

Taking Back My Life

Alarming statistics are published regarding rape and violence against women every few years. We often read these numbers and think “yes, there are many attacks, but it won’t happen to me”. I used to think that way also, but have learned that each of us has the possibility to become one of those statistics. According to the United States Department of Justice, a woman in the United States is raped every 2-3 minutes. Two-thirds of these victims are less than 18 years old, and only 29% of the reported cases were listed as “stranger rapes.” This statistic is alarming in and of itself. Think about the fact that only 29% of rapes are from strangers, this means that 71% of the rapes are committed by men the woman already knows. The Department of Justice also reports that an estimated 500,000 women are assaulted each year. 170,000 end in rape and 140,000 attempted rape. The statistics indicate that women between the ages 16 and 24 have four times greater chance to be assaulted and/or raped than any other age group. I feel that we need to be aware of the danger that exists in our societies. Additionally, most experts in the field of crime reporting state that these statistics are very underrepresented. Sexual assaults of all types are perhaps the most underreported criminal acts of all. Therefore, the actual figures are probably much higher.

I am certain that almost all of us knows someone who has been abused at some point in her life. It may have been physical, verbal, or sexual abuse. Most people assume that sexual and physical abuse is harder to overcome than the emotional/verbal abuse, however, verbal/emotional abuse leaves scars that last a lifetime. Surface bruises heal. Broken bones heal. Verbally inflicted scars do not. Unfortunately, physical and sexual abuse is often mixed with verbal and/or emotional abuse or attack.

If you are one of the lucky few who live in a “perfect” world, sheltered from violence, and do not know anyone who has suffered an attack, you will have learned about one such person by the time you finish reading this. I will provide some background information into my life to illustrate that I am no different than most of the women in this society. I will detail the attacks as I remember them, and I will explain how I was affected by the violence. I will also tell you how I am learning to live with and heal from these incidents.

This is not written with the purpose to promote one method of “treatment” over another. What I want you to know and understand through this journey is that even if you have suffered a violent attack, you can survive and be a relatively sane, functioning member of society.

I was twice a victim of physical assault many years ago. Physical assault is often accompanied by emotional and verbal abuse therefore the scars that I bear today were inflicted by the emotions that I felt at that time. I am thirty years old now, and my experiences occurred when I was fifteen years old. I am able to admit to being a victim now, without shame, after a long and difficult journey. The ones who victimized me remain unpunished, and will remain unnamed. I did not have the courage at the time to come forward with my story, but now I feel that it needs to be told. I also feel that it is important for women to know that assault is not okay, and that speaking out about it immediately to proper authorities is key to stopping those men from hurting others. Realize that being a victim does not mean that you are or were weak. It only means that you were in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong person.

My childhood was a “normal” one in our society. I was lucky enough to be raised by both my mother and my father. I have two older brothers. We lived in a small town in rural central Nebraska. The town population was approximately 2,500 of which most would be classified as middle to upper-middle

class. People felt safe enough to leave their houses and cars unlocked, walk around the town during the day or night, and allow their teenagers to be relatively unattended. It seemed like a very safe place to live.

When I was in junior high and high school, I was extremely shy and insecure. I was not a “pretty” girl, nor was I remotely popular. I was also overweight, and having difficulties adjusting to puberty. I did not imagine that any boy would be interested in me for more than mere friendship. Many people would have considered me the “nerd” of the class. I liked school, enjoyed studying and reading, and always got “As” on my report cards.

The first attack occurred in the spring of my sophomore year of high school. I had been “dating” a boy for a short while, and we had become friends. He seemed to be nice, and he treated me well. He said all the “right” things to make me feel special, and I trusted him. We began talking more and more, and became closer as time went on. As I said, I was shy, so I was unsure of what he expected or even wanted from me when we were alone together. I can remember feeling like I was expected to give more of myself to him than I was comfortable with, but at the same time, I did not want to upset him. I was happy to have a boy interested in me, and felt that I should do what I could to keep him interested in me. I have since learned that listening to our “uneasy” feelings is a major protective mechanism built into each of us. It is called intuition, and we need to learn to listen to and trust it.

