



FACES OF POVERTY

After escaping domestic violence, homelessness, Auburn woman finds normalcy for daughter, self

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AUBURN | Within the walls of the domestic violence shelter, Sandra struggled to make her daughter feel at home.

After all, it was Elizabeth's 4th birthday, and Sandra didn't want her daughter to feel uncomfortable or unhappy on her special day. But Sandra could not stop chewing on an unpleasant thought.

This was not the life she wanted for her child.

It was a thought that had haunted her frequently in 2012 — a year when her home had been repeatedly broken into, her jaw dislocated and her peace broken by a man who was supposed to love her.

Homeless, without transportation and with only a part-time job to generate funds, Sandra could not give her daughter a home or afford to pay for a place for her to stay during the day. She felt trapped.

"Everything she'd gone through," Sandra said, her voice trembling, "there's not a 3-year-old in the world that deserves it."

So when her daughter's father offered to take care of Elizabeth, Sandra made an impossible decision: Until she regained her footing, she would need to let her daughter go.

As she recounts what it was like to say goodbye to the person she loves most, Sandra, now 26, spoke through trembling lips, a steady stream of tears tracing tracks down her cheeks.

"This was my only way out," Sandra said, "to have her not dragged through my messy life."

With the help of a friend, Sandra ferried Elizabeth to Buffalo, where she would fly to her father's home in Texas. She held herself together just long enough to wave her daughter out of sight.

Then, with her heart moving 1,500 miles away, she crumbled.

"The web he spun"

Sandra — who asked that names be changed to protect the identity of herself and her daughter — was born in Auburn to a woman who gave birth to all four of her children by her 21st birthday. The family moved their children around frequently before landing back in Auburn when Sandra was a teenager.

Soon after, Sandra's father killed himself.

After, the then 16-year-old girl was quickly left to fend for herself. When she came home with a black boyfriend, her mother put her belongings outside. So Sandra dropped out of high school and started to work.

Then she met Thomas.

Sandra was working at Byrne Dairy when they first became acquainted. She was 18. He was 29.

Still steeped in the emotional turmoil of losing her dad, the teenager felt alive around Thomas. He gave her a "sense of peace," and a relationship that, starting out as purely sexual, made her feel safe.

"I was very naive and young and wanted attention," she said, shaking her head.

As the years marched forward, Sandra's feelings for Thomas grew. He helped her get over the loss of her father and grandmother, and provided the familial support she lacked.

The only problem? Thomas had a girlfriend and seven children with five different women. But Sandra — with Thomas as her emotional anchor — had trouble seeing what she had with the older, attached man as wrong.

"To me, he was everything," she said. "The web he spun around me, I didn't see it as negative. I accepted it as him."

When she found out she was pregnant, however, Sandra felt nervous. Thomas was headed to prison for selling drugs, and she knew he wouldn't be present in their baby's life.

Two months after Elizabeth was born, Thomas got out of prison. He continued to see Sandra — along with his girlfriend. And Sandra, completely entwined, did not break away.

"He had me in this tight grip emotionally," she said. "He knew if he removed himself from my life, I would fall apart."

For months, Sandra waited for Thomas to take an active stance in their daughter's life. When hope shriveled, she called Thomas at work with plans to ask for money to help buy diapers.

The employee who answered the phone delivered shocking news: Thomas had taken a day off to marry his girlfriend.

Devastated, Sandra confronted Thomas and his new wife at their Auburn home.

While she was holding Elizabeth, then 1, Sandra said Thomas' wife ran at her. Thomas, in anger, struck his new wife as she charged.

That's when Sandra realized Thomas was someone to fear.

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For years, Thomas and Sandra's turbulent relationship included no physical violence. That

changed on Mother's Day 2009.

Sandra was inside her Auburn kitchen feeding her young daughter when an enraged Thomas burst into her home — and, without provocation, grabbed her by the throat.

Thrown across the room, Sandra stood pinned against her fridge as Thomas unleashed a torrent of anger. When he finished yelling, he ripped the mini-blinds off a nearby window and hurled them at Sandra.

His aim, however, was off.

A portion of the blinds broke off and struck Elizabeth, who was sitting in her highchair. Feeling guilty, Thomas picked up his crying daughter and took her out for ice cream.

From then on, violence often visited Sandra — in the form of threats and hands around her neck.

One of these violent incidents happened while picking Elizabeth up from her godmother's home. Sandra and Thomas started fighting about an upcoming custody visit. Sandra had just learned that Thomas' wife had struck their daughter, then 2, with a shoe during a weekend visit.

