

Good afternoon. My name is Tara. Lately, I have been doing a lot of reminiscing. My father passed away a few months ago. We were really close. And so I've been doing a lot of thinking as to how he - and my mom - raised me. I guess that's part of the grieving process... the memories. And there's something that struck me about my childhood and young adult life. That was, he and mom, they taught me to be fearless. For instance, when we found out when I was 12 years old that I had a rare hearing impairment and that I would continue to lose my hearing (I am now 98% deaf), they encouraged me to continue lip-reading (which I do proficiently) and playing my beloved piano even though we now realized I only "heard" through feeling vibrations. Just a few years later, I was guest soloing with orchestras. Or when I was applying to colleges and my comfort level was living in a very small, safe town in Southern New Jersey, they encouraged me to attend my dream school 3000 miles away. I graduated from Stanford University summa cum laude with a triple major. And when I was going to follow the safer career path and attend Georgetown Law School, but on the 11th hour I was offered a job with B-Movie Producer Roger Corman, they urged me to listen to my gut. Listening to my gut was the right choice. After climbing the ladder, I became the producing partner to Francis Ford Coppola. All of these decisions, and many others, were made because I was fearless. It was the way I was raised. Never in my darkest nightmares, did I imagine there would come a time when all I felt, was fear.

It was 2009, when my then-husband and I temporarily (or so I thought) moved with our son Dash and daughter Sadie (then 5 and 3 years old respectively) from Park City, Utah to Culebra. My then-husband owned an

estate there along with 50 acres overlooking the Caribbean Sea, and we often visited several times a year for shorter periods of time. But since Dash was entering his kindergarten year, we knew such visits were no longer possible. Our plan was to live there full-time for one school year, long enough for the children to learn Spanish - something I really wanted for them. If you were an outsider looking in, you would have thought that the life I was living was Paradise. But if you were on the inside — cowering behind the children's bedroom door that was hastily locked in fear, like I was, you would have known, instead, that It was an unimaginable hell.

As I was thinking about this speech, I realized that my past life seems like a different life. Today, days - sometimes even weeks - will go by before the abuse comes to mind... physical, verbal, emotional, financial, psychological, sexual, isolation, mental. I had them all. It was constant. Eventually every day. Sometimes every hour. Sometimes even as I slept, forcing me awake. To this day, if I really think about it (and I try not to), I can still remember the suffocating feeling of living every moment in fear. So suffocating, in fact, that it was hard for me, at first, to even figure out how to feel when the feeling of fear was mercifully, finally absent.

It was February 22, 2010 when the pivotal attack happened at the hand of my abuser. I finally realized that if I wanted to live, I had to flee. The following morning, I gathered the children and went to my son's teacher, whom I had known for many years. I didn't say a word. I didn't need to. She took one look at me and said "Are you finally ready to leave him?" She opened up her home to Dash, Sadie, and me. But Puerto Rico was not MY

home. I did not speak the language. I had no family there. I had no way to support myself. New Jersey, where my parents and sisters lived close by, really was MY home. That was where I wanted to start a new life - a safe life - with Dash and Sadie. So I certainly was not expecting my tormenter to immediately file a custody case, ensuring that the children could not leave the Puerto Rican jurisdiction. By filing the custody battle, my abuser - in essence - succeeded in holding the children and me hostage for what would become 23 months. Even with being granted not one, but TWO Orders of Protection, I could not escape my abuser's rage. And so finally, in June of 2011, I allowed the Department of Justice to move the children and me into a domestic violence shelter - something they had wanted to do for quite some time.

There was trouble placing me into a house. I had a service dog to help me hear. Many of the shelters refused me because of her. But as we waited to be accepted somewhere, it turned out to be a blessing in disguise, because we ended up at Hogar Ruth. I vividly remember the night when we were transported there. The children and I sat in the back of a police car —holding each others hands — as we drove further and further away from anything familiar. When we - 5 year old Sadie, 7 year old Dash, my service dog Ruggles and I - drove through the electric fence encased with barbed wire for the very first time, I had no idea what to expect. I only knew I had to survive.

We were escorted through the doors and met by a caseworker. I was surprised when she took away my cell phone (safety precautions) and searched our very few possessions we were able to gather in a rush (same

reason). I realized we were entering a different world. It was scary at first. No one spoke English and I didn't speak Spanish. I wasn't used to living behind barbed wire without being permitted to leave the premises without escort. I wasn't used to seeing women with bruises and broken bones. What made that even scarier, was I knew I was one of them. And what I didn't even realize then was that I, like them, was just a shell of a person. Dead inside.

Over the course of the next few days, Dash, Sadie and I navigated our new surroundings. We saw our small bedroom with the twin mattress bunk bed as home. Dash and Sadie learned to play Shoot the Hoop basketball in the back yard with the other children who were also escaping their horrific realities. Not yet accustomed to Spanish eating, we soon realized that rice and beans would be a staple at pretty much every meal. And that Telemundo — always tuned in on the one television that we all shared in the common room — aired some fairly juicy soap operas. It was a new world to us and I remember one night - early on - saying to my children “Ok guys... I have NO idea what to expect yet from here. But I do know that these ladies who work here are going to help us stay safe and get home again to where mom moms and pop pops wait for us. So we just need to keep our eyes on the ball, OK?” To which 7 year old Dash very earnestly nodded and said “Ok! Ok Mommy!!” And then looking around our small bedroom, he asked me, “But where's the ball?”

