

Nicole's speech for International Women's Day Butterfly Place, 24 March 2011

Good even ladies. I want to thank you all for coming to celebrate 100 years of international women's day. It is such an honour to be asked to speak at such an important night. I have been asked to speak to you all about my past, present, and future as an 'inspirational' woman. I am not exactly comfortable with this as I come across so many inspirational women every single day, I believe that every woman is inspirational in their own unique way, but here is my story.

I come from a fantastic home, where I was given every opportunity in life. Though most of high school I was a pretty normal teenager (although maybe my mother might disagree). I experimented but nothing too far from normal. However in the beginning of year 12 I was sexually assaulted and for me that's when I started on my path of destruction. I started to be involved in a few less desirable activities. Then, half way through year 12, my cousin was in a train accident and passed away. This all added to my deep depression as my cousins and I all grew up together and we were all pretty close.

The one good thing to come out of all of this was that I met an amazing friend Lorren, who has since been there for me through thick and thin. She is like the big sister I never had. After I finished year 12 and I turned 18, Lorren and I moved out together into a friend's house that was nice enough to rent us his garage, which we shared. Both of us were in a pretty deep depressive point in our lives and continued to do some pretty self-destructive things. As we were both pretty strapped for money, I went in search for a job and managed to get one working full time as an admin officer. It was hard to maintain a job with this destructive behaviour (I am still not exactly sure how I did it). We had managed to break this poisonous cycle when we had to resort to moving in with her Mum however once on our own again, it just started back up.

This is the point where I met my husband (soon to be ex-husband). He was my knight in shining armour. He whisked me off my feet promising me the world and I jumped at the chance of finally having a life I was proud of. Our relationship was very brief however, in that short amount of time we hit every milestone we were meant to. Within 2 months of meeting we got engaged. Within 5 months of meeting I was pregnant and within 7 months of meeting we were married. I think a part of me knew that things were going too quickly and it would never work but I never dreamed it would end the way that it did.

Once we were married the abuse started. It was like a switch went on in his head that said that he owned me. During the first 5 months of our marriage I was subjected to him controlling who I saw, where I went, how long I was out for, what money I could spend. He would sexually abuse me, he would ridicule me for my beliefs both spiritually and my strong belief of human rights and one day he snapped and reversed into me with his car. I was 7 months pregnant at the time with my beautiful boy Lachlan. At this point I left him. In my head he could break my soul but he was not going to hurt our little boy.

We went to marriage counselling to try and sort through our problems and for my husband to get the help that he needed. During these sessions the councillor told us that no abuse had taken place but that he believed there was a risk of it happening in the future if we didn't learn to communicate. This is how good my husband was at manipulating everyone around us. Although the councillor had heard everything that happened he still proceeded to agree with my ex in telling me it was all in my head. After being told this we came to some agreements around communication (which of course were never followed) and I moved back in.

For the rest of my pregnancy there were no more violent outbursts however the rest of the abuse continued but somehow he had managed to convince me that I deserved it. Finally after what seemed like forever (42 weeks of pregnancy and 3 days of labour) Lachlan was born. I didn't feel the connection you're meant to feel when you finally get to meet your child for the very first time. I was lucky I saw my friends and their emotions so I was able to put on a brave face. Now looking back on the first few months of Lachlan's life I can now see that I suffered from postnatal depression and just put on a brave face so that people didn't see the pain I was in.

My ex did not help me look after our son. I was so bad that when I went in for more surgery about 4 weeks after having a c-section I had to ask Lorren and my beautiful sister to come and live with me while I was in hospital and while I recovered. Shortly after this, 3 days before Christmas my ex and I got into a massive fight resulting in me wanting to leave for the night so that things could calm down and we could talk more about it later. He refused to let me leave with Lachlan. He tried to snatch Lachlan from my arms (hurting him in the process). Luckily Lorren was there and she tried to negotiate with him to let us leave the bedroom and come to sit outside away from Lachlan and sort it out. He refused and got so angry with me he lifted up the cot and threw it at me while I was holding our not even 2 month old son. Lorren called my family and the police. The police came and told us that neither of us were fit parents and that Lachlan had to go to a family member for the night. My mother was there by this point and took Lachlan home with her. This was the biggest turning point for me. There is no way that someone else's actions were going to dictate whether or not I am a fit parent. I put a DVO out against him and I believe that he has breached in on 2 occasions however the police won't investigate it.

From that point I started to rebuild myself. I realised that my son needed a future and I was the only one he could rely on to do that for him so I decided to finally go and do University. I got accepted into a Bachelor of Education at USQ. I think that this was possibly the proudest day of my life. I don't think I had seen such pride in my parents face for such a long time and although I think I could have slapped him, my Dad even said that he was so proud that both of his girls were now going to be graduates. With the help of Micah's PIP group I got to my first day of Uni with all new stationary and text books, more nervous that I had ever been. My first class was philosophy and I remember walking out not understanding anything my lecturer had said and ready to go home and cry cause I couldn't believe what I had gotten myself into. But I did keep going and figured out that philosophy was one of my favourite subjects. About halfway through that semester it dawned on me one day that I was going to be responsible for 30 odd kids that weren't mine, making sure they got an education, and I decided then and there that I needed to do something different. I changed to a bachelor of human services majoring in child, family and community development so I too could help young women and

their families to rebuild their lives after domestic violence. I looked at the work Kylie and Kate were doing here at Micah Projects and really got inspired.

Today I am working through my degree. I also have a new amazing job working at a high school with young refugee girls who are either pregnant or parenting, trying to finish high school. For me those girls are truly inspirational. I have also met someone who is really amazing. He treats me like a princess and Lachlan worships him so that always helps. We live together in a beautiful house both working through our degrees. Things are finally settling down. I do still have problems with Lachlan's father as I go to supervised visitation with him once a fortnight, but even that is starting to settle down, for now anyway.

There is no way I could be where I am today without the amazing support I have received. I want to just take a few seconds to say a quick thanks to those who were really there for me. I want to start with Lorren. Thank you big sister, you have been there by my side, even sometimes my partner in crime, through thick and thin. I am truly blessed to have such an amazing person in my life. To my beautiful little sister Alysha who couldn't make it, thank you so much for helping me with Lachlan even though you had your own dramas going on. I love you so much. To my beautiful Mum, words cannot begin to describe how grateful I am for everything you have done for me. You are the most beautiful woman I know and I really admire you for not only the work you do and the people you help but also for the mother that you are. If I can be half the mother you are then Lachlan will be really lucky too. Thank you for being my rock and an open ear, even if I do share too much information with you sometimes. Thank you so much for standing by me regardless of the pain I put you and dad through growing up.

I also want to make thanks to Micah Projects and the work that you have done to help me get into Uni and get back into the work force. You have inspired me to follow in this direction to help others the way you have helped me. Thank you so much. I hope what I have said tonight will plant a seed in another woman, so that it grows out to their full potential regardless of their background or circumstance. Thank you every one for coming tonight and I am going to leave you all with this:

"No one can make you feel inferior without your consent. "

~ Eleanor Roosevelt ~