

# Laura's Story

CURATED AND WRITTEN BY JESSICA WAHLSTROM

If you or someone you know is a victim or survivor and needs help, please reach out to us, we are here 24-hours a day.

**THIS STORY CONTAINS IMAGES AND DESCRIPTIONS OF ABUSE THAT CAN BE TRIGGERING.**



Laura is not sure when her husband decided to attack her in the basement of their home. She doesn't know when he determined that he would put a noose around her neck and then look her directly in the eyes while calmly telling her that she would die. She is not sure on which day he made the noose and

hung it on the wall of the downstairs space where they stored everyday items—holiday decorations, tools, outdoor gear. She understood, as he forced her against that wall and reached up for the rope, that the attack had been planned. She doesn't remember how she escaped, how she somehow freed herself from the noose and then got up—first onto her knees and then to her feet—to climb the stairs and run.

Laura is not sure how she got through her statement to the police that day. She can't recall exactly when she decided that she needed to board the windows on the first floor of the house, covering the glass panes so that they could not be opened or broken. She removed her kitchen cabinet doors from their hinges and hammered them onto the window frames when she got home from the hospital. She isn't sure where she found the strength to push heavy furniture against the doors after the windows were secure. She was convinced that if her husband was released, he would return to kill her. She does not remember how many weeks it was after the attack before a friend gently suggested that Laura move her bed down to the first floor—the floor with the boarded windows and blocked doors. To that point she had been sleeping on the couch. She refused to sleep in her bedroom because there was no direct escape route from the second floor.

Laura is not sure exactly when—during the criminal and divorce proceedings in the brutal months that followed the attack—her ex-husband's family started to advocate for "his share" of their assets, including the house in which he tried to kill her.



Laura found herself scraping by after the attack, selling personal items to make ends meet. While she waited for the legal proceedings to close and to sell the house, she felt ready to "pack it in" and file for permanent disability, ending her career as a nurse and clinical researcher and stepping out of her active life. She was exhausted. She was afraid to leave home. She was equally afraid to be in her house. Laura wasn't sure that she would feel secure anywhere again. She wasn't sure how she had gotten to the place where she found herself. She wasn't sure where to go next.

Center for Safety & Change and a robust group of friends stood by Laura after the attack, ready to meet her wherever she needed them. They knew that she would find her own way through it all and that they would walk with her, one step at a time. Laura was connected to the Center by a police officer hours after the attack. She was hesitant to engage. She didn't feel comfortable participating in a support group initially. Telling her story out loud again didn't seem possible. It was hard for her to comprehend what she had endured. Laura remembers feeling no pressure from the Center to do anything. That was important. Over time she felt less numb. She began to open up. She found conversation with other victims comforting. She began to work closely with the legal advocates at the Center who helped her to navigate the lengthy and complicated proceedings. With their support, she eventually finalized her divorce, sold the house, and secured an order of protection against her ex-husband. Laura met regularly with social workers at the Center who helped her process the trauma that she survived. She was—and remains—exceptionally grateful to her "village" of friends and the Center staff for accompanying her as she made her way forward.



A couple of years after the attack, Laura decided that she wanted to share her story of survival publicly. She hoped to shine light on some of the less visible challenges that victims encounter as they attempt to move forward with their lives. Center for Safety &

Change helped Laura amplify her story and voice. Though she was nervous the first time she spoke to a large group, she was confident that she belonged in front of the hundreds of lawyers, law enforcement officials, and other professionals working with victims of violence. The Center staff stood beside her as she made her way up to the podium. They were waiting for her when she stepped down. Laura shared that her ex-husband had been sentenced to spend years in prison only because of legislation that passed shortly before he tried to strangle her to death. That legislation made strangulation—which had previously been a misdemeanor—a felony. Prior to its passage, her ex-husband would not have been sentenced appropriately.



Laura has advocated for legislation that holds abusers accountable for their

crimes. More recently, Laura has raised awareness about the range of financial injustices that victims are subjected to, citing her own experience. She was shocked when a judge ruled that she would pay a percentage of her pension fund to her ex-husband when she retired. Laura was forced to deposit money that she had earned into the commissary at the prison where he was serving time for attempting to murder her. She felt that she was being reassaulted every month as she transferred money to him. She eventually met with lawyers, judges, and legislators to demand that domestic violence be taken into consideration when awarding alimony. Laura has continued to speak over the past few years about how current criminal and legal systems fail to prevent violence and adequately protect victims. She has highlighted how these systems can cause further injury. She understands how powerful her story is, how it can be used for change. Her work feels healing, restorative.

Spending time with animals has always felt restorative to Laura. In the years after the attack, she spent time volunteering with the Hudson Valley Humane



Society (HVHS). Laura was working on a plan to leave her ex-husband before he tried to kill her. Leaving an abusive partner and home that you have created is almost always extremely complicated. Victims of violence will often not leave their abuser

unless every being in their household can get out safely with them. Laura remembers feeling that she could not leave without a plan for getting her cats out of the house. [Threats and acts of cruelty against pets are common and deter victims of violence from seeking help.](#)



Many victims who own pets report returning to their abuser in an effort to keep their pets safe. Laura has found a deep sense of satisfaction in volunteering with HVHS and helping to facilitate the launch of Center for Safety & Change's Paws for Safety Program. The program gives victims the option to temporarily and safely house their pets while they seek safety for themselves and plan for what is next. Laura knows how much these services mean to the people who need them.

Laura's plans and needs changed often in the hours, weeks, months, and years after her ex-husband attacked her and shattered her sense of the world. In the early days, staff from the Center gave Laura the space that she wanted but remained in view; she knew that they were ready to step in at any moment. They recognized and honored Laura's specific and evolving needs at every turn. [The Center's support was consistent but never intrusive.](#) She never felt judged. The Center helped her find ways to tell her story in her own voice and from her own perspective.

[Laura's life now is gentle.](#)

She does not think about escape routes in her home. She enjoys keeping the windows and doors open in the right weather, feeling the breeze blow through the screens, smelling what is growing outside. Laura knows that by making something out of the pain that she has experienced, the power of her trauma has been diminished. Life has expanded and asserted itself over what happened to her. She is sure of her strength—her might—and the solid ground beneath her.

