

Harmony House Miracles: Surviving and Thriving Beyond Abuse

Testimonial by Lauren Bays

In late 2013 I met, whom I believed to be, the love of my life. In the beginning, our relationship was full of love, romance, and excitement... until it wasn't. Very quickly into our relationship, I found out I was pregnant, and just as quickly, the physical abuse began. It escalated quickly, and despite my growing pregnant belly, the abuse I endured became significantly more frequent and progressively worse. I often found myself with his hands around my throat, my face smashed against concrete, my body thrown against walls, and the constant need to find new excuses to explain away my cuts and bruises. But I was pregnant, I was alone, and he always apologized... he always promised it wouldn't happen again, so I stayed.

I gave birth to our son in 2015, and while there was a short reprieve from the physical abuse, it didn't last long. I can't even count the number of times he threw me across a room or strangled me throughout the course of our relationship, but I do remember that each time his hands would wrap around my throat a little longer and a little tighter than the time before, and every time I had to wonder if this would be the time he didn't let go, except now I wasn't the only victim, and I often found bruises on our infant son, while my 11-year-old daughter (from a previous relationship) helplessly bore witness to it all.

*In 2016, I found out I was pregnant with our second child together, and during one particular argument, he violently threw me onto the ground as I was holding our 1-year-old son. I managed to gently slide my son across the floor so he wouldn't get hurt as I fought for my life, and I remember looking into my baby boy's eyes, watching him as he cried, and wondering if he was about to watch his mommy die. I knew this cycle couldn't continue. **I couldn't bear to live in fear anymore, and I couldn't subject my kids to the trauma,** so I made the decision to leave. Within a weekend, I packed a U-Haul with as many of my belongings as I could, and I started making my way to Ottawa, where my journey with Harmony House began.*

I moved to Harmony House in February 2017 while heavily pregnant with my third child. I was greeted with warmth and support from the moment I first walked through the doors. Being new to Ottawa, the wonderful staff at Harmony House provided me with a variety of supports, but most importantly, Harmony House allowed me a sense of safety and belonging as I navigated this new life. While nearing the end of my pregnancy and planning for the birth of my new baby, my mental health suffered. I was alone, grieving the loss of what was, and scared of the unknown future, but Harmony House gave me the space to rebuild myself.

In April 2017, I gave birth to my daughter and watched as the staff at Harmony House welcomed all my children into their arms with warmth and love. Through Harmony House, my children had a daycare to go to, friends to interact with, field trips to parks and museums, summer excursions, and Christmas celebrations; they felt a sense of belonging. They learned to thrive.

I was eventually connected with a housing worker at Harmony House, and after a year of living at Harmony House, I finally moved into my own space: a quiet and family-oriented neighbourhood that we still call home 5 years later. While moving into our own home marked the end of a chapter, it also marked the beginning of a new one, and I was determined not to let this be the end of my story of redemption. I was ready to thrive.

After realizing the impact Harmony House had, not only on myself but on the countless women who walk through those doors, scared, alone, afraid, overwhelmed, and hopeless, and seeing how the experience at Harmony House was able to breathe so much life back into these women and families, I decided I wanted to use my story and my experience to give back and do for others what had been done for me. Four months after moving into our new home, in August 2018, I applied for the Social Service Worker program at Confederation College, and in June 2020, I graduated at the top of my class. In September 2020, I began my Bachelor of Indigenous Social Work at Laurentian University, where I graduated Magna Cum Laude in June 2023. In September of this year, I began the Advanced Standing Masters of Social Work Program at Carleton University.

*My time at Harmony House was the catalyst that got me to where I am today. Coming into a shelter experience, especially after enduring abuse, is scary. I felt like a failure. But the staff at Harmony House **truly** saw me. They saw my family. They saw my experiences. They removed any power imbalances. They removed any stigma. And they **humanized** me. They **celebrated** me. And because of their unwavering support, I was able to get to where I am today. - Lauren*

At Harmony House, we recognize the strength and determination of women like Lauren, who are overcoming their adversities and have found a safe haven with us. With your help, we can ensure we have the resources to provide therapy sessions and programs to catalyze these women's healing journeys.

Our offsite office offers therapy, where our qualified Mental Health Professional works to help residents overcome their psychological traumas. With years of experience and knowledge of the best practices in trauma therapy, our team is eager to initiate positive change for our residents.

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