

Following several years of abuse Margarita finds the support she needs to break out of an abusive relationship and regain her sense of self worth.

Margarita became a landed immigrant on March 26, 1997. At last she had officially won the right to remain in Canada. But Margarita will tell you that the day she'll always remember is August 25, 1993, because that was the day "someone finally did something". That was the day that her husband beat her black and blue and almost killed her. But that was also the day that the police came and took him away for good. "I became free the moment they put the handcuffs on."

Margarita, her husband and their son, Anthony, moved to Toronto from Equador in 1989. Her husband's plan was "to make a lot of money and return back to Equador". It was of no surprise to Margarita that he hadn't consulted with her before the move. After their marriage in 1984 he basically had stopped communicating with Margarita on most family matters. Of course he communicated plenty if his dinner wasn't prepared to his tastes or if Margarita wore the wrong color dress for his liking. This communication usually took the form of kicks to the abdomen or punches and slaps to her head. Margarita was abused "a hundred times or more" in the years before they came to Canada. Despite calls to the Equadorian police Margarita's cries for help went unheard. The police told her "All families have problems. This is a private matter." Unfortunately this attitude was shared by most of Margarita's friends. She had no where to turn.

*"I became free the moment they put the handcuffs on"*

Margarita was eight months pregnant with her second son when she came to Canada. Needing medical care but lacking health insurance, a friend of her husband recommended York Community Services (YCS), a Community Health Centre in Toronto. There, she could receive free prenatal care. YCS is a multi service agency which offers social, legal and health care to those on the fringes of society such as schizophrenics, the working poor, refugees and victims of domestic violence.

Back then Margarita walked with her head down, spoke very little and cried almost every day. She wore tattered jeans and always a long sleeve shirt or jacket to cover her bruised arms. She'd been losing weight. The doctor, identifying Margarita's depression, arranged a meeting with the centre's spanish speaking social worker. Margarita was amazed that such a place existed. A place where she was encouraged to talk about her problems, a place that offered to help, and a place where she could trust someone. "What we talked about was our secret."

However talking was one thing, taking action another. With no where to turn and no money, not to mention two young children, Margarita remained with her husband. Her social worker encouraged her to speak with the centre's lawyer but she refused.

Meanwhile, her husband, being the paranoid thug that he was, began keeping closer surveillance of Margarita's comings and goings. He was suspicious of this community health centre. He screened all phone calls and forbade Margarita from going to the centre. The beatings and threats increased. But something began to stir in Margarita. She found a part

No More Secrets

time job with a cleaning company. She refused to quit despite her husband's orders to do so. She continued seeing her social worker, usually dropping in for a few minutes after work before racing off home. Still, she refused to call the police. She remembered how they brushed her off back in Equador. "He'd kill me if he found out."

Life continued this way until August 25, 1993. On that day Margarita, with 9 year old Anthony snuggled in beside her on the bed, watched television quietly. Her Husband came home that evening in a particularly foul mood. He stormed into the bedroom, pushed Anthony aside, and began punching Margarita. He swore at her and said he was going to kill her. He had a rope which he tied into a noose and placed it around her neck. Anthony screamed at his father to stop but he didn't, so Anthony ran to the phone in the hallway and dialed 911. His father went after him. He ripped the phone out of the wall but he was too late. Within minutes the police arrived. They pinned him against the wall. They handcuffed and dragged him away. Margarita never spoke to her husband again. He was convicted of his crimes and, on February 7, 1997 was deported back to Equador.

*"What we talked about was our secret"*

Meanwhile Margarita agreed to see the lawyer. Unfortunately her initial refugee application was denied by the Immigration & Refugee Board (IRB). But her lawyer appealed the verdict to the Federal Court of Canada. The Federal Court, in a precedent setting declaration, overturned the IRB decision. The Federal Court concluded that local authorities in Equador are either unwilling or unable to adequately protect the lives of women subject to abuse and, therefore, Margarita's life would be in danger if she were returned. The IRB re opened the case. This time Margarita was granted permanent residence on humanitarian and compassionate grounds.

Today, Margarita owns and operates a thriving cleaning service. She lives in Toronto with her two sons. She continues to receive counselling at York Community Services.