disrupt her life. He told me he understood. He questioned me about whether I had any family nearby and I told him no. He seemed so concerned about me being on my own. We met at lunch, and it wasn't long at all before he started pressing me about meeting Alex. My mother was planning a visit, and I attempted to explain to him that I needed to wait a couple of weeks before I made any further plans to see him. When he pressed me as to why and I told him my mother was coming, he quickly said he needed to meet my daughter before he met my mother, and since he would be meeting my mother in two weeks we'd better arrange for him to meet my child. It actually sounded logical at the time, despite the fact that I didn't like being pressured that way.

Both Jim and I came from large families, and both of us had our siblings spread across many states. I had 2 brothers and 3 sisters. He had one half-sister and two half-brothers. I had always gone to see my family at least two to three times a year. He made it sound like his family was the same way. He was disappointed that both of his brothers had gone through bitter divorces, and he was impressed that no one in my family had ever divorced. He talked about his best friend, Paul, who had married his high school sweetheart and who then suffered a painful breakup. He told me the reason he had waited so long without marrying was because he wanted his marriage to be for life. He said people shouldn't flee a marriage simply due to some hardships. It matched my view points completely.

After meeting Alex and my mother, he quickly began talking about marriage. When I expressed concern to him, indicating that I thought it would be best if we slowed down, he would say things like "I didn't wait this long for God to give me the perfect woman just to lose her." This made me more uneasy, but, he would then tell me he was just so in love with me he couldn't bear the thought of losing me. He would call me numerous times throughout the day, and send me e-mails, professing his love for me. When I tried to tell him one time that I didn't want to see him that night, he became frantic. He told me he had to see me. I told him I really didn't want to see him that night that I just wanted to spend some time with Alex, and he just kept calling me back. I finally started refusing to answer my phone. Finally, the phone stopped ringing, and I thought I had gotten the point through to him. Then, all of a sudden he was standing in the door of my office and quickly entered and closed the door. I was shocked – our law office does not let "visitors" go behind the locked doors into the area where the attorneys work without an escort, yet there he was. He told me not to scream, telling me that it would embarrass me, and they might fire me and then I wouldn't be able to support Alex. He told me that he was there because he wasn't going to let me go. He said they let him behind closed doors because they liked him, and even they knew that he was good for me. He told me not to ever test him. I was terrified. Then, he must have realized how much he was scaring me, and he changed his tactic. He got on his knees and cried, telling me that he just couldn't bear being without me. My secretary knocked on the door to see if I was alright, and I was embarrassed, and I told her everything was fine. I told him to get up off his knees and quit crying, and I wouldn't break up with him.

Not long after that, we were getting married. He had spent time with Alex and he knew how much she "wanted a Daddy and a baby sister." He had told her that maybe

some day I would be nice enough to say “yes” and marry him so she could have both. One night, less than 2 months after we met, he put Alex down in the chair next to the sofa, sat me down on the sofa, and then dropped down to one knee and asked me to marry him in front of Alex. Before I knew what had hit me, Alex had jumped off the chair and onto my lap, shaking me by my shirt front and screaming “say yes mama.” I don’t think I ever answered, but, he put the ring on my finger and he picked a date and he began the process. At one point he asked me if I wanted to plan the wedding and I told him “no.”

The problems didn’t take long at all to begin. Alex went home with my sisters after the wedding so we could go on a honeymoon. I had recently had a medical procedure, and my doctor had specifically cautioned me about doing anything physical, and specifically told me to refrain from sexual intercourse. I had told Jim this, in fact, I had tried to use it as a excuse not to go through with the wedding. However, he said no way we could cancel (or even postpone) the wedding. However, on the honeymoon Jim forced himself on me repeatedly. When I asked him to stop he told me “you are mine now – I’m entitled to have sex with you whenever and however I want. You don’t have the right to say no, you must be submissive to me in all things.”

Within a month of the wedding he was fired from his job. When I told him that I couldn’t afford to support him, he told me that I didn’t have a choice. He had a contract on a house (and I had a house I had just refinanced before meeting him), and he said someone had to pay the bills. I pointed out that I would not pay for his house; that I did not live there, and I needed to take care of mine. He said not to worry about it. He found a job within a month. When I asked him why he lost his job he told me it was my fault. He said that his boss didn’t like me, and she had said bad things about me and he defended me.

