



## **SURVIVOR STORIES** *by Samantha Decker*

In this issue, First Step is highlighting three true survivor stories that were interviewed and written by Samantha Decker. Some names have been changed to protect the identity of the survivors. First Step thanks these brave individuals who have shared their stories. Please note the content warnings for each story.

### **Faith's Story**

**CONTENT WARNING:** Physical abuse, torture, child abuse, homicide, death of children

Faith was referred to First Step after surviving a violent attack at the hands of her [then] husband. After waking up in a hospital bed, she was faced with the extent of the injuries she had sustained which included a gunshot wound and a knife cut to her face.

Her physical wounds would only account for a portion of the trauma. The night of the attack, she was not the only victim. Tragically, her four children were brutally murdered by her husband, leaving Faith as the sole survivor. Being bound with tape and lying on the cold floor of her basement, she was forced to helplessly watch as two of her children were killed in front of her. After what she describes as feeling like hours, she was rescued by first responders and rushed to the hospital. She was left to grapple with the sudden loss of her entire family and find a way to somehow pick up the pieces.

At the beginning of the relationship, Faith describes her husband as being quiet, helpful, and a seemingly well-liked friendly person. Despite this, she admits to having a pungent feeling early on in the relationship that she should leave. "I [felt I] needed to break up with him but didn't know why". Unfortunately, she felt there was a lack of tangible reasons to put an end to the relationship.

Eventually, the relationship became turbulent which did cause her to leave. The separation lasted for 2 years\*. During this time, he used manipulative techniques to charm and convince her to reunite their relationship and family.

After a short time back together, she came to the disappointing realization that the toxic aspects of

[Continued on Page 3](#)

### **Adam's Story**

**CONTENT WARNING:** Child sexual assault and exploitation, grooming, suicide

Adam\* sought help from First Step at age 17, years after experiencing several traumatic events.

As a preteen, Adam struggled with his sexuality and attraction to boys. Feeling misunderstood and left out among his peers, he turned to the internet to find a romantic connection. The impersonal nature of online dating caused him to quickly develop a fear of rejection. He began to exchange sexual images of his underage body which he found to hold the interest of his pursuits longer. Eventually, the attention and perceived affection he was receiving online turned into an addiction and he lost control.

During his junior year of high school, he began his first relationship with someone he met in person. Soon after it began, he experienced an unexpected

sexual encounter where innocent cuddling turned into non-consensual sexual touching. In the moment, he felt shocked and confused, causing him to freeze\*. This left him powerless and unable to refuse the advances.

His next relationship was with an older man who was aware that Adam was underage. Very quickly, the relationship became sexual. At the time, Adam believed he was giving consent but was not old enough to process the true reality of the situation in which he was being preyed on by a child predator.

After that breakup and being single for a little while, he began his next relationship with a partner he describes as being an amazing person. However, since he had not yet acknowledged or healed from

[Continued on next page](#)

### **IN THIS ISSUE:**

*Survivor Stories:*  
Faith, Adam, and Tracy

2023 You Are the Light Gala Information

Ms. Voluptuous Michigan:  
A Champion for First Step

Expansion of First Step Community Response Program

Support First Step by Donating Your Vehicle

Thank You to Our 2022 You Are the Light Sponsors

First Step Family Photo Gallery

Count Me In!

# SURVIVOR STORIES

by Samantha Decker

“SEEING A SPECIALIZED COUNSELOR WHO KNOWS HOW TO PROPERLY HANDLE MATTERS SUCH AS SEXUAL ASSAULT AND VIOLENCE WAS A WHOLE NEW EXPERIENCE FOR ME. IT WAS SCARY AT FIRST BUT IN THE END IT WAS WORTH IT.” -ADAM

## Adam (continued)

the trauma of his past, he developed chronic depression. This prevented him from feeling the normal happiness and fulfillment that is an essential part of a healthy relationship. The depression eventually became so severe that he attempted to end his life and was referred to a psychiatric hospital to receive treatment. Unfortunately, he recounts that the hospital stay did little to ease his depression since there was a lack of focus on addressing and resolving the underlying issues. Shortly after his release, his relationship ended which he found to be devastating.

Still in the throes of his addiction to online dating, Adam turned to a dating app meant only for adults. He came across a family friend who was much older and had known him since childhood. He pursued Adam sexually and despite feeling uncomfortable, Adam still did not yet have the ability or skills to say no. This continued to degrade his mental health.

After continued attempts at generalized therapy proved to not be an effective treatment for Adam, he found First Step. He enrolled in trauma-focused, 1-on-1 counseling sessions.

“Seeing a specialized counselor who knows how to properly handle matters such as sexual assault and violence was a whole new experience for me. It was scary at first but in the end it was worth it.”

