

# CASA MYRNA

**Casa Myrna**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Annual Community of Conscience Breakfast**  
**May 22, 2013**  
**Fatou's Remarks**

Good morning and thank you for giving me the chance to speak with you today.

Domestic violence used to be my whole world. I want to share my journey with you and show you how I now define my life and my daughter's without this issue constantly weighing us down.

My journey began in Senegal, where I was born. This cultural difference is very important: in Senegal, if there is domestic violence in a relationship, you just deal with it- society tells you that marriage is not easy, whatever kind of husband God gives you, you accept it and make it work. It is a male-driven society, and, as a woman, you take what comes with that. **MANY TIMES, THIS MEANS ABUSE.**

My mother hoped for a different life for me. She did not want me to get married to my husband. After I left him, she told me that she knew I was being abused the whole time.

My husband abused me for the entire 16 years of our marriage. I hid it from my daughter, my mother, and other family out of shame and embarrassment.

There are many kinds of domestic violence. Some are clear, and others are more hidden. Some you can see by bruises, red marks, and physical disabilities. Others are not shown so outwardly. **ALL FOCUS ON CONTROL.**

In my case, the bruises appeared after the more silent abuses were going on. It was the financial and emotional control and manipulation that kept me hostage.

My husband controlled and manipulated me in many ways:

- In 1996, my husband came to the United States with his green card. He applied for mine in '97, but when complications with the paperwork came up, he said we did not have the money to figure it out.
- His excuse for not completing the application process was that we couldn't afford a lawyer. But yet, he would buy himself a \$500 pair of shoes.

- When I came to the United States in 2000; I came on a student visa. I enrolled in classes at Bunker Hill Community College. He would be waiting outside after class, every single day.
- He would take me shopping at a thrift store (a place I had never heard of in Senegal), picking out the clothes for me. He continued to say we had no money.
- He took the little money I earned at a hair salon – money that I intended for my education. I needed to ask him permission to buy anything.
- Ultimately, he made me stop going to school. He said we needed to start a family because he was getting old. I guess his clock was ticking.

Then the physical abuse came: on Fridays or Saturdays, he would stop by the bar, have a few drinks, come home and start a fight. He would hit me, scream at me, spit on me, call me all kinds of names and tell me how useless I was.

At some point, when I smelled the alcohol on him on weekends, I either locked myself in the bedroom pushing the bed against the door so he wouldn't be able to open it, or I just ran out of the house. In those days, I only wish I had family or friends around. Then the next day, he would cry and tell me how sorry he was.

Our daughter was born in 2002. The physical abuse stopped, but the control got worse. When my daughter was just three months old, we moved from Cambridge to Athol; I wondered why we needed to move so far away since it felt very isolated out there. But we did buy a house that I loved, and I tried to make it a home for my daughter.

The control worsened as my daughter grew. My husband would lie to my daughter that I was greedy and selfish and I just wanted to buy shoes and other things for myself; she once asked me, "Mommy, why don't *you* just stop buying so many shoes?"

My husband's behavior would escalate when my family members would visit from Senegal- One day my aunt visited as my husband was drunk and angry. He was telling her how awful of a wife I was.

I was embarrassed. I had enough.

For 16 years, I felt trapped: trapped from realizing my dream of going to college and getting a job; trapped from being able to help my mother who sacrificed so much to put us through private school, trapped from making her proud. "IT WAS TIME TO GET OUT."

That night I called SafeLink. An advocate gave me a list of places to call the following day and on September 3, 2011, I LEFT MY HUSBAND.

My daughter, Megan and I found an opening at Finex House, a shelter in Boston. We left as soon as we could and took several trains to get from Athol to North Station.

One month later, Nancy- the Program Coordinator at Casa Myrna's Emergency Shelter and the Transitional Living Program...or TLP as we call it- called to say there was space at TLP for Megan and me.

More than one year later, THIS IS OUR LIFE TODAY:

I participate in a weekly Empowerment Group at the TLP, with the other women who live there.

I also work one on one with Paola, the Self-Sufficiency Specialist, to research scholarship funding for my education.

I am working with Jackie, the Housing Advocate, to find a Section 8 apartment for my daughter and me.

And, most importantly, I am getting wonderful support from the Legal Services team to finalize my citizenship.

I HAVE UNTANGLED THE TIGHT CONTROL AND FEAR TO BECOME FREE.

My daughter is in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade at the Epiphany School in Dorchester. Shelia, the family advocate at TLP, helped me find this amazing school that goes from 7:15 a.m. to 7:15 p.m., and includes all meals, exercise, homework assistance, and, of course challenging studies. My daughter loves it there.

I go to the Epiphany School, too: every Monday, I volunteer in the kitchen helping the chef plan and prepare meals. I love cooking, and I even cook Senegalese dishes for the students sometimes!

On Wednesdays and Fridays, I volunteer at the Boston Medical Center food pantry, where I help provide food for families based on their health needs. This has made me see that the need is so great in our community—and I have a responsibility to help others (just like I have been helped by Casa Myrna).

You may think I should become a chef, based on my love of food! But I want to be an attorney.

I want to influence policy and lobby for women affected by domestic violence, locally and internationally. Of course, my personal experience has influenced this choice.

To the lawyers in the room, thank you for the important work you do.

I am working toward my B.A. in Psychology at the Harvard Extension Program. Then I plan to attend law school.

In January, Senator Elizabeth Warren visited Casa Myrna. She is a champion for women, and worked very hard on the Violence Against Women Act. We spoke in great detail about this important legislation. I am so glad it successfully passed, with the Senator's strong backing.

Now, more than ever, I am focused on the future. I want to realize my dreams that I put aside years ago: to complete my college degree, to become a U.S. citizen and an attorney, and yes, to buy special shoes!

My daughter has dreams for the future, too. She dreams about her own room: having privacy, decorating her space, and feeling safe and comfortable there. She is starting to understand why we had to leave our own house and is ready for a new place. I tell her Mommy's working on it.

Now you've heard my story, this is why Casa Myrna is so important. They didn't just give me a bed, they helped find me a school for Megan, scholarship for my education, legal services for immigration and housing. They are helping me put the puzzle back together. Please help them keep doing this important work because the need is greater than ever. Thank you and God Bless.