



WOMEN'S AID

Helping women escape and survive domestic violence

If you are being hurt or abused yourself – or if you know someone who is – please phone our **National Freephone Helpline** 1800 341 900

Your urgent Christmas gift of €85 will help a woman find the courage she needs to escape a life of cruelty and abuse...

November 2010

WARNING: This letter contains a descriptive account of domestic violence of a sexual nature, as well as information about this kind of abuse. If you feel you may be upset or offended by this, or if you are under 18 years of age, please do not read it.

Dear Friend,

Could you picture, for a moment, a woman on the brink of making the hardest decision of her life.

She's holding the number of our National Freephone Helpline in her hand.

Behind her are four years of abuse and fear. In front of her, the unknown. She feels alone. She wants to call the number, because right now – more than anything else – she needs to talk to someone who will understand.

But she's afraid.

Her name is Joanna. Yes, she's real. Although Joanna is not her real name. She's thirty-one years old, probably quite like someone you know – a friend, a work colleague, or maybe someone closer to you.

Last year we answered more than 10,000 calls from women in this situation. Women looking for advice, for support, and most of all, a caring voice on the end of the line.

Six months ago we answered Joanna's call.

The first time, she was so afraid that she hung up. But eventually she began to tell us about her life, and today, she's agreed to let me share her story with you...

Please continue...

But first I have to tell you about our urgent need for your support this Christmas. Because of the continuing climate of cutbacks in Ireland, Women's Aid is under extreme financial pressure. We've just come through a really tough year, and we're expecting more difficult times ahead.

Because of this, we urgently need your help today, to keep our vital services running for women like Joanna – like our National Freephone Helpline, our Support Team, and our Court Accompaniment Services too.

If you can send a Christmas donation of €85 before Friday the 17th of December, I promise you that your gift will make a real impact in the life of a woman trying to escape an abusive relationship.

I know this because I speak to so many women who would still be trapped in damaging and violent relationships if not for our help.

Joanna is one of these women. I should warn you that some of the details of her story are quite upsetting, however, what you will read is the first hand account of a very brave young woman who has chosen to speak in order to help others like her.

This is Joanna's story, in her own words...

"I survived. That's about the best I can say.

On paper, Pat was the perfect guy. He was attractive, well educated, funny, he had a good job, and he seemed to be crazy about me.

His attention made me feel really special – he was always calling and texting me, and sending me flowers. He wanted us to spend every minute together. I was literally swept off my feet. We moved in together after eight whirlwind months.

Pat was very into sex, probably more so than me, and the relationship was very physical. At first that was great – the whole first flush of love thing where you can't get enough of each other. But I was also finding out that he could be very critical, and judgemental, and cruel.

He'd make me feel so small, like my opinion wasn't worth his time. And if I mentioned this, he'd laugh it off, saying it was me just getting ideas in my head. He was always so slick and assured, that I began to doubt my instincts that something was wrong with our relationship.

*I started feeling very insecure and found myself trying really hard to get his approval – to say what I thought he would find interesting, or suggest doing things that I thought he would like. It felt like his opinion really **was** the only one that mattered. He certainly made it seem that way.*

*Over time, the sex became more one-sided. **When** Pat wanted it. And **how** he wanted it. And it got rougher too. Sometimes he would even choke me to the point where I thought I was going to black out.*

He began hurting me at other times too – not only during sex – but just if he got annoyed about something.

He would twist my arm behind my back, or pull my hair, or bend my fingers back. Once he bent them back so far I couldn't close my fist for a week. And when I said I wanted to see the doctor he was furious. He told me it was nothing, and that I was being a baby.

It reached the point where the violence could happen at any time, for no reason whatsoever. He'd just hurt me for the sake of it. And he stopped even bothering to ask me about sex – he just did it, whether I wanted to or not.

I gave up saying no because it was easier and because I thought if I said nothing there was a chance he wouldn't hurt me or be quite so cruel. But it usually made no difference.”

I'm sorry if some of this is distressing – but the disturbing truth is that a significant proportion of women who call our Helpline are reporting sexual abuse of this nature.

Over the last 12 months we have received calls from women who describe being beaten for refusing to have sex, as well as appalling acts of sexual cruelty, including being burned, choked, bitten and raped – sometimes in front of children who have been forced to stay in the room under threat of violence.