Once I became pregnant with our daughter, Chris, he started putting pressure on me to move out of my house and into the one he had purchased. He said the house I had been living in with Alex wasn’t big enough for us because it was only a two bedroom, whereas the house he had purchased was a three bedroom. Of course, his house was a lot further away from my job, and was going to add about an hour onto my commute to work. But, he argued it was the only choice we had. Plus, he kept saying that if I were a “good mom,” then I’d want my children to each be able to have their own bedroom. As we were moving out of my house, he said “look, you can keep it and that way you’ll always know that I’m not trying to hurt you because I’m letting you keep that. But, I’ll find a management company to deal with renting it out.”

While I was pregnant he took a job with a company that had him traveling all the time. I was supposed to take care of Alex during the week, and then spend my weekends doing his laundry and getting him ready to go again the next week. He told me I couldn’t keep going to my church because we lived so far away from it. When I told him that I thought Alex needed continuity in her life he would tell me that she was a kid and she’d get over the changes. He’d tell me how rude I was to think of just me and Alex. He’d point out how his life had changed so dramatically: he had purchased a house, got married, became an “instant daddy,” and then had a wife get pregnant all in less than a year. When I’d point out that it was even more stressful on Alex he’d tell me that she was a kid and she didn’t know what stress was.

Having Chris born was the most awesome thing in the world. I was thrilled with a second beautiful daughter; Alex was overjoyed to have the baby sister she’d always

wanted, and I thought maybe things were going to be alright. But, Jim was angry all the time. He was infuriated with me that I had “betrayed” him by giving him a daughter. He wanted a son, and felt that somehow I had messed everything up.

After Chris was born, my family wanted to come down and help out. But, Jim said they couldn’t come until after his parents had come down. He insisted they needed to come right away. His father was already in his 90s and his mother was 15 years younger. He had to be out of town on a business trip, but, he told me that I’d better make them feel welcome, and keep the children from waking them up in the mornings. I was getting up in time to get Chris fed, Alex up, fed and ready for school. I would then drive Alex downtown to school, and try to hurry back in time to fix breakfast for his parents, because he kept telling me that’s what a good daughter-in-law would do. At lunch time, I was supposed to make their lunches just the way they wanted, and then get back downtown to pick Alex up, get her home and get dinner on the table for his parents at the time they wanted. Doing this, while juggling a newborn, was tough, given my age when I had Chris. At night, after everyone was in bed, I was required to call him and tell him about the day and whether I had been able to please his mom and dad. He wouldn’t let me get off the phone until well after 2 a.m., despite the fact that I’d tell him that I had to start it all over again the next day. By the time they finally left, I was totally exhausted, and desperately needed my family to come help me.

While two of my sisters and my mom were there he informed my mother that she was not to come visit as frequently as she had prior to his involvement in my life. He explained to her that he was “taking care” of me, and he thought it was inappropriate for her to come for two weeks at a time. She began coming less frequently, until it reached the point she could no longer come at all.

During this time he also went through a few jobs, each time telling me that it was my fault that he’d lost each job. I never could understand how it was my fault, since I never met his co-workers or his bosses. He would scream at me it was because he was having to take time off work to attend my work functions. However, I’d tell him that he didn’t need to go to my firm activities. He would become enraged about this, especially after I had made partner. The reason was that my firm would have partner retreats – trips where we would travel somewhere else to have meetings and “bond.” The first trip I was scheduled to go on was to Cancun. Jim made it very clear that I could not go there without him.

After Alex’s father passed away, and after I had made partner, he was having a particularly rough time at his job. He had a rough time getting along with one of his supervisors, and he would often come home in a rage. I had just made equity partner in my job, and things were going well for me professionally. In the mornings, I would get up, help Alex get ready for school as much as I could, get Chris ready, fed the girls, eat and get myself and the girls ready to go in. Sometimes Jim would drive Alex to school, but, she’d tell me that she missed having the time with me. He’d tell me it was inconvenient for him to help get Chris in. Then, he started calling me during the day and demanding that I put everything I was doing aside so I could help him. He was having a lot of difficulty with his supervisor and he would ask me what to do. When I’d try to ask questions to find out what was going on, he’d start screaming at me to just tell him what to do. Then, the day came when I was out at lunch with some clients and my cell phone rang. I saw it was him, and I tried to ignore it. But, he just kept calling and calling.

