

From Darkness to Light

A Battered Woman's Story from Texas Death Row

By Bettie Lou Beets

Time is running out.

While this story of part of my life is true and is mine, it can be told in whole or part by the hundreds and thousands of women across our country. So, there is not only my story but our story. We as battered women have got to stand up and say, "It has to stop."

The abuse of our children and of us women, the domestic violence has to stop. At the same time we must ask ourselves, "When and how? When will it end?" Mine will end soon.

If there are those of you out there who don't recognize my name, you will soon for the state of Texas seeks my life. I've lived on women's death row for 14 years in the state of Texas. My time is running out and the state of Texas will pick up where my husbands left off. While the Texas law enforcement out there did nothing to help me, it is now legal for them to finish the job.

Records will reflect the many times I filed against him until I gave up on them helping me. I wanted to believe they would help then; I want to believe they won't kill me now. My trust is in Jesus and I need your prayers for myself, for the many abused children, the battered women who don't know what to do, for the many children who are paying the cost of what we are going through.

Time is running out.

I can now understand how these things happened to me, but I couldn't then, just as there are so many women in the world who can't know how or why the battering is going on in their lives or how to get out of it for good. If you ever believed that this time would be the last, trust me, it won't. How far can it go?

I am on death row and they (The Texas Department of Criminal Justice) plan to take my life soon. I wished many a time I had died at the hands of my husband and I've wondered why, as well. I've wished that my children and grandbabies wouldn't have to live with the shame of what the state Texas wants to do to me.

Yes, I want to live. I want my grandbabies and all the grandbabies out there to know there is hope and help, that there are people who can and will help, that they can fight back in a way that they will not be hurt for it. We have better laws for domestic violence, but they are not strong enough and they are not enforced enough.

On behalf of myself and many other battered women, I lift up in prayer and praise for the hundreds and thousands of battered women and children who didn't make it and pray to God that I do make it after all, even now being on death row with the time running out.

While all of this story was available to the court, my attorney at trial, the state, none of it was told and no one on the jury heard any of it. They knew nothing of my past life to pass a sentence of death.

I still believe in miracles just like the ones that we read about in our Bible. I believe that God still works those today to help us to learn and grow and believe and have our hopes in Him.

A Testimonial

I want to talk to you about privation, the mentally ill, the impaired, the abused, and how all these things have touched my life and have lived with me throughout my life.

I was born to a poor family in North Carolina. My mother and dad were tobacco sharecroppers and lived in a shack without windowpanes, water, or electricity. That is where I was born. We lived there (from what I understand) until I was three years old - my mother, dad, and a brother two years older than myself. Later, we moved to Virginia where my mother and dad worked in the cotton mills.

About that time I came in contact with the measles. I ran a high fever for days and my mother believed I would die. Measles left me with very little hearing from running the high fever so long and not being able to bring it down.

When I started school I was hearing impaired and learning disabled without any help - besides not knowing there was something wrong with me. I watched - focused - as people talked and I taught myself to lip read without knowing what it was. Without the facial clues to help me I could not tell what was going on. I couldn't always see the faces or expect people to turn my way as they talked so a lot of the time I heard nothing.

I married at 15 years old to a man I loved dearly. We were married for 18 years and had six children. At 31 years of age he left me and we had to learn to live without him. I had to go to work and it was hard for I could not hear to relate to others. I had been a wife, mother, and homemaker all those years. I had no schooling or skills to turn to.

After a while I started to drink and I had never drank before. At first I would go out to hide this from the kids. I didn't like going out because of having to relate to people and I started to stay home. I would ask my oldest daughter to watch my smaller children so I could be alone. I would go into a world where he was still there and I would drink myself to sleep. I did this a lot. Even though I knew it would not change anything, it did take me away for awhile.

When I was about 40 and it was Christmas time, a friend of mine asked me what I wanted for Christmas. I told him I wanted a hearing aid. He said, "Go to the doctor and find out what you need."

I learned I needed two hearing aids. I felt these would really help me and change my life. They did, but not like I thought or expected, for hearing aids don't change what you hear, they only make everything louder. The hearing aids did bless me in a lot of other ways. They enabled me to hear water, the wind, the rain, birds, things like my watch and a clock. I had never heard them before for 40 years. I didn't know one could hear you walk across the carpet, or that your clothes made a noise, too.

I recall the first morning. I got up to make my son's breakfast, turned on the toaster and it made so much noise I asked him, "Has it always done that?" Bobby said, "What?" I said, "The noise from the toaster." "Yes, Mama. It has."

It made me think of all the times I had gotten up early to get something done before the children got up and I knew I had to have been making enough noise to wake the dead.

