Outside Looking In

(A family member’s perspective)

My sister and I have always been close. We come from a large family; there are nine children in our family, my sister the seventh and me the youngest. She was twelve when I came into this world, so in a sense she was a mother figure to me. The day she became a foster parent and made me an Aunt was one of the proudest moments of my life. I had the privilege of helping raise my niece and nephew; picking them up from school/daycare and having sleep overs at my house.

In late 2005 all of that began to change. My sister had met a man online and things between them seemed to move rather quickly. I knew something was not right about the situation, but did not know what to do about it. At the time it was only a strong gut instinct, as I did not have any physical proof that something was off. Then one night my phone rang and she said, “I’m engaged!” Now the normal reaction of most sisters would be elation. My reaction, however, was the exact opposite. I responded, “Congratulations, I guess.” There was no excitement in my voice, and despite the uneasy feeling I had, I was forced to push my feelings aside and move forward to keep the peace within my family. The engagement came two weeks after the two of them met and they were married within six weeks.

As the months went by my sister began pulling away and I saw her and the kids less and less. I did not understand what was happening and it seemed like every time I would try to do something with her there was a reason she could not get together. Thanksgiving of 2006 turned my world upside down. Family had gathered at my parent’s house and my sister did not join us. A couple of family members drove over to her house and were asked to leave. A few hours later my sister, her husband, and the kids pulled into my parent’s driveway. My sister and niece came into the house, seemingly just to start an argument with my father, and before I knew it they were gone. That was the last time her husband allowed me to see my sister for 8 years.

Heartbreak… That does not even begin to describe the feelings that I had when losing my sister. It was a couple of months after that I learned who the real man was that my sister had married. He had a record and spent a decent amount of time in jail.

What do I do? Who can I turn to? How do I know the children are safe?

My only saving grace was that I had friends that worked with my sister on a daily basis. That was my lifeline. I watched the kids grow up through pictures. Friends would say how my sister had changed so much and that they did not even recognize the person she had become. There were no marks or physical signs of abuse that they could see. The abuse was hidden deep inside her, but that was not something she was ready to share with the world.

In November of 2013 I was leaving work one morning and had been thinking about my sister. A day never went by that I didn’t think of her and the kids. That morning, in particular, I had a sense of urgency that I needed to reach out to her. I was exhausted after working a twelve hour shift, but before I knew it I was pulling into a parking spot outside of her work. I went into the building and just started talking to her. So many things had happened in the last eight years and all of my emotions came flooding through. It was not a lengthy conversation, but I said what I needed to say and left my phone number on a post-it note. She hugged me and I sank into her arms as the tears fell from my eyes.

The days passed and I didn’t hear anything. The days turned into months and still nothing. Then one February evening in 2014, I received a call on my cell from an unknown number. I let it ring through to voicemail and to my surprise I received a notification that there was a message. I was at my best friend’s house at the time and walked into her kitchen to play the message. The voice on the other end of the message was my sister’s, asking me to call her back when I had a chance. The phone almost fell from my hand. I called her back within a few minutes thinking that she would probably want to get together for lunch or something. To my surprise my sister asked if she could come and stay with me. I was shocked and managed to stammer out a ‘yes, absolutely.’

My sister and the kids moved in, but at that point I did not know where things would go from there. We sat and talked about different things, but she didn’t open up enough to share the horrifying details of her marriage that I would soon learn. Her plan at that point was to take the time apart from him and decide what she was going to do. Deep down I wanted her to kick him out of her house and be done with him forever. However, I knew all too well that it would not be that easy. I felt like I was walking on egg shells. A part of me was too afraid to bring up the past. How could I bring up the past when I just got her and the kids back in my life? Would she just run back to him and then I would not see her again for another nine years? After about a month my sister moved back to her house, and still remained in contact with me. I still didn’t feel very comfortable about the situation, but she was an adult and could make her own decisions. Her husband had changed for the moment and was trying to be a “better” person. That only lasted so long and eventually my sister moved back in a second time. I knew in my heart that I would go above and beyond for her and the kids, but a part of me knew I needed to start using tough love. I told my sister that if she decided to go back to her husband again that she couldn’t come back to my house if things went bad again. (Of course she could come back, who was I kidding?) I put my foot down and said that she needed to make him leave the next time, as it wasn’t fair for her and the kids to keep packing their things up to leave. After all, the house belonged to her, even before their marriage.