As they walked up the stairs to Elizabeth's godmother's home, Sandra told Thomas there was no way she would leave their daughter alone with his wife.

At the words "over my dead body," he snapped.

Sandra said Thomas used his entire palm to "mush" her face, pushing her down the stairs. Desperate to get to her daughter, Sandra stumbled back up the stairs.

As she reached the landing, Thomas lifted her into the air by her throat and slammed her against the door. Her feet dangling in the air, Sandra struggled to see past the black dots exploding across her vision as Thomas choked her.

When he finally released her, Sandra dropped to the ground — and the world faded to black.

A minute later, she woke to the sounds of her friend screaming and her daughter crying. Sandra, bruised and blindsided, simply tried to breathe.

Thomas had never choked her "that hard" before. But not wanting Elizabeth to grow up without a father and still attached to Thomas, she still could not let go.

"I was damned"

For Thomas and Sandra, 2010 marked a milestone year.

The couple moved from Auburn to Buffalo after their daughter was diagnosed with epilepsy. Considering they were making frequent trips to the city to bring Elizabeth to doctors appointments, Thomas and Sandra decided moving to Buffalo would help cut down on costs.

The family moved into a duplex owned by Thomas' grandmother, cramming themselves into one room.

Sandra worked two jobs — one at a collection agency, and another at Target. Thomas lived off of her hard work. Sandra, however, was wary of asking him to pitch in.

"He was more into me than he was his daughter," she said. "I felt obligated to make things OK so she would have a father."

That changed when Thomas broke her nose in front of their toddler.

When Thomas came home in a particularly bad rage one night, Sandra pushed two dressers against their one-room apartment's door in an attempt to keep him out. But Thomas, a 180-pound former football player, had no trouble breaking down the door.

Throwing aside the dressers as if they were weightless, he backhanded Sandra so hard she flew across the room. Her teeth went through her lips, filling her mouth with blood.

When Thomas' rage cooled, Sandra left the duplex.

Cradling her daughter in her arms, the injured mother wandered the Buffalo streets covered in her own blood, walking to the crackling and popping of what sounded like firecrackers.

A police car — responding to what Sandra learned was gunfire — pulled up next to her to see if she was OK. When they discovered she wasn't involved in the shooting, Sandra said the officers encouraged her to call 911 and drove away.

That's when Thomas pulled up next to her.

"He told me if I was going to leave him, he would kill me," Sandra said.

So she and her crying daughter, following his advice, got into the car.

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The cycle of violence continued. Thomas would beat Sandra, and later apologize. Fearful for her life and stuck in an unfamiliar city with no friends, Sandra stayed.

"I felt like I was damned," she said.

After a horrible experience in a Buffalo domestic violence shelter, Sandra changed her number in January 2011 and got a nice apartment for her and Elizabeth. When she refused to let Thomas in, he broke in.

He smashed through her bedroom door, and she called police. But Thomas dodged arrest.

One Friday soon after, Thomas drained her bank account and drove back to Auburn to spend the weekend with his wife. His actions — while debilitating — gave her the opportunity she'd been desperately seeking: Time to escape.

Sandra quit her jobs and told her landlord she was leaving. She sold as many belongings as she could. Then, with the generosity of a friend, she booked two bus tickets and took her daughter back to her hometown.

They arrived in Auburn with two duffel bags filled mostly with Elizabeth's things. Along with

having no money, no job and no permanent place to stay, Sandra only had room for two pairs of clothing — which she wore for two months straight.

But finally, she felt liberated.

"It was probably the most freeing thing I ever did," she said, smiling at the memory.

Driving on the Thruway back to Buffalo, Thomas called Sandra and told her he was coming home. When Sandra told him she was gone, he became "fuming mad."

When Thomas promised to kill her in a voicemail, Sandra called the Auburn Police Department. She secured a restraining order and pressed charges.

In the fall of 2011, Thomas was given a conditional discharge. He moved to Texas with his wife and their children, and finally left Sandra alone.

After couch surfing between friends, Sandra — with the help of Patty Weaver, of the Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency — moved into a "cute" Seymour Street apartment. Through gift donations, Sandra was even able to put presents under the Christmas tree.

"I was able to give Elizabeth a Christmas," she said. "It wasn't much, but it was something."

Then, just as she started to rebuild her life, she met Jeff.

"This can't be my life"

Jeff, at first, seemed nothing like Thomas.

When she fell for him, she did not know he had a history of violence with his estranged wife. She was not aware of the cruelty he was capable of inflicting.