Later, my attorneys sent a team of people, doctors to run tests on me. I learned then how devastating this lack of hearing had ruled my life, ran a pattern for me over and over. How I had felt vulnerable to men who had raped me, men who abused me, hurt me, held guns to me, beat me and left me for dead. After learning all these things, I cried myself to sleep at night for a long time. A lot of questions come to mind and I needed answers.

I knew God wanted to know all our hurts, pain, all about us. He really already does, but He wants us to tell him and ask him. My answer comes from Him. He'll let you hurt, live in pain, he'll let your heart be ripped out and when you've hurt long enough and bad enough you'll turn to Jesus.

I ask, Lord, give me something to justify this reasoning in my view, some answers so I can go

on. He says: Knock, my door will open; seek and you will find; you ask in faith and you believe and you shall have. So I asked, Lord, "Why did all this happen to me? Why did I go through all this abuse that put me into a state of mind?"

Why did you let it happen? It came to mind how all the times God had healed people, people who could not walk, hear, see, how he healed the people who were brought to him - people who were just there and he healed them before many others. He could have healed them from anywhere he was. He didn't have to heal them before others.

But God worked a miracle for the non-believers. That was my answer. I am God's miracle. God could have healed me and not allowed me to be deaf. He could have sent someone to help me, could have let me grow up and be as normal a person as I could. I wonder sometimes now where I would be today and what kind of success I may have had if I had not been deaf, if someone had just helped me a little. But he didn't let it happen that way.

He gave me a blessing and that blessing is to share my life, my experience in hopes just like his that my testimony will touch a child and spare them from a life like I've lived. Or that my testimony will touch an adult and they will try to understand, have compassion for those who are unlike them in many ways and having a hard time. To try to be just like Jesus is and how he is, to stand there and wait as long as it takes and say, "Here I am. I want to help you and lend a hand and pass it on to others who have less."

I believe God sent his son Jesus Christ to live here on earth in the flesh just like us, that he lived and died and rose again to give us salvation and everlasting life. I believe I am worthy because Jesus lives in my heart and if it weren't for Jesus, there would be nothing. I thank you Jesus.

Abuse has no preference

Abuse has no preference as to where, when, or how it will apply itself from the hands of an abuser to the person who receives it.

Abuse has no preference how it is applied to effect the mind to bend it to the abuser's control - it will do it every time. I was talking to someone a few years ago about how it seems that no matter how good I was, how much I did, how well I did it, it was never enough. They told me, "Bettie, to those kind of people you can never be good enough or do anything well enough to please them. There will always be more they want from you."

As I thought back I found it was so true, yet we as battered women try to please to keep what peace we can, but the end always sounded the same - it was never enough.

I can recall the times I was beaten if I answered and beaten if I didn't. It was the same outcome. At times when I was so scared to speak and was kicked with boots and dragged from room to room and water poured over my head when he thought I was passed out and he wanted me awake to endure this. That time he left me on the floor when I couldn't get up and walked out. There's the time I was taken out in a field by my husband and strangled, raped, and told to scream all I wanted to, it would do no good. I learned not to scream, to do a thing or say a word. Just do what he wanted me to and he would take me home. I was not even married to him then; we were divorced when this happened. Still, no one would make him leave me alone.

These stories could go on and on. I used to go for weeks and not think of this in here, in prison, but not any more. Now I am stripped daily, up to 6 to 8 times a day, and it reminds me of those times in the past. I am trying to block it out. Sometimes it works and other times it doesn't.

I just keep talking during the time I am stripped to avoid thinking of what I am doing.

Yes, I learned to endure it, to fake it, to even live with it to some degree because what was I to do if no one else would help me? I lived in a state without my family with only my six children and me. It was hard trying to run and hide, to move my children from school to school, home to home, and start over time and time again, only for him to find me again. My children couldn't

live anything like a normal family life. We always had to be on the lookout for someone who would hurt us and did. This world gets very small. I moved from Texas to Virginia once and in a few short weeks my husband was at my door and it started all over again.

On My Own

In 1969 after my divorce from the children's father, I was told that maybe the welfare could help train me for a job.

I went to talk with them but because I was supposed to be getting \$250 a month for my five children living with me, I did not qualify. That was only \$50 a month for each child to feed, clothe, to keep a home, send them to school and get medical care. Praise God my children were always healthy, but for my baby. Bobby was dehydrated because he couldn't digest milk and didn't want Kool-Aid or water.

The Welfare could have helped me with my hearing, but said I was drawing too much money - when I could get it from the children's father. When I called him, he came by and gave me \$50 for milk and lunch money. My children suffered as almost all children do when there is a divorce. I believed their father when he said he would not let them down. He didn't have to help me but he could have helped me with the children and given them a better life than what they had. He never paid more than \$50 a month for all of them, ever. Sometimes he went for a whole year without paying that.