This boy and I spent time together for a month or so (the time frame has since faded from my memory), and then he began to change. We would kiss and “make-out” as young teens do, but I do remember telling him that I was not ready to lose my virginity. He said that he wouldn’t push me, so I continued to spend time with him. After a short while, he decided that he wanted more than I wanted to give. I was at a friend’s house with him one evening, and he pushed me into a bedroom and started pulling on my clothes. I again said that I wasn’t ready, but he told me that I would be ready by the time it happened. He forced me on my back on the bed, my legs bent at the knees over the edge. He leaned against my lower legs, pinning me to the bed. As he leaned over me, he began to un-tuck my T-shirt from my jeans. He was trying to pull it over my head. I was struggling with him and telling him “NO.” He took his shirt off and tried to reassure me that it would be okay. He then lay on top of me and began kissing me, his hands still working at my shirt and mauling my breasts. I assure you that I was experiencing pain, but mostly anger and fear. This anger and fear provided me with enough strength to push him off me, get out of the room, and eventually get out of the house. He later told me that he was not going to force me into anything that I did not want to do. He just wanted to see how I would react, and to “look good” in front of the other guys that were in the house with their girlfriends.

The following weekend he came to see me at my job. I worked in a local fast-food diner, and it was normal for friends of the employees to visit. The other girl working with me said she’d give us some privacy in the back room. When we got to the back room, he began accusing me of teasing him and being rude. He said that I should “put out” more, and that I was being immature. I tried to explain my feelings about sex to him, but he refused to listen. He forcefully pushed himself on me, and began kissing me violently. He was forcing his mouth on me so firmly that he actually bit me several times on my lips and neck. I pushed him away and tried to run around a chest-type freezer, but he grabbed my arm and wouldn’t let go. His grip on my arm was quite strong, and I did not know how to break free from his hold. He pulled me to him and used his body to move me against a wall. I could see anger in his eyes, and I felt extremely trapped and terrified. I thought that he was going to start hitting me, or even try to rape me. He kept telling me that if I would just

“give-in”, he would not have to do this. He moved his grip to my upper arms, pinning me completely to the wall. He then moved me a little to the side and shoved me violently into the wall. The problem with this wall is that it was not just a wall, but a door to a walk-in freezer.

Walk-in freezers have big metal handles, and this one kept getting slammed into my side. He repeatedly thrust me up against the door using his body to shove me with as much force as possible. I tried to tell him to stop, but he kept telling me to be quiet, and to do as he said. The more I struggled, the harder he pushed, and the tighter his grip got on my arms. It felt as if the handle was going to go through me while he kept shoving me into it. After what seemed like an eternity, he abruptly quit manhandling me, and left the diner. He said that he never wanted to see me again, and that he was going to find a girl who would give him what he wanted.

Once he left, I slid down the door, trying not to make any noise. I was too embarrassed to ask the other girl for help, and I did not want her to see me in the shape that I was in. I quietly walked around to the bathroom to see how I looked and realized that I was bleeding vaginally. I mention this because the majority of the physical injury was internal. I do not tend to bruise too easily; therefore there were very few external signs of my assault. I had a few bruises on my backside, but was able to hide them until they healed. This happened in the early spring, so I could wear long-sleeved shirts to cover any bruises that I did have. I was angry and hurt, but thought that I would easily get over it and go on with my life. I now know that the physical injury was significant, but relatively minor compared to the emotional difficulties that I have dealt with since that time.

My emotional state was not very stable for quite some time after the attack. I had not spoken to anyone about what had happened, and was not dealing with the emotional responses well at all. Combined with the stresses of being a teenager, being beaten by a boyfriend tends to make one emotionally unstable. However, even with what I was going through, I experienced yet another assault.

A few months later, one of my brother's friends came to visit me at work. He had been out of town for several months and was back to visit. Since I was still too young to drive, he offered to give me rides home after work so that my parents would not have to come get me. After a few nights of talking to him, and him driving me home, he told me that he liked me and had since before he graduated from high school. I told him that I was too young for him (he was 21, I was 15), but he said that he didn't care about the age difference. He also said that he could tell something was bothering me.

I had been having nightmares about the first “beating” I took, so I started to tell him about it. This was the first time that I had ever told anyone about the attack. He seemed to empathize with me, and told me that if I would tell him who did it, he would “take care of him” for me. I explained that wasn't necessary, and that I was dealing with it. We talked about me being in vulnerable positions, being too trusting, and being insecure. After a short while, I decided that he was being genuinely nice to me, so I began to trust him more. Looking back, I realize that my intuition again was telling me that this guy wasn't safe either, but I was desperate for an ally.