But within the first few months of their relationship, Sandra said Jeff's true personality emerged.

Tucking her legs under her and shaking her head, Sandra described the impact Jeff had on her fragile, newly reconstructed life.

"In a matter of five months, it's like he took my life, shook it all round and dumped it," she said.

Sandra got her first true glimpse of what kind of man her boyfriend was when Elizabeth, then 3, told her Jeff had "touched her." After spending an entire day crying and holding her daughter, Sandra confronted the Auburn man.

Jeff did not take her accusations well.

"He went absolutely crazy," Sandra said. "I had never seen someone so irate in my life."

From then on, the abusive Jeff was in and out of the Cayuga County Jail for violating orders of protection filed on behalf of both Sandra and his estranged wife.

Night after night, Jeff dismantled a basement window and broke into her apartment — frightening Sandra when she awoke and found him standing over her. And day after day, police rushed to her apartment — and were unable to capture Jeff.

Fed up with police's frequent presence, Sandra's landlord evicted her and Elizabeth. That's around the time Sandra found out she was pregnant.

Terrified, she couldn't stop thinking, "This can't be my life."

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While Sandra tried to figure out how to keep her daughter safe, Jeff's abuse continued.

After he threw Sandra across her driveway and partially dislocated her jaw, Jeff — following a police chase that ended with him being subdued by a Taser — was finally arrested.

Homeless, Sandra dropped Elizabeth off at a friend's home. There was no extra room for her, so Sandra spent a few days wandering around Auburn, alone and drifting.

After finding out her baby had no heartbeat, Sandra was forced to go to Ithaca and have an abortion. Soon after, in May 2012, Sandra and Elizabeth were given a spot in Cayuga County's domestic violence shelter.

Sandra got a job — but with only 15 hours a week, she couldn't afford babysitters or her own apartment. Emotionally wrecked, she desperately called Elizabeth's father and told him about Jeff.

"I felt like I was a shell of myself and I wasn't in control of my life," she said. "I felt so helpless. I felt like I was doing a disservice for my daughter, because I felt like I couldn't keep her safe."

Thomas, who was working and living in Texas, offered to take care of Elizabeth for awhile, stating he felt responsible for Sandra's plight.

"He said he felt like he opened the door for this to happen to me," she said.

Knowing it was the only way to give her daughter stability, Sandra finally relented — and, though it crushed her, sent her baby away.

"Piecing everything together"

After Elizabeth left, Sandra spent most nights crying herself to sleep. She would wake in the middle of the night to reach out for her daughter — and break when she remembered Elizabeth was not there.

When they talked on the phone, Sandra said her 4-year-old would cry and ask to come home.

"She just felt like I left her," she said, brushing away tears. "I couldn't explain to her that I had to do this."

Despite her depression, Sandra worked hard to put her life back together and get her daughter back.

With the help of the C/SCAA, she created a list of goals. Sandra obtained her GED and worked as many hours as possible, saving up enough money to buy a car. She went to counseling and got a new, nice apartment. She met a kind man who reminded her that not all

men were abusive.

And so, 366 days after she sent her baby away, Sandra was ready to bring her daughter home.

Using the security deposit her landlord kindly allowed her to borrow, Sandra bought a ticket to Texas on June 18, 2013 and boarded her first flight.

As soon as her plane arrived, Sandra booked a motel room and waited with her stomach pretzeled into nervous knots. When the knock finally came, Sandra flung open the door — and, for the first time in over a year, held her child.

Elizabeth "glued herself" to her mother, refusing to let Sandra go. "It was the absolute best," Sandra said, smiling.

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Nearly a year after she reunited with her daughter, Sandra is happy to report that all is relatively well.

Sandra attended Finger Lakes Community College. She became a certified nursing assistant, and started working at a local nursing home. Over a year after they started dating, she is still with her kind boyfriend — a man she calls "a breath of fresh air."

"I'm piecing everything together, trying to get it all together," she said.

Life, however, isn't perfect.

Elizabeth — who will soon turn 6 — struggles with separation anxiety. She misses her half-brothers and half-sister, who still live in Texas, and has trouble being away from her mother.

But now, Sandra's problems feel manageable. They feel ... well, normal.

"It's different," she said, grinning. "It's the first time in forever I can sit back and say 95 percent of my life is normal."

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To conclude this special series on poverty in Cayuga County, we're holding an online town hall meeting with a group of local experts on the frontlines of the War on Poverty. Head to auburnpub.com at noon Friday to take part in this interactive forum.