

Don't be a Bystander Campaign – Mary's Story*

When describing her background, Mary recalls it as being very comfortable and secure. Her first marriage was happy and loving and she was devastated when her husband died when her daughter was just three years old. She focused on her daughter, throwing herself into further education and supporting herself and her daughter by teaching. After a number of years, when the father of one of her pupil's who had become a friend asked her for a coffee, she accepted. From their initial friendship, a much closer relationship developed quickly. He was attentive and romantic and very soon they became engaged. However, it was while on a holiday that her conversation with another hotel guest, an elderly gentleman, led to a jealous outburst and her partner hit her for the first time:

"I was stunned and in pain but he was immediately sorry and upset and told me that it wouldn't happen again. He was so sweet but that was just the beginning, there were more and more occasions where he was violent and his behaviour became more controlling and sinister. Before I knew it, I was walking on eggshells. I changed from being a happy, relaxed person into an anxious and nervous wreck, always busy second guessing and trying to work through the gas-lighting. I was petrified of anyone knowing, thoroughly scared of what he would do if he thought people knew."

An example of how his behaviour become controlling was that her partner bought and chose all of her clothes, the style of clothes she wore changed, she had no choice in what she wore. Colleagues at work commented on the change they had noticed in Mary, both in her personality and in her appearance but they did not understand what was happening. One colleague did sit down with Mary saying "that's one bruise too many" and her reaction was absolute fear, she said:

"I realised that I hadn't hidden the bruises well enough. Immediately I thought about the trouble that I would be in at home but also somewhere in the back of my mind I felt a sense of relief that someone knew. I think that's where I started to see an element of hope, especially when they said "anytime you want to talk I'm here."

On one occasion, Mary was aware that as she had tried to leave the house to avoid a situation and had fallen and was being dragged back, an elderly neighbour was at her window and saw, Mary said:

"My initial thought was fear and then complete embarrassment. I was relieved that my partner hadn't seen her watching from the window, I was scared of what he might have done and I realised that SHE was scared as well, but was not sure what to do."

The violence escalated and one night everything came to a head. Mary's daughter witnessed her mother being kicked and punched, she tried to step in and was hit in turn, but managed to run to a neighbour. The neighbour immediately sprang into action and brought Mary into their home and persuaded her to ring the police. Only

then did she realise that a number of her neighbours had suspected something was wrong. The elderly neighbour who had seen from her window said that she could not believe what she had seen and thought it may have been 'messaging around' but had an inkling that it was more than that. Her partner was arrested that night and life changed. Mary was supported by many people around her and was surprised to realise just how many people had thought that something was wrong, she said:

“Suddenly I didn't feel alone. People asked “are you ok?” and “how can we help?” and I felt that I could answer. I'm not sure I would have felt safe enough to answer before but hope that I would have at some point. I know I had been relieved when my colleague had asked, even though I didn't feel able to speak to them about what was happening. What I would say to people who suspect things are not right with a family member, friend, colleague or neighbour, is trust your instinct, ask them if they're ok and keep asking, it may not be the right time for them to speak to you when you ask that first time, but your words could be the glimmer of hope that leads to a life being saved.”

Mary is an inspirational survivor who is sharing her experience to help others and stop domestic violence and abuse. She has provided support, expertise and advice throughout the development of the Welsh Government's “Don't be a Bystander” campaign and is a volunteer with the Welsh Women's Aid SEEdS (Survivors Empowering and Educating Services) survivor participation project. This project gives women who have lived through all forms of domestic violence and abuse the opportunity to share their experiences and influence change.

The project brings together women from across two regions (Gwent and Cardiff and the Vale) and provides training, support and resources as well as a safe space where survivors can learn from and encourage one another.

<http://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/seeds/>

*Name has been changed