We have even received calls about men who have given their partners so-called “date-rape” drugs throughout the course of their relationships.

What Joanna endured is rape. Her partner used fear, violence, and the threat of violence to force Joanna to have sex when she did not want to, and in a manner that she found both frightening and demeaning.

Even though rape within marriage was made illegal in Ireland 20 years ago, only one man has ever been convicted of this crime, and he had to be tried and found guilty twice before going to prison. Yet it goes on all the time.

This must stop!

Last year alone we responded to calls from 335 women who told us they had been raped by their husbands or partners. But this is far from the true figure, because most women find it so difficult to talk about.

Please do all you can to help us eliminate all forms of domestic violence and abuse against women – we really are counting on your support today.

As you can probably imagine, the psychological impacts of the kind of cruelty Joanna endured are devastating.

Most women feel so humiliated and degraded by this kind of abuse that they find it almost impossible to talk about it to anyone – especially family or friends.

And this is one of many reasons why our confidential Helpline is so important, because it provides a safe, supportive space for women to share their experiences – on their own terms.

And as you'll see from the rest of her story, this was also the case with Joanna...

"I ended up like someone drunk in the gutter. I was only thirty-one, but I was so worn down by the humiliation I felt like a ninety year-old woman.

I got through it one day at a time. I couldn't tell anyone the truth of what was happening to me – it was so unspeakable. And who would believe me anyway? Everyone thought he was brilliant, including my friends and my family.

Then one day I saw the number for Women's Aid on the back of a supermarket receipt and without really knowing why, I picked up the phone and called.

The first couple of times I just hung up the phone when they answered but eventually I found the courage to speak. To begin with I only talked about Pat's verbal cruelty, and how my self-confidence was at rock bottom. But gradually, over a few calls, I opened up a bit more and eventually disclosed all the other things that were happening.

It was very hard to do, but I knew I had to do it because I realised that I had done nothing to deserve this awful treatment.

When I moved out, Pat told everyone I'd been sleeping around, that the break-up was all my fault, and that I was a complete bitch. My family and friends know different now, and are starting to realise he's not the great guy he once seemed.

They don't know everything though – I simply couldn't bring myself to tell them. Women's Aid were there for that. To listen, to tell me I wasn't the only one going through this, and to help me find the courage to leave.

Recently, I feel like I might be moving on from simply surviving, to actually living again. And that's a really good feeling."

I hope you feel as moved by Joanna's words as I was. They stir up so many emotions for me. Admiration for her courage. Sympathy for what she endured. And anger that she should have had to suffer alone for so long.

Sadly, almost every day we receive a call from someone living through this kind of hell. They come from all walks of life. All ages. They are just like the women you and I know – our friends, women we work with, women we meet casually in shops and restaurants, our sisters... our daughters.

We cannot leave them alone.

Fortunately though, there is good news too.

Because every day – thanks to the incredible support we receive from amazing people like you – our Helpline volunteers are also helping women like Joanna.

And our Support Team is meeting with women like Joanna – giving them the face-to-face support they need to escape lives of violence and fear.

And we're also out there accompanying women like Joanna to court – to help them through the impersonal and often intimidating legal procedures necessary to protect and secure their personal safety.

Without support from people like you – none of this would be possible.

Joanna would still be trapped in a relationship with a cruel and abusive man. And so many other women who count on Women's Aid services, would truly be alone.

That's why we need your support so much this Christmas.

Please do all that you can to help us keep running our essential services for women trapped in cruel and abusive relationships, by making a generous gift of €85 before the 17th of December.

Thank you so much!

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Margaret Martin". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.

Margaret Martin
Director

P.S. Please try to send your urgent Christmas gift of €85 or more before the 17th of December to help us secure all of our vital services for 2011 – including our confidential National Freephone Helpline, our Support and Court Accompaniment services, and our Advocacy and Campaign objectives for the year ahead. Thank you so much!

About Joanna: Joanna's experience is based on real accounts as told to the Women's Aid National Freephone Helpline and Support Services. Specific details and circumstances have been changed in the interests of protecting identity and to preserve the confidential nature of Women's Aid services.

