

# There's always a silver lining

She smiles and laughs as she sits, eating her homemade chicken and rice, which smells and looks delicious. One would assume she is the average high school senior having an after school snack but this young lady is anything but ordinary. Her story is one that needs to be shared and she believes that it needs to be told, not for self-pity or to become famous but to share so other girls like her might learn from her experiences. From abused childhood and outcast foster child to pregnant beaten teen living in a domestic violence shelter, this flourishing, optimistic young woman has a story one would never believe. This is Michelle's\* story.

It all began when Michelle was a baby. Unwanted by her mother, she was raised, or adopted as she says, by the man whom the system assumed was her biological father. Regardless of blood relation to this man, Michelle loved him as her father. His role was to protect and love her, like a father should for any child, and everyone thought this was the case. But the unimaginable actions began when Michelle was only three years old. For six long years this innocent little girl was physically and sexually abused repeatedly by this man. Michelle kept this dark secret hidden away from the world until she was nine. She knew something was not right about what was happening and told her school counselor. Immediately she was removed from his "care" and began living with her aunt.

This is when she picked up her love for cooking. It fascinated her to watch her aunt in the kitchen. Wide eyed and amazed, Michelle would sit for hours just admiring her aunt as she watched her aunt create desserts and full course meals from scratch. Cooking became her escape from reality.

In the beginning, Michelle enjoyed her aunt's home. She had a nice warm bed to sleep in, someone tucking her in at night, thinking she was safe from the torture she endured for so long, and a mother figure she'd always wanted. The blissful dream of a life she was living soon became the similar horrors of her past. Her aunt became cold and unloving, casting her out from the rest of the household. Michelle felt as if her aunt wanted nothing to do with her, that she loved only her own children and Michelle had become a burden on the family. For another six years, Michelle would live with repeated abuse but this time it wasn't physical or sexual. It was the kind that breaks your spirit; verbal and emotional cruelty. Name calling, put downs, and isolation was her everyday life at her aunt's.

Michelle had enough when she turned 16. She decided to request to leave her aunt's and become a foster child. In 2013, she moved in with her foster family. Though she wasn't abused by her foster parents and felt like her new home was loving and better than the last, she longed for more love than they were able to give.

That's when Jason\* enters her life. In 2015 she met an older man casually in the neighborhood. They hit it off right away and shortly after she moved in with him. The first few months were like most relationships, the honeymoon stage. Michelle fell in love with him. She truly thought this was it. But for Michelle, where there seemed to be rays of happiness shining into her life there was always a dark cloud closely behind.

Unbeknownst to her, Jason was an alcoholic. His rage began to show only three months into their relationship. Triggered by the alcohol, he would take out his past on her. Growing up, Jason watched his father beat his mother regularly and this became normal to him. This is how he assumed a family operated. So he began physically and verbally abusing Michelle, always promising her afterward that it would never happen again. That he made a mistake and that he loved her dearly. Just like most abusers, he was not sorry and the abuse continued. "You're stupid" and "You won't amount to anything in life" were some of his favorite things to tell her. In late 2015, Michelle had endured enough of his abuse after he beat on her, giving her a black eye. Protecting herself was no longer her only concern; she was now five months pregnant.

That is when Coastal Women's Shelter enters the story. She left Jason and began living in our shelter, not the ideal place for a pregnant teenage girl to want to live. After a few days she left and went to live with a girlfriend. Michelle knew she should not contact him and to stay away. Two days before Christmas her friend drove her to Jason's, previously Michelle's place too, to pick up some clothes and belongings. Jason was supposed to be in jail for a civil charge, making Michelle assume she was in the clear so her friend mistakenly dropped her off.

As she unlocks the door, her heart drops when she sees him standing in the doorway. Drunk. He pulls her inside and begins to beat her harder than he ever had before. Repeatedly he screamed "I'm going to kill you" with his hands wrapped around her throat. Michelle knew she had to find a way out or she would die there on the floor. She managed to escape from his grip and get out the front door. As she is crawling across the front lawn and he is attempting to drag her back into the house, a concerned driver stops to help. Jason tells Michelle to get in the house and threatens her life again. But he wasn't going to manipulate her this time.

Today, Michelle is living at our shelter, Jason was arrested, and sadly the baby was lost because of that night. Though she mourns the loss of her unborn child she is positive that her future has countless doors to open. During her time at the shelter she has made close friends and gotten advice from women that she looks up to as mother figures. Michelle does not feel alone anymore. She wants other young girls to know that though they may feel alone, like they have no place to go and no one to love or care for them, that they're wrong. There is help out there. That this isn't normal behavior from someone who "loves" you. And to never give up hoping for something better because better is out there. You just have to find it.

In a few months Michelle will graduate from high school. She wants to attend Craven Community College to be an entrepreneur, one day owning a restaurant or catering business. Her past is not defining her future. This independent young woman is determined to be something everyone in her life has told her she could not be: STRONG!

\*names have been changed to protect character's identity and permission has been granted for CWS to tell her story.