

#weekly WISDOM

Healing from the Trauma of Growing Up with Domestic Violence

This message of #WeeklyWisdom is brought to you by Lyn Staack, the Youth Education Coordinator at the Advocacy Center of Tompkins County, a proud partner of the Community Coalition for Healthy Youth. This week, our message focuses on healing from the trauma of growing up with domestic violence.

*NOTE: This does include a link to an event, but otherwise the information is not time bound

Released just a few weeks ago, [“A Breath Too Late” by Rocky Callen](#) has been described as a “haunting and breathtaking” YA novel with an encouraging message: hope can be found in the darkness. Indeed the novel is haunting, literally, as the reader realizes that the narrator, seventeen year old Ellie, is a ghost. Breathtaking, as we watch both Ellie and her mom struggle to breathe in a house that is tightly, violently controlled by her father. And hopeful, as Ellie remembers moments of laughter, singing, and love.

Growing up with domestic violence is not easy. Rocky Callen hasn’t written an easy story with a happy ending. Even as I found myself forgetting that she was a ghost and cheering for her, I did not completely forget the danger that she and her mother were in. Her father’s controlling presence permeates the book, much like how he back moves into their lives after tracking them down: subtle at first, he seems to fit in, but soon he is clearly suffocating and threatening. Callen’s openness about the violence, and the fear and depression, it causes is a central message of the book. As she writes in her author’s note, “the moment the truth is out, you can’t shove it back into its shadowy corner.” Once the secret of the abuse is shared, the silence is broken, there is the hope that victims of domestic violence do not have to face their experiences alone.

Brian Martin’s book “Invincible: The Ten Lies You Learn Growing Up with Domestic Violence, and the Truths to Set You Free” is an equally direct book about overcoming the trauma of domestic violence and being able to fully embrace the joy of life. A survivor of childhood domestic violence, Martin challenges the beliefs many survivors of family violence have internalized. Chapter by chapter Martin, shares stories of how survivors replaced the “lies” the abuse taught them with healthier thoughts as well as a great deal of psychology and science. What are some of the common “lies”? Here are three that I wish Ellie, the narrator of Rocky Callen’s novel, had been able to read and talk with someone about:

“You will always be sad.” For many adults who grew up with domestic violence feeling sad is a constant cloud that follows them and overshadows other feelings, covering life with a deep sense of loss, despair, or hopelessness. As a Martin writes, “As a child I felt let down often. Things just didn’t work out for me. My mother let me down, my family let me down, everyone let me down because they didn’t help me or protect me.” Past pain and an ever present dread of what might happen can become an overwhelming depression. Even when things are going great, it might not feel real. Survivors might find themselves waiting for good feelings to be ruined. The encouraging message is that it is also possible to learn to notice, trust, and hold onto positive moments and memories.

“You are alone.” Many people who grew up with domestic violence feel deeply alone. Even in friendships or close relationships they may feel separate. They may worry about when and how to share their experiences of abuse-- sharing those experiences may ruin a relationship, but on the other hand, not talking about experiences of abuse can become a troublesome secret. Some survivors find they question other people’s motives, or find it almost impossible to trust anyone. Keeping people at a distance feels safer. Martin explains some of the factors underneath this feeling of difference and distrust, and again gives examples of how survivors slowly built trust with others and themselves. As he says, there are more than a billion people who grew up with domestic violence: you are not the only one. You can talk about what happened. These are people who will understand.

“You cannot get away.” Not surprisingly, and with good reason, fear can dominate the world of a child growing up with domestic violence. However it is described, the feeling of being on edge, waiting for the other shoe to drop, or a threat to become real, this fear keeps children on constant alert. While some children and teens may react to this tension with aggression, others retreat -- like Ellie who in the beginning of “A Breath Too Late” runs out of her house into the street where she tries to hide in the loud music of her headphones. Living with or leaving an abusive person are both dangerous. Leaving the abuse, and the constant fear that goes with it, takes planning, persistence and courage. In his chapter on fearful to confident, Martin looks at ways adult survivors of childhood violence carry this fear with them and how some of them have chosen to take action despite it. I thought about this chapter often while reading “A Breath Too Late”: as Ellie’s mom sits in the parking lot at the police station; as Ellie and her mom were driving and singing; when Ellie decides to apply to college. Martin’s book is full of examples of people who took small steps and eventually achieved the dreams that once felt out of their reach.

Can a childhood filled with pain and violence become a life of freedom, joy and love? Brian Martin and Rocky Callen both, in different ways, have written books to say, “Yes, it can.” We agree with them. I recommend both books for anyone who is looking for more understanding of what it feels like to be a child or teen living with parental domestic violence.

Buffalo Street Books is hosting an online reading and discussion with YA author Rocky Callen this **Friday May 15th at 7pm**. Join that event by registering through their [website](#) event page. (buffalostreetbooks.com/event) If you are not able to attend this event, you can learn about other events by following Rocky Callen on twitter. Brian Martin’s book can be ordered through Buffalo Street Books or [his website](#).

As always, if you have experienced domestic violence, or want to support someone who has, the Advocacy Center is here for you. Reach us through our hotline at 607-277-5000. Take care and be well- we are all in this together!



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