In June of 2014 as my sister attempted to leave, her husband refused to allow her out of the house. He grabbed her up by the shirt proceeding to rip both her bra and t-shirt. Voices became escalated and the next door neighbor came to see what was going on. He asked the neighbor to leave, while my sister said he could stay. Meanwhile my nephew was on the phone calling the police. The neighbor noticed things were not getting any better. My sister was still being held against her will, and that is when the neighbor threw a punch. The police showed up soon after and arrested her abuser.

Court proceedings took place and a temporary protective order was put in place while the domestic violence charge was being tried. My sister was given the choice to fully pursue the case against him, which would mean a trial. My nephew would have to testify as well as my sister. My nephew was eleven at the time, and we didn’t think it was a good idea to put him through a trial. Not to mention, that if a jury found him ‘Not Guilty’ he would completely get off the hook with no charges at all. So, instead of taking a gamble a plea deal was offered. He was initially charged with:

2919.25A DOMESTIC VIOLENCE KNOWINGLY CAUSE OR ATTEMPT TO CAUSE PHYSICAL HARM TO FAMILY OR HOUSEHOLD MEMBER

Then it was amended to:

2917.11A1 DISORDERLY CONDUCT (M4)

He would have to wear an ankle monitor with GPS tracking and serve two years’ probation. My sister immediately obtained a civil protection order to replace the temporary protection order.

My sister was served with divorce papers shortly after the protection order was fulfilled. One would think that would be a relief, however as it continued, it became more and more evident it was just yet another manipulative tactic, and an attempt to tear my sister down. He claimed my sister was negligent and an adulterer, among other things. She was anything but those things. The process of divorce was grueling to say the least. Her soon-to-be ex-husband created an itemized list of every item in the house to be negotiated; 27 seven pages, right down to the curtains.

In the meantime, my sister and I were there for each other. Our bond was strengthening and the feeling of walking on egg shells subsided for me. I felt whole. Where there once was an empty space in my heart, it had been filled with love and new memories. I could slowly see my sister returning to the once happy person I had known prior to meeting the malignant narcissist. I attended divorce court when I could and helped support her in any way she needed me. It took nearly nine years for me to get my sister back, and I was not going to let anything take her away. At one of the meetings at the courthouse we were surprised to hear that he had finally agreed on a settlement. It may have been because he had illegally contacted the county auditor’s office and lied about upgrades on the house to raise my sister’s taxes. Whatever it was that made him settle we were more than elated. In June of 2015 the divorce was finalized and we were finally able to celebrate.

Things seemed pretty quiet for a while and life began to have some normalcy. My sister was happy at work and reconnected with her friends, who mean the world to her. All was great and it felt like things picked up where they had left off almost nine years ago. Unfortunately that was all about to change in a matter of months.

On March 23, 2016 at 8:15pm, I received the worst phone call of my life. My heart felt like it was ripped out of my chest as I answered my cell phone; the caller ID displayed Mercy St. Vincent. The voice on the other end of the line informed me that I was listed as an emergency contact for my sister. She was in the emergency department and she had been shot. A million things raced through my head, but I immediately knew who had pulled the trigger. I took a deep breath and asked where she had been shot, knowing that if she were dead they were not allowed to tell me over the phone. At that point they knew she had been shot in the side, the shoulder, and the ear. It all seemed so surreal, so I asked for confirmation of her date of birth. August 5, 1971; it was my sister…

So many things were running through my head, but I knew I needed to react appropriately and take care of my family. I made sure my niece and nephew were in a safe place, and continued to my parent’s house to tell them of what happened. I will never forget how I felt as I saw my father burst into tears upon hearing his daughter had been shot. I had to quickly regain my composure to get to the hospital. I was the one they were looking to as an advocate for my sister and my family. I assured my parents I would contact them as soon as I had an update.