During these sessions he learned that his first sexual experience, and many others following, was assault. This was something he was in denial about up until that point. He has since come to the realization that he was not at fault, and instead, after years of manipulation, coercion, and exploitation by adults, he, too, is a survivor.

“Hearing [my counselor] say those words broke me down, but helped me be able to understand what work I needed to do to recover from what happened and repair the damage that had been done.”

Through hard work and consistency in counseling, he was able to learn to set boundaries as well as how to accept and give genuine love, including self love. He was also able to resolve some issues with his family to become a stronger system of mutual love and support. Adam has accepted that healing is a lifelong and non-linear journey. He can proudly say his addiction is under control and he has the skills to build and maintain healthy relationships with others.

♂ **OUR BODIES AND MINDS HAVE AUTOMATED RESPONSES TO TRAUMA TO HELP US COPE. RESPONSES CAN VARY FROM PERSON TO PERSON AND STRESSFUL EXPERIENCES. FOUR COMMON TRAUMA RESPONSES INCLUDE FIGHT, FLIGHT, FREEZE, OR FAWN.**

\*Names have been changed to protect the identity of survivors.

Samantha Decker is a freelance writer in Los Angeles, California. Originally from Michigan, she still feels very connected to the community that was her first home. As a person who has been affected by gender-based violence, she is passionate about building up survivors and making strides towards a violence-free future. Her lighter hobbies are playing recreational ultimate frisbee, taking acrobat classes and petting every dog she sees.

## Faith (continued)

the relationships had not been resolved. Caught in a sticky web of abuse, she did not have the means to leave. Although the idea of getting counseling crossed her mind, she felt they would be unable to help until she left. Additionally, she states his controlling nature would've made it nearly impossible to attend counseling sessions without him putting a stop to it.

Over the course of many years within the relationship there was an absence of physical abuse prior to the night he became violent. Instead, the relationship exhibited other types of abuse that were more mental and verbal in nature. The abuse would appear in torment such as yelling, berating, demeaning, gaslighting, giving things and then taking them away, and sleep deprivation. This behavior escalated in severity gradually over time. Faith admits she was not aware these are forms of abuse and therefore did not think she or her children were in any type of danger. The night of the attack was completely unanticipated.

**ON AVERAGE, IT TAKES VICTIMS 7 TO 10 TIMES TO PERMANENTLY LEAVE AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP DUE TO A VARIETY OF REASONS, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO SAFETY CONCERNS, LACK OF RESOURCES, ESCALATION OF ABUSE AND MANIPULATION TACTICS, CHILDREN, ISOLATION, AND LIMITED SUPPORT SYSTEM, ETC.**

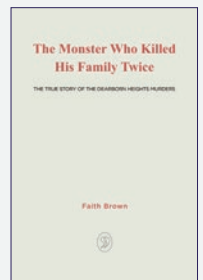
Upon her release from the hospital, Faith felt the gravity of her situation and knew she needed help. Among the crisis materials provided to her at the hospital was a pamphlet about First Step's services. Days after her release, she made contact with First Step and began receiving services starting with grief, domestic violence and trauma-centered counseling. She describes her counselor as being patient with every step of her healing process and never pushed her to a level where she would feel uncomfortable.

She also received transitional housing services which allowed her to quickly move into a new home that was safe and peaceful. Additionally, the ongoing criminal case against her husband prompted First Step to provide legal help, support and advocacy throughout the entire process until he was brought to justice.



*It has now been 7 years since this tragic event and Faith still carries the weight in her heart of having lost her children. She finds strength in telling her story to empower other survivors to seek help, and educate the community on the impacts of abuse. You can read more about her story of survival, strength, and healing in her book "The Monster Who Killed His Family Twice."*

*If you'd like to read more about Faith's story and support her as she works to raise awareness and end violence in our community, you can purchase her book using the QR code and attending First Step's You Are the Light Gala this October 6th, 2023 to hear her speak live.*



## Tracy's Story

**CONTENT WARNING: Sex Trafficking**

Tracy\* is a survivor that sought help from First Step to leave a dangerous situation. In the midst of an abusive relationship, her then romantic partner began to traffic her. Feeling rattled upon her release from a jail cell after a 2-week stint, she decided she needed some grounding and an outside perspective. Picking up her phone, she typed "free counseling" into the Google search bar. Among the populated results was First Step's website. Tracy was able to easily enroll in the counseling program at no cost.

Counseling sessions began soon after, and she felt that it was helping. However, after a short time, she could not continue seeking support from First Step due to a sudden safety concern. Her abuser, who she'd cut ties with, had resurfaced and posed an imminent threat. Upon his imprisonment a year later, she resumed sessions despite still feeling scared. First Step made it easier by eagerly welcoming her back.