When my baby was dehydrated and in the hospital, I was staying there with him and needed to go home a while to see about the rest of the children, I called their father at work to come stay with Bobby. He came but told me what time to be back because he had a date. I knew he would leave and Bobby was only fifteen months old and I didn't want him left alone.

I worked jobs waiting on tables and in a bar and along with those jobs where you pay your own taxes, the so-called pat on the back jobs for respect. With being hearing impaired, I learned to work in degrading places I didn't like, learned to smile and keep going to make a living.

I worked two and three jobs because one didn't pay enough to raise my children. Things did get easier from time to time as my children grew up and went on their own and there were fewer to take care of.

I learned to talk better, but fell into groups where no one cared anyway. I kept to myself a lot where I didn't have to have any input so no one knew any different or that I didn't know what they were talking about. People would sometimes say how quiet I was and I would just smile and say, "I'm listening." This, so no one would tease me about not hearing or about my hearing aids after I got them.

I really lived in a world of my own and tried to be as much like others as I could. I lived in a very sheltered place to be safe as I could in body and mind. Without really knowing it, I chose words I could say to sound better. I did not and still can't hear words like normal hearing.

A lot of words I still can't say or repeat and it makes me feel less intelligent than I could be if I had more training after I got my hearing aids.

These are some of the errors that confused me after I got hearing aids.

I learned that all those years I had never heard words right or said them right as well. How embarrassing I must have been for my family, husband, and children! I withdrew because of it.

People still don't understand this to this day. Even when I try to tell them, they think because I can hear better or talk some that all is OK.

It is not. Do I blame my hearing loss for my lesser life? No, I am only trying to explain what it did to me, what a disability can do to a person and their life when others know and could have done something to help them. What abuse and neglect can do to a person. What we can do to ourselves when we don't know where to turn or even have a place to turn.

I just read this:

Helen Keller, who was both blind and deaf, was asked which of those senses she would rather have restored if it were possible to do so. She replied without a moment's hesitation, "Hearing, because it truly connects you to the world."

Five Generations of Abuse

At age five years old is the first I recall of rape, yet I didn't know what rape was for many years to come.

I am 62 now. At age five you didn't hear those kinds of words and I couldn't hear anything then. I remember the pain and fear as I was hurting and my mother and aunt tried to help me. I remember them trying to put something back into me as if my insides were falling out. I still don't recall who did it. I think back at times to try, but I can't.

After that I can recall the fear of others when I was given a bath. I never wanted anyone to see me. We lived in an apartment where the back door came into the kitchen that everyone used. There was a large deep sink that I was given a bath in and was dried off with a towel there. I never wanted anyone in there. But I was just a little girl and no one knew what was wrong with me as I cried. I didn't even know myself.

When I got married at fifteen and had a home of my own, everyone had to be dressed when they got up. No one, not even my babies, could run around in the house in their underwear. I had a fear of that and I didn't know why and I've felt that way all my life. I can recall almost everywhere I have ever lived after the age of five, but I can't remember what happened. Some things that I do remember I can't repeat because it would hurt those now who don't need to be hurt and would change nothing.

I believe God blocks the mind so we are not given more than we can carry at one time. But this is not blocking the minds of the children who are watching and hearing what is going on. Believe me when I say it has a great effect on them and those who witness what the children see. Children grow up with what they see and learn and carry it on into their own families and the lives of others. What they see they think is normal and right and OK. It is not always right when it causes fear in those who must live with it all their lives.

At age twelve, I became the woman of the house though I was still a child. I was taken out of school one day to care for my little brother, 5, and sister, 3. My mother had gone to the hospital for a while. No one knew for how long. My mother had been sick off and on for a long time and I didn't know what was wrong, but I was told this time where she was. She had been admitted into a mental institution.

She was there a few months. During this time I became the mother of the family taking care of the house, my brother and sister, washing, grocery shopping, and cooking. I already knew how to do all this for I had spent most of my time at home with Mama. It feels so sad now how I went from playing with my dolls and playing house to being a real mother and it wasn't playing now.

After a while my mother could come home on weekends so I would clean house and cook and have everything all nice for her, but then others in the family would come over, mess up the house, eat the food and I had no time alone with Mama. When they all came over I had to go back to being a little girl only I was a little girl no more. I was somewhere in between.

There was one time I remember being able to talk to Mama a short time and tell her what was going on while she was gone. I didn't know anything about mental illness and I still don't know much, but had I known anything at that time I never would have told her what was going on. I would have known she didn't understand and that she was helpless to do anything even if she did. At that time she had given up.

