

Survival Instinct

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by Karen Ali

Battered by her husband with a shovel, Monique Faison Ross is alive today because she played dead. She lived to tell the story and now seeks to educate others about the warning signs she missed.

“I did not listen to my gut when it was screaming at me, ‘extreme danger is ahead,’” Faison Ross says. “I wrongly believed domestic abuse was a black eye or broken bones, not years of red-flag behaviors. My marriage did not become physically violent until the end, but my ex-husband’s volatile and dark side was bubbling just under the surface, and I did not recognize it.”

Faison Ross wants both men and women to be aware of the signs, so they don't suffer the same extreme violence. "I dismissed explosive outbursts and his following me, thinking my ex was immature and had no control over his temper. But those are, in fact, dangerous behaviors."

Her first violent encounter was a choking incident that occurred just a couple of months before she left the marriage. She knows it was a warning sign of likely escalation that could lead to serious injury or even murder.

Domestic violence experts stress awareness of the many methods employed by abusers to control their victims, including physical, verbal, emotional/psychological, digital, sexual and economic tactics.

Ann Rodwell-Lawton, Director of Education, Training & Outreach at the Women's Center of Greater Danbury, says the center's staff uses the term "red flag" to describe behaviors that signal a relationship could turn abusive. "Red flags are unhealthy, but society often frames them as healthy, romantic behaviors. An example of this is jealousy and possessiveness," she says. "These behaviors are based on power and control."

Other red flags include isolation from friends and family, belittling, minimizing and deflecting responsibility for actions. These strongly contrast with "green flags," which are elements of healthy relationships, including respect, equality, trust, empathy, boundaries, communication and independence.

Rather than referring to types of abuse, Rodwell-Lawton uses the term "methods of control" to describe these tactics, as these behaviors are meant to exert and maintain control over an intimate partner.

Leaving an abuser isn't always easy; for many reasons both men and women stay in toxic relationships, like Faison Ross did. Many domestic violence assaults don't occur until the victim is ready to leave. It's important to seek support from a domestic violence shelter when preparing to leave or, if you're in imminent danger, call or text 911.

It may require time and meticulous planning to safely exit an abusive relationship, says Mary-Jane Foster, president and CEO, Interval House in Hartford. "Our agency provides services to educate and empower victims, helping them establish independence from their abusers," she says. "Our advocates work to ensure that a lack of resources does not prevent someone from seeking help or escaping a dangerous situation. Calling our hotline—or any other around the country—is the first step to opening the door to a safer future."

Overcoming the trauma of domestic abuse and violence can take years and leaving is a difficult process. People often stay in abusive relationships for emotional, cultural and religious reasons. "They may stay because they have suffered so much emotional trauma, they don't believe they deserve better. The abuse has destroyed their self-esteem. This may be complicated when some victims are ostracized by friends and family when they leave an abuser," says Debra A. Greenwood, president and CEO of Bridgeport's The Center for Family Justice.

Greenwood adds that many people are afraid to leave their abusers because they are economically and emotionally dependent on them. An abuse victim may have been prohibited from working or accessing the education and training needed to make them employable. “They may have children who need a roof over their heads or have ties to their community, schools, sports, activities and friends that may make leaving feel overwhelming; domestic violence is the number one cause of homelessness for women in America.”

Faison Ross stayed in her relationship for her children, thinking it would be better for them: “Protect yourself and especially protect your children. They can be scarred for life,” she says. “Never stay because you believe, as I did, a two-parent family is better than a single-parent family, when a safe, peaceful, loving home is most important. It is essential to have boundaries, know the warning signs and have a safety plan.”

Faison Ross’s split from her husband put her in a precarious financial situation initially, but with support from the community and hard work, she was able to get back on her feet. She urges abuse victims to seek out support and “follow their gut” when they feel something is wrong. “Don’t let anyone talk you out of what is unacceptable and intolerable to you.”

Faison Ross published a book this summer called *Playing Dead: A Memoir of Terror and Survival*, where she tells her harrowing story, focusing on the dangerous red flags she overlooked and detailing how she survived the brutal attack where she was left alone in the woods to die.

“I wrote this book for the sole reason of helping others recognize sociopathic and abusive behavior when they see it,” Faison Ross says. “My goal is to save someone’s life by telling my story.”

Connecticut resident Monique Faison Ross has worked as a program manager for a Connecticut educational non-profit since 2004. She has four children and a grandchild. Her book, Playing Dead: A Memoir of Terror and Survival, was published by WildBlue Press, Denver, and officially released in August.

Karen Ali is a journalist and media relations expert in Connecticut. A former criminal justice reporter covering high-profile trials, she is now a media strategist with Michael J. London & Associates in Trumbull.

Local Resources:

Women’s Center of Greater Danbury

Danbury • 203-731-5200

Domestic Violence Hotline: 203-731-5206

WomensCenter@wcogd.org

WCoGD.org

Interval House

Hartford • 860-246-9149

24-Hour Hotline: 860-527-0550

IntervalHouseCT.org

The Center for Family Justice

Bridgeport • 203-334-6154

Domestic Abuse Hotline: 203-384-9559

Kcwikla@CenterForFamilyJustice.org

CenterForFamilyJustice.org