Finally, I excused myself from the table and took the call. He was angry. He told me that his supervisor had demanded he leave the job site and return to Atlanta or that he was going to “call the police.” Jim asked me what to do. I then questioned him as to what was going on that had resulted in his being told this by the supervisor. He explained that some “dumb woman” had caused him a problem on the job site and he didn’t think he should leave. I tried to explain to him that if he had been ordered off the premises he needed to leave.

When he came back to Atlanta he didn’t want to talk about the situation. He told me that the whole thing was my fault and he’d just about had enough of me. A few weeks later, he was calling asking me if he should quit his job. When I asked him what he was talking about, he told me he was sitting in the manager’s office and they were giving him a chance to resign. When I tried to ask questions to figure out what was going on he became enraged and told me it was all my fault. That day when I got home I learned that he had lost another job.

Life became more difficult after that. Each day Jim would stay up all night watching tv and then sleep all day. When I’d ask him about looking for a job he’d tell me not to “nag.” He’d tell me that a good wife would understand he’d just taken a huge blow and they’d leave him alone. He didn’t clean house, he didn’t help with the kids, he didn’t do anything. I tried to explain to him that I was having a rough time with it, and he’d scream at me that it was all my fault. He’d tell me that a good wife wouldn’t put pressure on him. No matter what I did, it was always wrong. If I talked about leaving he’d become furious and tell me that he wasn’t going to go through a divorce. He’d tell me that he’d kill me and my kids before he’d let me go. He’d tell me that if I was a good wife he’d be able to get a job and things would be alright.

During all this time, he was taking me to doctors and telling them that I was sick. He’d tell them that I couldn’t sleep at night and that I needed sleep medications. Then, after he’d get me the prescriptions he would give them to me as soon as I’d get home at night and then refuse to let me go to sleep. I was in a constant state of confusion.

The physical violence got worse. At first it was just him forcing himself on me sexually all the time. That, and forcing the medicines down my throat. Then, it got where he would charge at me if I dared to say anything that was contrary to what he desired or said. He’d tower over me and raise his hand. He’d shove me. He’d tell me that if I tried to leave he’d make sure that my kids would be taken away. If I tried to argue and tell him that he didn’t have a right to Alex and he couldn’t take her he’d laugh and say he didn’t have to. All he had to do was make sure I couldn’t have her. He said he’d tell them lies about me and that she would be put into DFACS custody. If I started to try and leave he’d get the kids to cry and tell me “not to cheat them out of a daddy.” They’d beg me to give him another chance.

Finally, because I was spending so much time in the car on my commutes, I asked the kids if they wanted to move closer to my job. Both indicated they did. When I started looking for a house he told me that he wouldn’t let me move without him. I told him I really had no interest in continuing to pay for “his” house, because he would constantly remind me that it was “his house” and he could do what he wanted in his house. Given that he didn’t pay the bills, and that I was paying for everything, I didn’t feel it was right for us to live in a house that didn’t have my name on the title. He kept trying to get the girls interested in houses that were further away from my job. However,

when I found the house I wanted, I simply looked at the girls and said “which is more important – the great big house Dad is wanting where you each have your own room and your own play room, or the smaller one where you share a playroom but I get to spend more time with you?” Both girls opted for having me there more. He was furious. I told him he didn’t have to move there, he could stay where he was. At that point, he apologized and said he wanted to come with us and that he would try harder to find a job.