Mama got past her illness, went back to work, and worked until she retired at 65 or so. She still had some problems, but I was never told about them. Like I've said, we became friends and mother and daughter. At one time I sent home over 350 letters she had written to me here, I could never put one in the trash. Mama passed away in 1993, just six months before my son

Bobby died. That was a very painful time.

Mama didn't know anymore how to fight back than I did later on when it came my turn. This abuse had started in my grandmother's time, on to my mother, then me, as well as into my own children and grandchildren's generations. This is five generations of women who have fallen into some kind of abuse and control by a man. Where does it stop and where does it end? I wish it could with me, but it has already gone on ahead of me.

I recall my own started when I was five years of age with the first man in my life, my father, when I felt I was so special. How many women and children can tell this same story? Will we ever know? But please, Lord, let my story wake up a few who are able to change this cycle.

Cycles of Abuse

The cycle started many years ago in my family when we didn't know what a cycle was.

My grandfather (my mother's dad) gave her away along with her brothers and sister. My grandmother could do nothing about it when my mother was raped and used until she also married too young to get away from it. I never knew this all this time until I was here in prison. My mother and I have become friends as well as mother and daughter at last. I even asked some questions about what her hopes and dreams had been other than being the mother she was to us. The things our children as children don't realize we have, until they themselves get older. The heart and mind don't change as we get older the way our skin and appearance change. We still have the same feelings as always only they are deeper and closer to our hearts. I still feel caught somewhere in between somewhere and here.

As I went from one abusive relationship to another, each one seemed to get worse. Sometimes I felt like they all must have read the same book or else men all have the same make up. Of course I knew this was not true. Each one had their own kind of abuse and it all meant control. They don't start out that way. I believe we miss seeing it so much because as women we actually try so hard to please. When the abusive side comes out, we want to believe them that they are sorry. We forgive and look forward to that nice side again. It seemed like each one of them just added a twist of abuse to that which was already there.

I didn't like being single, wanted to be married and have the family life I knew was there, even if I had to furnish most all of it. After my first marriage, I had always had my own home, my own car, and no one else had ever offered to get another for me. That was OK and I shared what I had and that was OK, too. Now it seems everyone is saying and acting like I had nothing - that is not true. My home was mine and I wasn't married to anyone when I bought it or my property. I worked hard for those things and everything I had.

As a little girl I thought you grew up, got married, had children and the family stayed together forever. That was the way of life and I still believe it is the best way. All I ever wanted was to be married and have a family. As a young girl, I dreamed of that little house with a picket fence and flowers to take care of when I got old and until then, always my family. When my husband left the children and myself, that world and dreams all fell apart and I had to face the real world that I could never accept. I married over and over again looking for the dream that never even got close to the one I had for 18 years married to my children's father - even though he was very controlling.

Back on the Right Track with God

In 1985, God picked me up out of that nightmare I lived in after the children's dad left us and I really faced the real world.

It was like God set me on this cloud way up above everywhere and everyone so I could see. As I sat there I said, Lord, there is a jungle down there. How did I ever get this far? When I looked into His face and eyes I knew it was only by His Grace. Then is when I started back on the right track that I knew as a child and young girl and went to church and trusted, paying

attention to the details of life.

Yes, it is hard here where I am. I ask, why was I here and not some where else? I know now I didn't know how to get out of that life. There was no one else who cared enough to save me from myself. No one cared enough to get into my head or heart. No one helped me understand what had happened to me, so here I sit.

I wish it could be another way and I hope and pray it will be. This is no place to be and I don't belong here. If it takes all this to turn my life and help me understand, then I am grateful for it. I would think that with all that goes on in prison, there would be more important things to do than strip a little old woman all day long who never goes anywhere. I'll hold on to my pride, morals, dignity and pray one day I may, by the Grace of God, walk out of here. If not, then I pray something I say or do will help another live a little better, a little easier, someone else who had to live this way.

If the truth or if any of what I've said had been told at trial, I would not be here. If the witnesses had been called, and none were, or the pictures of me beaten and bruised with black eyes had been shown, but they were not - even though my attorney had them.

How was I to know what was going on when no one told me? I still don't understand it today. The jury never knew that I was deaf and could not hear my trial - only in parts. I couldn't hear enough and know what was going on. There were no speakers. I didn't know there could be for I had never been in court before for a trial. Something went wrong.

Yes, God picked me up out of that world and let me see how it really is. There are a lot of places out there now for battered women to turn to, but why does it have to be her who gives up her home and moves her children from place to place and never having a secure home?

Why is it her who always has to be hiding somewhere and on the run to be safe? I

know: I've been there time and time again.

It was hard with five children and trying to keep them in school and safe. It is hard to hold a job and be able to work free of the abuser calling and coming to where you work. Battered women go through this all the time. There has to be a way to stop it so they can have a normal life.