A couple of nights later, I got off work early and he came to pick me up. My parents were not expecting me home for several hours, so we decided to spend some time together. I explained that I just wanted to be friends, and he agreed that we would not pursue anything further at that time. He then started to drive out of town. I became uncomfortable, but he told me that he wanted to head out to the river to sit and talk for a while. It was a common thing to do in my town, so I agreed. Once we got there, however, he became quite physical with me.

He began groping my legs, stroking my face, running his hands through my hair, and telling me that he wanted to “be with” me. I tried explaining my concerns to him. I tried telling him that he was changing the dynamic of the relationship that we had agreed to. And, I was crying because I had trusted him and he was hurting me. I reminded him that I was only 15 years old and just gone through a terrible attack recently. He told me that being with him sexually would help me forget about it, and he kept assaulting me.

We were still in his car, and I was sitting in the passenger seat. I still do not know how I managed to do it, but I was able to knee him in the groin. It stunned him badly, and I was able to jump out of the window before he realized what happened. He had locked the door electronically, so the window was the fastest route out of the car. I ran a couple of miles home, and went straight to my bedroom.

I felt scared, ashamed and guilty. I blamed myself for getting into the situation in the first place, and told myself that it was my entire fault. I did not tell anyone about this incident either. I now know that these are typical feelings of assault victims. Our society tends to blame us, the victims of assault. We have all heard of rape and/or assault cases of a female alone somewhere dressed in a short skirt or something similar having the blame placed on her because she “deserved it” due to the way she was dressed, looked, or acted. No one deserves to be attacked. No arguments. No exceptions.

Before this guy left town, he wrote me a letter telling me that he would have me, and that I can not hide from him. He then began writing to me, telling me that he loved me. I never wrote back, and learned that he became quite angry with me for ignoring him.

My emotional state was so fragile at that time that I considered many methods of suicide. I was so ashamed of myself for having gotten attacked, and I could not bear to live with the guilt that I felt. I am quite thankful that I lived in a small house with a large family. The lack of privacy at that time is probably the only thing that kept me from trying to kill myself.

Luckily, nothing happened for many years after that. I started dating again after a year or so, but never told my boyfriend what had happened. I had nightmares occasionally, usually when I was under a lot of stress. The nightmares were “replays” of the attacks, magnified in my dreams. After high school, I went to college thinking I could put all of it behind me and just forget about what happened. Unfortunately, the second guy found me there and started stalking me. I ended up leaving that college after one year for many reasons, but one was to find a new place to “hide”. I could not handle the stress he was putting on me, and was still unable to talk about what had happened to me. I had even counseled some of my friends in college who had been victims of attack or rape, but never opened up to them about my history.

I never “dealt” with the assaults that occurred to me. I do feel lucky that I was never actually raped, but the emotional assault was devastating none-the-less. I moved on with my life, moved to Lincoln, and finished my undergraduate college education. After a few years of living in Lincoln, however, the nightmares returned. It had been over twelve years since the first attack, and I could not believe that I was experiencing difficulties again.

I was living with someone at the time, so I had to tell him about the nightmares. I would awaken at night in a cold sweat, terrified. I would not be able to return to sleep, and began “fighting” in my sleep. I explained to him that I was attacked in high school, and he listened. He said that it was a long time ago, and that I was safe now. I tried to believe him, but knew that I would never feel safe unless I did something about it. I looked into counseling through my work, but the counselor was unable to help me. I was offered medication to help me sleep and another medication to dull my emotional reactions, but nothing to help me deal with the emotional trauma. The counselor actually told me that I would either have to continue with

intense psychological counseling in combination with medication, or learn to live with the memories and nightmares. That was not an acceptable solution for me. I did not want to deal with the experience by numbing myself to life through drugs, so I started searching for another method of "treatment".