I made it to the hospital, parked my car, and went to the main desk in the emergency department. I said I was there for my sister who had been shot. They told me to have a seat and it would be just a moment. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a man wearing a bullet proof vest with ‘POLICE’ written across the chest. I turned to him and said that he was probably there for my sister; in fact he was. We walked over to a corner and started talking about the situation. I had, at that point, no idea why my sister was near her ex-husband as there was a CPO in place. None of it made sense. Finally, the doctor appeared with pastoral care and we went into a private room. I looked at the doctor and told him I was in the medical field and to not hold back. He explained that my sister had at least three bullet wounds. The worst injury was the one that had entered just under her right breast and travelled through her lung, diaphragm, and liver. There was also an entrance wound to the shoulder and what appeared to be a wound to her ear. I asked when I could see her and was told that when she came back from CT someone would come and get me. I made a phone call to my parents, updating them on what I knew and making sure that the kids were okay.

White sterile room, bright lights, and a monitor displaying a strong heart rate, a good oxygen saturation, and a great blood pressure. The hospital bed, with the metal rails raised and a white blanket adorning it, held my sister. A chest tube coming from the right side of her body hooked to the vacuum sealed container. A breathing tube inserted to assist respirations was connected to a ventilator to help her breath. Her beautiful face and blonde hair covered in semi dried blood. Where the hell was I? Was I dreaming? I placed my hand on her shoulder and said, “Everything will be okay, I am here. I love you.”

I needed to be strong. I couldn’t let emotion take over and I had to make sure my sister would receive the best care. She certainly did receive the best care too! The doctors and staff kept me informed, even showing me the CT results and updating me on the care plan. As long as her vitals remained stable she would not need surgery and would be moved from the ER to the ICU. Around 11pm she was transferred to the ICU. I walked into her room once she was settled and went to her side. She was receiving light sedation and pain meds. I took hold of her hand and began to talk. I asked her to squeeze my hand if she could hear me and she responded. A sense of relief rushed over me and I mentioned what had taken place to the nurse. That night was a sleepless night for me, sitting in the hospital chair going to my sister’s side any time I heard her moving. She moved about every hour, and I would make sure that she got her pain meds to remain comfortable each time.

A new day dawned and by the afternoon the doctor and respiratory care team came in to take out the breathing tube. Once that was removed and everyone had left the room I went to my sister’s side. It was at that point that she shared the whole story of being shot. She had gone to her ex-husband’s apartment to get things he had promised for the children. From the first pull of the trigger to the last there were a total of six shots, four of them striking my sister’s body. The first shot entered her right side and caused the most damage with the bullet coming to rest in her lower back. He pulled the trigger again and she was able to hit it away causing the bullet to hit the toilet. The third shot grazed her ear. The fourth shot entered her shoulder and rested in her upper back. The fifth bullet was never fired as she was able to hit his hand as he tried to reload. The final shot entered and exited her scalp as her body lay lifeless in the hallway of the apartment building. A man from the upstairs apartment called 911 and the people across the hallway came out to render aid until law enforcement arrived on scene.

He took my sister from me once and tried to take her away from me a second time. Thankfully by God’s grace and His mercy she is still here today. My sister has made a full recovery and the two bullets that were lodged in her back have since been removed. I could not be more proud of who she has become. The strength and courage that my sister displays is immeasurable. My sister is not a victim of domestic violence she is a Survivor. She is Standing Courageous so that others may stand with her and know that there is a way out. Everything happens for a reason and I am grateful for the path that we have both been led to.

There are so many things I wish I could have done or changed. None of that matters though. If you find yourself in a similar situation, as a family member, just keep reaching out. Keep pushing forward! Thank you for reading my story.