Restarting counseling, she claims, is when the real healing began. Finally feeling safe and comfortable, she was able to open up completely to her First Step counselor, sharing details of her story and her most closely guarded memories and emotions.

"It was so hard for me to come out of my situation not only because I was being manipulated, I was being gaslit, I was being love bombed and then on top of it you throw in that [my ex] put me into human trafficking. I lost my whole self."

In one session, Tracy confessed that her current living situation was toxic for herself and her two children. Her counselor quickly secured a spot for Tracy and her children into First Step's housing program\*. Once placed in a healthy environment, Tracy was empowered to build a new and positive life. She was able to focus on making progress by completing her GED certificate as well as setting and achieving many personal and professional goals.

"[My counselors] literally put my feet on the ground and were like 'Okay, we got to take baby steps before we run but those baby steps are going to turn into jogging and then we're going to [get to] running.'"

Through mental health services, Tracy was able to work through and overcome much of the after-effects of trauma. She describes initially directing her anger towards herself but learning how to release those emotions and find peace.

Continued on page 5

★ CELEBRATING 45 YEARS OF SERVICE ★



YOU ARE THE LIGHT

*Gala*

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 6, 2023  
6:30-11:30PM

LAUREL MANOR  
39000 SCHOOLCRAFT RD  
LIVONIA, MICHIGAN

PLATED DINNER

LIVE MUSIC BY  
THE BLUEWATER KINGS

DANCING & COCKTAILS

SILENT AUCTION

AWARD CEREMONY

SURVIVOR SPEAKERS



★ EVENT CO-CHAIRS ★

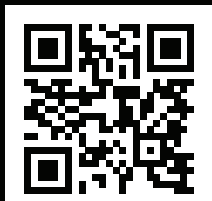
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HONORARY CHAIR:  
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[FIRSTSTEP-MI.ORG/LIGHT](https://firststep-mi.org/light)



## Tracy's Story CONTINUED

Tracy's message to anyone thinking of seeking help for a similar situation is to not be afraid and that survivors will not face judgment. She warns that a bad situation is bound to get worse. Seeking help is the only safe and sure way out and brighter days are possible. First Step is a great place with the right tools to help.

\*First Step's Transitional Supportive Housing (TSH) program is a rent subsidy program where First Step provides safe and sustainable housing to survivors and their families by paying their rent for up to two years while offering supplemental support through advocacy, counseling, life skills building, and more.

## MS. VOLUPTUOUS MICHIGAN: A CHAMPION FOR FIRST STEP

Kat Nelson, 32, from Madison Heights, MI is a goal-getter. She is a wife, a Branding & Communication Manager for Barton Malow, an artist, a mother of two, and a survivor of domestic and sexual violence. Kat survived abuse from multiple past relationships and has told her story of survival in many different forms, she is an advocate for others to tell their truth.



Last year, Kat experienced a hard pregnancy with her second child and was on medical bed rest for over two months. "During this time I had a lot of time to think. I was about to bring another child into the world, and I felt an inherent need to grow from my pain from abuse. I wanted to become the role model I needed as a child." Kat mentioned during an interview. "Not only did I want to retrain myself to love the body I was given, but also become mentally healthy for my children. It was during my lowest times I decided enough was enough, and I needed to pursue a new personal renaissance as a survivor." She decided to pursue her art as a form of healing and challenge her body insecurities by entering her very first pageant to win the title of Ms. Voluptuous Michigan, an international pageant for plus-sized bodies designed to empower the women behind the sash.

In the past, Kat has produced numerous videos to help raise awareness and funds for First Step and has donated her artwork for First Step's annual gala. Kat's message is simple: "Your scars of abuse are NOT who you are!" She shared her story of pain and survival and nominated First Step in February of 2021, for a grant opportunity called "100 Businesses Who Care" which provided First Step with a \$40,000 grant to fund core safety net services and the First Step ARK pet center.

Most recently, she accepted the crown of Ms. Voluptuous, Michigan, with First Step as her platform. In April of 2023, she competed with other queens from the Netherlands, Guam, Poland, United Kingdom, Greece, Malaysia, and other US states for the title of Ms. Voluptuous National/International. For her talent portion, Kat hosted a series of art therapy workshops with First Step survivors, volunteers, and donors. She believes that "Art and other creative pursuits help survivors to heal, work through trauma and to thrive". Even though Kat didn't win the title of Ms. Voluptuous National/International she presented herself with dignity and we are proud of her achievements.

