

# Yolanda's Story

I was 36 years old when I arrived. With no former desirable life to rebuild, Perspectives would be the birthplace of a brand new me. Over the next four years of living in Perspectives' housing, I would realize the vastness of my worth, find the tools for restoration, and use the support and space they provided to successfully move forward.

My first childhood memory is of being a tiny girl walking down a street with my mother, my hand tightly in hers. I remember I wasn't happy and something didn't feel right. We were carrying everything we owned after leaving our recently foreclosed home while making our way to my grandmother's apartment on the west side of Chicago. Somehow I knew that my life and that of my seven siblings was never going to be the same.

Reliving this period of time is very unpleasant and even now I can feel my breathing seize up. This is where it all began. You see, I was four or maybe five years old when that man began arriving at my grandmother's to sexually abuse me. I call him "that man" because he's nameless to me. He is the embodiment of cruelty and evil and the thief of my childhood. I can't make out his face but I see him carrying a hat and remember the dark color and shape of his coat. I also know that I was afraid and completely alone. There was no one there to take care of me. I suppose it was the same for my siblings— every child for his or herself. We found no comfort in each other and we surely didn't have anything to offer in the way of companionship. We were all just trying to survive.

Observing my mother when I was a child was puzzling. She would mumble and talk to herself. She used words that didn't pertain to our surroundings or what was happening at the time. I learned much later that she suffered from schizophrenia. This knowledge may have filled agonizing emotional gaps and explained her complete lack of care but it couldn't possibly undo the damage. My childhood days were frightening and horrible, filled with incest, hopelessness and isolation. At the tender age of nine, my siblings and I were dealt an insurmountable blow as we were forced to witness the brutal rape of our mother in our home. With no sense of power and paralyzed with fear, we watched and ended up completely traumatized.

We left for the projects when I was 13 years old, the same age I experienced firsthand the mind-numbing power of getting drunk. Drinking and smoking pot became my escape. I often think back to this time of my life and wonder, "What if?" What if I would have known there was another future outside of drugs and despair? What if I had been lovingly cared for and protected and empowered? I was a strong, athletically gifted girl. Could I have earned a scholarship? Could I have attained greatness academically? Unfortunately, I had a different destiny.

I dropped out of high school in 10<sup>th</sup> grade to hang with gang-bangers and shoot heroin. I was 18 years old when my first child was born. Completely unable to cope with my life, much less a new baby, my sister took my daughter into her care. I headed to the streets. There I found my home and my workplace. To earn money and support my addictions, I sold myself. My second daughter was born when I was 22 years old; finding myself less capable than when my first child was born, my baby's paternal grandmother took her in.

The hard, painful occupation of prostitution swallowed me up for the next eleven years. My life revolved around finding the next trick to get the next fix. I lived a vicious life of drug-induced oblivion. I would do anything to numb myself into forgetting what I felt, what I was doing, and who I was. I barely escaped death more times than I can account for. Prostitution is a dangerous life and I was no stranger to brutality and rape. Still, I took the risk so that I could continue to live doped.

After a horrendous, life-threatening scare, I followed my sister to Minneapolis. Although in a new city and reunited with my oldest daughter, very little changed. Getting stoned and numbing myself continued to be my highest priority.

So how did I turn my life around? Here is how my miracle began.

I had been in treatment several times. Each time I walked out, I swore to myself that I would not go back, yet "back" was all I knew. "Back" to the crack house, "back" to the pushers, "back" to the Johns, "back" to despair. I couldn't find *forward*.

Unexpectedly and in spite of my self-destructive behavior, illumination found me... literally and brilliantly. I was not in church or screaming out to the heavens, or even remotely thinking of anything spiritual. A calming brilliance, a wavelike presence originating far behind the sun washed over me one day when I was sitting in a car. I heard clearly and profoundly a voice that said, "Yolanda, you are tired and you need to stop." Why these words worked I'll never know.

I immediately went back into treatment but this time I stayed for months. From there I went to a halfway house and then on to safe housing for single adults. I walked back into my daughters' lives just short of one year of sobriety. My oldest daughter was 18 and living on her own and my second daughter, now 14, was in need of rescuing. Her grandmother had died. I knew I had to get to Chicago and pull her out of her unsafe, living conditions. How would I care for her? Where would we live? No program that I had been involved with would take children. But I desperately wanted her to live with me and to have a home where my 18-year-old would visit. I began to search and miraculously I found Perspectives.

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Because I had been sober for one year (Perspectives has a 90-day sobriety requirement) and interviewed well with their staff, I was hopeful they would accept my daughter and me into their program. And, they did! I will never forget the day I received the call from Perspectives. I was told that they had an apartment. We were ecstatic. We moved immediately into a *fully-furnished* apartment, even the linens and kitchenware were provided for us. Oh happy day!

My daughter and I would finally be safe and cared for. I was about to experience my rebirth. At Perspectives I would have the opportunity to succeed, stay sober, have my children, and even gain an education. During my first year of recovery and sobriety and prior to coming to Perspectives, I received my GED. I attained my Associates Degree in 2005 and this December... well, I don't want to get ahead of the story.

Of course, it was not easy. Living without medicating gave my buried feelings free reign to surface and torment me. I had a continuing flood of memories to deal with. It was a daily struggle to fight the deep and awful feelings of trauma, pain, shame, fear, anguish, rage, and gut-retching grief from haunting me. I didn't know how to trust the Perspectives community; I isolated myself from the other women and was locked up by fear. Then, one day, I experienced another breakthrough.

I was sitting with Perspectives Program Director, Ms. Jazi, depressed and despondent. After a long conversation, she told me quite plainly, "Yolanda, you are going to be okay." I heard the words and allowed them to work. I broke down and began repeating, "I will never go back, I will never go back, I will never go back!" I sobbed and sobbed, realizing how much I needed to change and knowing I was in the right place to do it. I began reaching out and my life started to look brighter and full of hope. I went to every meeting available to me and even became a member of the Resident Council. I soon found myself a respected and trusted member of the community. Amazingly, the other residents were coming to *me* for support!

I worked diligently with the Perspectives' staff for four years to gain confidence and self-respect, to create a new life for my daughters and me, to stay sober, to be a parent, and to build a future. It was often three steps forward and two steps back. But I never relapsed! When tempted, I remembered the voice and that God was with me.

Then that inevitable day came. The staff had been telling me I was ready to leave for a year before I finally had the courage to face the reality of starting my life outside the Perspectives' framework. I did not want to go and I was scared. But I knew as well that it was time. On November 16, 2006, I moved out to my own apartment and had a job. I was 4 years, 7 months and 27 days sober. I was still in school for a degree in Human Services and working toward achieving my goal to become an addiction counselor.

I have been living outside of Perspectives housing for almost two years. I look back with deep gratitude. They helped me discover my own brilliance, assisted me in creating a brand new life and lovingly they showed me how to live it.

Today, it's my choice to live with passion and assurance. Most days that's enough, but there are those times when I wonder if I will ever be completely healed inside. Occasionally, a sense of brokenness fights to take over. Then a small voice deep inside reminds me that life is a process and I am able to live clean and sober. I hear again the uncomplicated words from Ms. Jazi that, "I will be okay," and I remember once again what I promised myself — I will never go back!

This December, I will graduate from college with a BA in Human Services, completing my goal of becoming a counselor. My ultimate goal is to return to Perspectives and help women as they helped me. I am so proud of myself. Perspectives showed me that I could do it and that I had greatness within me. I just need to continue to believe it.

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