



The fight of my **LIFE**

Our subject takes a breather after a round of punching a heavy bag.

For years I tried to heal from being abused as a child. I finally turned things around by learning how to box – and finding out how strong I really am.

**by Anonymous, as told to Laura Robinson
photographs by Finn O'Hara**

I remember knowing that I was in trouble even when I was a toddler. As I got older, the violence in my family kept escalating. As a child, I thought, This is bad. These are the parents I am stuck with. Imagine being smacked in the head as hard as an adult can possibly hit you. Hard enough that it feels like your head is going to rip off your shoulders. That's what my parents did to me.

My younger brother was the child my parents wanted: He was a boy. He didn't get the treatment I got. At a young age, I started to understand what misogyny is. I know what it's like to be strangled and to always be fearful of the adults who are supposed to protect you. My mother and father were equally violent toward me, but because my father was bigger and stronger there was more force to what he did. >>

I was born in Toronto, but we moved around a lot. At 17, I ran away. I'd been planning it for years, but I had to wait, because I knew that if the police found me and I was younger than 16 years old, they would return me to my biological family – I don't call them my "real" family – or force me into foster care, and I had known kids who were abused in foster homes. Then there were these other kids, who lived like refugees in abandoned buildings. I thought, I won't try to leave yet. I was always hoping for a miracle, that the violence would stop, but it didn't.

When I left, we were living in Aurora and just down the street from us was the Yellow Brick House, a women's shelter. Normally they help women in abusive relationships, but they took me in as a teenage girl and let me figure out where I'd go next.

First I lived in a rented room, and then I got my own apartment. I tried really hard to go to school and work, but it was difficult. When you're a teenager, isolated, female and black, you are a pariah. Over the next few years, I made several attempts at finishing high school, but I eventually gave up. I couldn't afford to stay in school; I had to work to support myself and to live on my own.

Finally, when I was 28, I found a second chance in a program at York University for women whose education has been interrupted for various reasons, such as violence. I finished the course with a B+, which meant I'd earned my high-school diploma and I could start university. I enrolled in York University's undergraduate arts program, but I couldn't handle the student debt. Finishing high school didn't mean I was being paid more at the jobs I'd had before. I worked three jobs at once, including stints in retail, women's literacy work and childcare, just to survive.

I also volunteered: For more than 16 years, I've been a peer advocate and supporter. I love children, and some-



Savoy "Kapow!" Howe,
founder of the Toronto
Newsgirls Boxing Club.

times when I look at them, I think, I was that age and that size when someone who was an adult beat the hell out of me. How cowardly. I just made the decision that it's not going to be them and it's not going to be me.

Getting into the ring

The shadow of cruelty stayed with me, so I did a lot of reading on violence against women. When you come from an abusive background, there are many emotional issues that hold you back. I wanted to read about violence against children, but I couldn't find any information at my local library. I continued to be involved in these issues, though, which led me to activism and support programs for abused women and children. In 2007,

with several programs, including Brock University in St. Catharines, Ont., and the June Callwood Centre for Women and Families. The class is for women who have experienced violence, and it's been a big part of how good I feel about myself now. The coordinators don't ask for details. They respect your honesty and privacy, but if you want to talk, there are good people around who will listen.

The classes run once a week for three months, though I try to go more often than that. There are between 20 and 30 people in the program. We warm up with a few minutes on the treadmills or rowing machines, and then we do intense core work – skipping, sit-ups and squats. After we've done just over 30 minutes of core exercises, we hit punching bags. We don't actually spar

When you're a teenager, isolated, female and black, you are a pariah.

I joined Sistering, a woman's organization, and the Women Against Poverty Collective. At Sistering, I started my career as a visual artist; I was already a published poet and spoken-word artist. I think by now I have performed in every nightclub in Toronto.

In February 2008, when I was 32, I started going to Shape Your Life. It's a boxing program for women and trans people run out of the Toronto Newsgirls Boxing Club in co-operation

with one another, like you would in other boxing classes.

Women are often assaulted with blunt objects – baseball bats, crowbars, you name it. One of the first things our boxing instructor taught us is that the forearm to the fist is like a hammer. Women need to know these things.

It's not uncommon for victims of abuse to have health issues, but when I start the workout, I feel some of my health, vitality and strength return >>

to me. Even sit-ups – and I hate sit-ups – give me a glimpse of my strength, and that is the most amazing thing. You slowly feel yourself get healthier and stronger.

I've suffered migraines since I was a child, but they've disappeared since I started boxing. I feel like I'm having my energy replenished over and over. It's more than serious; it's off the hook. If I'm irritable or depressed – wow. You've got to love it; when you're stressed, there's nothing like a punching bag. People say to me, "You're glowing. What are you doing?" I say, "Shape Your Life, baby."

A lifelong shift

The program has become such a part of my life. After graduating from it, all the participants were offered memberships at the club for a year. I'm addicted to that place now and go as often as I can. When I don't go I feel so horrible, not just physically, but psychologically.

Lots of girls are raised to believe that if you're attacked, you're not really capable of defending yourself. But now I

walk the streets with confidence; I'm not this weak thing who couldn't hurt a fly.

A while ago, a man in my neighbourhood started harassing me, and the management at my apartment building didn't do anything; neither did the police. The man was like a bad smell. One day last year, I was enjoying the beautiful weather like everyone else and he came up behind me and started verbally harassing me. I took a boxing stance and a deep breath. I said to myself, "This time I am going to fight with my fists. I said to him, "I told you to stay away." He looked scared and left.

Usually I feel terrible after an encounter with him. But after defending myself with my boxing stance, I felt great. My spirit feels better.

I've also formed friendships through the boxing program. It's such a positive space, full of awesome people. Everyone cares about the community and tries to make it healthier, to enhance it. They reach out to women who need help, women like me. They embraced me right away. I told >>

them about the projects in my life, such as my recent art exhibit at a major museum in Toronto, and they said, “That sounds great. When can we go?” It’s been nothing but a rainstorm of blessings.

There have been many times in the past when I felt pretty spent. I severed all ties with my family as a teenager; I have nothing to do with them now. I’ve struggled with homelessness, making a living wage, finding affordable housing; I’ve had to deal with being isolated. None of this was easy. So my life is not perfect, but now it’s positive and I feel opti-

mistic. I don’t feel like I have to be strong all on my own.

I’ve learned that you can’t keep poisonous people in your life. Jealous, sabotaging, abusive people – you have to leave, get away from them. You deserve better. Tap into the positive things in life, and find people who will support you. ■



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