It was also in those early beginning days when I began to meet the administration. At that time, Lisdell was a social worker and I was blessed to have her as mine. I met Carol, my psychologist (who taught me coping

techniques I still use - when needed - to this day), Maria the cook (who I began to jokingly sing the West Side Story theme song to her every time I saw her), Cuca the supervisor, who somehow made you feel at peace just by being in her presence. The more I got to know them, the more I began to feel some amazingly incredible things I hadn't felt for years. Love. Caring. Compassion. And with that, I began, with baby steps, to learn to trust again. And to feel safe.

It wasn't easy. But every day, Hogar Ruth helped me to find who that fearless woman once was before I became that empty shell. Sometimes, they encouraged me to move forward. Sometimes, they let me cry. And sometimes, they just stood behind me - supporting me so I would not fall. Therapy sessions. Group sessions. One-on-one supportive conversations. The constant companionship when I had to go to court, a place that terrified me, and sadly, happened more times than I could count as my tormenter continued his abuse through false litigation. Through every situation, I finally realized that the feeling of cowering in fear behind a locked door — trying to survive — was no longer the case. That instead, there was as amazing collective of people who genuinely cared for my well-being. Eventually with all of that... eventually I started to see who I once was. And who I wanted to become again.

But it wasn't just the mothers that Hogar Ruth carried on its shoulders. Hogar Ruth knew that the children, too, were victims. The administration embraced my children as their own. Dash and Sadie's faces would light up when a social worker or administrator would walk into the room. I saw the sheer and innocent delight on my children's faces that had been lost in

the past. I realized that my children, too, were learning the tranquility of a safe environment.

As far as the children, I would like to just tell you one last story. At Hogar Ruth, the mothers always had one chore to do a day (so long as you weren't spending the day in court). On one particular day, my job happened to be mopping the dining room floor. Lunch was over, but there was one lady there eating by herself. I had never seen her before. She started talking to me and I realized she was fluent in English. She invited me to sit down and we talked for well over an hour. And I remember how fascinating she struck me then, to this very day. I didn't know then but this lady was on Hogar Ruth's Board of Directors. This lady happened to be Bess Maldonado. I mention Bess because Bess became family to all three of us. You could say she adopted Dash and Sadie as her own (to this day, we still enjoy FaceTiming each other, something we have done now for years). When my abuser still didn't let us leave the jurisdiction once school was opening for the new year, Bess knew that the children would not be able to succeed in a Spanish speaking school, nor would I be able to communicate with their teachers. Bess with Hogar Ruth's support went to the English speaking Tasis Dorado and asked Tasis to accept Dash and Sadie. Tasis - another safe haven I will always hold close in my heart - accepted them with open arms. I tell you this story because this is how Hogar Ruth works. For every individual lady and child, Hogar Ruth considers their unique needs. Hogar Ruth knows that what works for one, does not necessarily work for another. That's rare with many organizations. And it is a major reason why Hogar Ruth makes such a difference in the lives of those who pass through there. Because the lesson I learned from

that - and other women learned from that - is that we ARE special enough for our individual needs to be considered, respected and met. That's something we never had from our abusers.

I have often said that Hogar Ruth saved my life. I mean that not only in the literal sense, but also in a metaphorical one. Because Hogar Ruth taught me to be whole. To put the past behind me, to live in the present and to hope for the future. It allowed me to rediscover the strength I had lost after years of abuse. It allowed me to fill that empty shell with the person I am today.

I've been back in the states now for a decade. My children thrive. Sadie, now a sophomore in high school, is a vivacious personality with the kindest heart. She is a singing talent who just two weeks ago, performed in her high school musical of SpongeBob. Dash, previously accepted at the number one magnet high school in the United States, is now a senior and the student body Vice President. He is the leader of many peer mentor groups and was recently accepted Early Action to Stanford University. As for me, I cannot believe the happiness I feel each and every day... even on the bad days. I'll be honest. It hasn't always been easy. Years of being taken to Court by my abuser (even after moving to New Jersey) took a financial toll. I juggle several jobs to give my children the lives they have. I'm sure people look at me and think that NOW my life is the unimaginable hell. But I can honestly tell you that the truth is, instead, I have finally found my Paradise. Because I once again am fearless. I know I can achieve anything - it might be difficult, but I am capable. I know I have given my children - certainly my proudest accomplishment - a full

life, a safe life, and a life of opportunity. Today, when I look in the mirror, I see a strong woman. I see a woman I love. I see a survivor. I look back on my past life as a different life. But it was my life. And because of Hogar Ruth, it is a life that is no longer mine.

Thank you.