Life was tough. It was a constant roller coaster. I never knew what he was going to be like when I got home. He ran the credit cards up, he refused to work, he refused to do anything around the house, he was constantly putting me down. I was going to church and Bible Studies and trying to figure out what I was doing so wrong. I prayed and prayed that I could somehow be a better wife to him and help him get his act together. That was when, while I was out of town for a deposition at work, I received a phone call from his friend telling me that he had been arrested and was in jail. The friend was picking the kids up at school and would get them to me. He told me that I needed to get Jim a lawyer. When I asked what had happened he simply said “Jim made a bad choice and he needs to tell you the rest of it.” It was a terrible time. Jim was charged with aggravated assault. He had gotten mad at another man in the parking lot of Publix, and attacked the man. When Jim got out of jail, he didn’t have a single bruise on him. But, he told me that he was going to call it self defense and get away with it. He laughed and told me that he would have killed the man if the store manager had not come out. Things changed for me that day. It finally hit me – if I ever let him get me on the ground again he’d kill me. And, he’d kill my kids because they would be witnesses to what he had done.

From that day on, every time he’d charge at me, I’d draw myself up as big as I could (Jim weighs 350 pounds and is taller than me), and I stare him straight in the eye and say “oh no you don’t.” I’d push back against him, and I’d try to call 911. He wouldn’t let me call 911 – he’d force the phone out of my hand. One time, when Alex tried to call 911, he started hitting himself as hard as he could and then he told her that he’d tell the police I hit him and they’d end up locking me up and putting them in DFACS. He told Alex if she went to DFACS both her and her little sister would be raped and beaten. She cried and said “I’m sorry mommy,” and put the phone down. I understood.

Finally, things came to a head. He attacked me again, and after he knocked me to the floor, Alex had seen enough. She called 911. When she did, things changed forever. He was furious, and he went to flee. As he did, Chris got in his way, and he tried to throw her down the stairs. I was able to catch her and protect her. However, he then ran down the stairs and to the garage. Chris followed, and she jumped in front of his van. He started the engine and revved it, jolting forward towards Chris. I grabbed her and pulled her out of the way. That was the end. And the beginning.

After the police came, the kids started telling me what life had been like for them. He had been abusing them for years and threatening them the same way he had me. After having seen what he was willing to do to Chris, and after having suffered for years at his hands, I understood and believed every word they said. I filed for divorce, and I went for a restraining order. I wanted to believe the system would work.

I’m now through with my divorce. I have sole legal and physical custody of Chris, and for the time being, my ex-husband does not have visitation of any type. This

divorce was nothing at all like my first one. This one was a nightmare, where every day I was fearful. Not only was I dealing with all the emotional trauma that always accompanies divorce, but, I was also dealing with all the years of threats directed not only at me, but, also at my children. The first attorney I used was almost as abusive as my ex-husband. At one point she actually told me “if you actually fear your husband as much as you claim, you should take your children and flee the state.” This would have been illegal. And, it was unethical for her to tell me that. While I had a great deal of fear (and I still do, when I think about his ability to come back and seek a modification of the child custody/visitation), I knew that I could not let the fear control me and cause me to behave in a manner that was as wrong as his. I became a lawyer because I believe in the system. I believe, as many faults as it has, this is the best system there is. I had to believe that ultimately things would be right.

Visions Anew helped me by providing contact with other women who encouraged me to be strong and believe. I thank God for bringing me through the divorce, and for bringing me in contact with other people who cared. That support of other women helped me so much. For years I had been told that I was crazy, and that other people didn't like me. It may sound stupid that I believed this, but, I did. The reason I did was because it was a very familiar tune, a song that had been sung to me most of my life. I grew up in an abusive home. My mother abused me as a child – not slightly, but severely. I thought I had dealt with the issues surrounding that, but, I learned I had not. You see, I knew it wasn't her fault. I knew she was mentally ill and that she didn't want to do the things she did. I had researched her condition and I had spoken with my mom about it. I felt like intellectually I was beyond that. But, you are never fully beyond that. If you have spent most of your life believing you don't measure up, that somehow you are less important than everyone else, it is easy to fall prey to one telling you the same thing.

Getting a divorce from an abuser does not solve the problem. I know that I am still at risk of being attacked by him. He used to tell me that no matter how long it took, he would eventually kill me. And, he may. However, he no longer controls me. Never again will I determine my actions/words/or thoughts based upon what he wants me to do. I am not going to live in fear. I am not going to allow my girls to live in fear. We are not going to believe that others don't like us. We are not going to believe we have no value. We are going to make a difference in the lives of others. We are going to count.