I decided to look into self-defense classes in hopes of preventing this from happening again. I finally found a class that offered what I was looking for. I searched the internet for self defense in Lincoln, Nebraska and found the Nebraska Hapkido Association Home Page (<http://hapkido.4t.com>). I spent many evenings reading the information provided on the page, and finally contacted the instructor. He encouraged me to watch the class to see if I was interested. After about six months I did finally watch a class. That was in June of 2000. While I was watching the class, the instructor would take time to explain the techniques that I was seeing the other students perform. I was amazed to watch a very petite female student easily throw a stocky male student to the floor. It was obvious that she had learned to perform techniques that maximized her strengths, used his mass against him, and provided her ways to defend herself from much larger attackers. I watched half of one class, and decided that I needed to try to learn to defend myself. I figured that if a tiny female could be that effective, I should be able to learn some useful ways to defend myself. I did not explain to the instructor the rationale behind my interest, just that I was looking for a self-defense class.

It was explained to me at that time that Hapkido techniques and principles allow one to deflect strikes and attacks to minimize injury, control one's attacker using minimal force, and finish to submission if necessary. I was informed that from the very first class I would be learning the basics of Hapkido and self-defense. This was exactly what I was looking for, and I was hooked.

I joined the class that same week, and began working very hard. I did everything that I was told to do in the class, and progressed quickly. I was not in the best physical shape at that time, but I did my best to learn balance, endurance, strength, and dedication. We started by working on basics, and I quickly learned that I was uncomfortable with the close proximity of my partner, especially if I was working with a male. I eventually learned to open my personal space, but it remained difficult for quite some time. After a few months, however, I began to change. I learned that it was not only appropriate to defend myself, but that it was encouraged. This concept was new to me. I had been "trained" by society that females do not fight back, that we "deserve" trouble if we act, dress or talk a certain way. I was thrilled to be learning differently. I was also thrilled to see other females working on self-defense as well. We started working on more techniques, and eventually began working on some ground-grappling techniques.

Time progressed, and the nightmares returned. Neither of my attacks occurred on the ground, but I have since learned that the body-to-body contact was similar enough to open my subconscious mind and let the emotions return. I had several episodes in class where I had "flash-backs" of the attacks. The "flashes" were intense. My mind would switch back to when I was fifteen, being beaten. I could see my attacker, feel the pain and humiliation, and become the victim once again. During these "flashes," I would see, feel, and experience the beating again. My mind would be convinced that I was physically back in my hometown at 15 years of age. I was not able to react to what was happening in the present, I was only able to relive the past. Luckily, my instructor recognized what was happening and had the female students assist me. They would talk to me, reassure me of my safety, and slowly bring me back to the present. After the first couple of "flashes", I explained what had happened to me to my instructor (Sabumnim), and he offered to help me.

I had to share some of my experience with the other students, as I was not in control of myself when I would have the flashes. I was concerned that I would either freeze during a technique and get

myself injured, or I would “snap” and try to seriously hurt my partner. I was very embarrassed and ashamed to admit what happened, especially to Sabumnim. I told him that I felt that I should not be having problems with something that happened so long ago, and that I felt “weak” for allowing the fears to continue. He patiently listened to me, and explained that since I had never dealt with the issues, they were still locked inside me. He also explained that the fact that I was working through my problems and finally dealing with what had happened to me showed strength and not weakness.

Sabumnim worked with me after that to help me through my difficulties. He would spend time discussing how emotions can be trapped inside and how certain events, sounds, smells, etc. could trigger the return. We began to meet before class to work on ground techniques to build my confidence and lessen my fears. Over a short time, the “flashes” slowly dwindled. I would still get them, but they would be less intense, and I could regain control of myself much more quickly. I would like to say that I am completely over my past difficulties, but I am not. They will always be a part of me. I can say, however, that I have learned to deal with them effectively most of the time. I still have nightmares occasionally, but they are rare, and I have since changed the outcome. No longer am I the victim that I was at age 15. No longer am I a victim; I am a survivor!

Being a victim does not have to happen. What we do with our lives, our bodies, and our energy is up to us. We are the ones who set the rules regarding our personal space. Each of us has the ability to shape our own future. We can not change our past, but we can learn to take necessary steps to help prevent assault from occurring in the first place. We are the ones with the power to overcome the pain and survive.

I would suggest to anyone who has been the victim of any type of assault to speak out, seek help, and do what you personally need to do to heal yourself. Counselors are available in most cities, and many insurance companies do provide some benefits for psychiatric counseling. Additionally, rape-crisis hotlines have toll free numbers that can be accessed any time of day or night. Don't sit back and think that you can “wish” it away. Do SOMETHING! I found that Hapkido was the perfect outlet for me, and it may or may not be for others. Do whatever it takes to heal. Survive. Live!