To learn more about Kat and her journey, check out Ms. Voluptuous Pageant at [missvoluptuouspageants.com/royalty](https://missvoluptuouspageants.com/royalty)

For more on 100 Business Who Care, visit [100businesseswhocare.com/past-recipients](https://100businesseswhocare.com/past-recipients)

## COMMUNITY RESPONSE PROGRAM EXPANDS TO NORTHVILLE AND PLYMOUTH

Over the course of the last year, the Community Response Program has not only been thriving but expanding the lifesaving work that they provide to survivors throughout Wayne County. The team has had the opportunity to increase their outreach by creating a formal collaboration with the following police departments: the City of Northville, the City of Plymouth, and Plymouth Twp. It is the hope of the program and the agency, that by formalizing these collaborations, that more survivors will be directed to First Step consistently for the myriad of support services that First Step offers. In the coming year, we will be expanding our Lethality Assessment Program (LAP) as well.

In 2016 the Community Response Program first implemented the Lethality Assessment Program, based off the Maryland model, in three of its longstanding collaborative police departments: Canton, Taylor, and Dearborn. Since that time the program has continued to help our survivor advocates and law enforcement partners identify those survivors most at risk to be killed by their abuser. Once a LAP screen has been completed by law enforcement, they will then call our 24-hour helpline to have advocates provide direct support to that survivor at the time of the initial assault. Upon our helpline completing a 24-hour safety plan with that survivor, law enforcement ends the call, and a Community Response Advocate follows-up the very next day. The critical work of this program has not only saved lives but caught the attention of other communities in Wayne County. We are happy to announce that later this year we will be expanding the Lethality Assessment Program to include the City of Northville, Northville Twp., as well as the City of Plymouth.

## SUPPORT FIRST STEP BY DONATING YOUR VEHICLE



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They take care of everything from the pick-up and sale, to sending you the donation receipt and necessary tax documents. Vehicle donation pick-up is always free to you and most vehicles can be picked up within 24-72 hours. You'll receive an initial car donation receipt upon pick-up and then CARS will work to turn your car into cash to support First Step. Once your vehicle is sold, we will provide you proper tax forms in time to file.

Visit [careasy.org/nonprofit/first-step-western-wayne-county](https://careasy.org/nonprofit/first-step-western-wayne-county) to donate your car today.



# FirstStep

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Chicks for Charity Essential Items Donation presented to Director of Philanthropy Theresa Bizoe



DTE donates Personal Care Items



GE Volunteers Deep Clean at First Step



Scentsy Buddies and Flowers from Jen Bowers



Survivor Advocate Lee Lee with First Step supporters B.O.U.G.I.E. Ladies; Essential Items Donation



Home Depot presents move-in cleaning kits donation to First Step's Shelter Program Coordinator Catherine Stafford



First Step receives donation from the Talbot Team



Project Beautiful donates Mother's Day gifts to First Step



Auldon Sweeny Wydo and Friends donate personal care items from Mary Kay



Guests enjoy the evening at the You Are the Light Gala 2022

2022 FOUNDATION  
GRANT RECIPIENT  
FIRST STEP



First Step receives 2022 Livonia Community Foundation Grant



First Step Staff celebrates for staff appreciation on board the Detroit Princess



Beaumont Adopt A Garden Group Summer 2022



First Step receives essential items donation from the Michigan Marine Corps Auxiliary



First Step receives \$5,000 from local Meijer

FIRST STEP *family*



AARBG Holiday Party 2022



Board Chair Elaine Tingle and friends attend the YATL Gala 2022



2022 Denim Day Exhibit at First Step



Plymouth Township Police Department donates essential items to First Step



First Step receives donation from the Michigan Masonic Charitable Foundation-Plymouth Rock Lodge 47



Chrome Angelz toy donation for First Step's Holiday Shop



Sarah Ann Cochrane Chapter — NSDAR Essential Items Donation



Representative from Gasser Bush presents Executive Director Lori Kitchen-Buschel with a donation to First Step



Volunteers Snigdha and Aakash assemble shelves for the Plymouth Office



Amazon Donation to First Step



44567 Pinetree Drive  
Plymouth, MI 48170



## ABOUT FIRST STEP

First Step is an organization in Wayne County, Michigan that provides free comprehensive services to support survivors of domestic and sexual violence.

First Step offers temporary emergency housing, counseling, advocacy, transitional housing, assault response, 24-hour helpline services, children's services, training and education to survivors and to the community.

Help work to make your community violence-free by becoming involved with First Step; volunteer, donate, and stand up for peace and safety in your community.

Call 734.722.1772 for more information.

First Step  
44567 Pinetree Drive  
Plymouth, MI 48170  
734.416.1111

24-Hour Helpline  
734.722.6800

First Step  
Karen Wilson  
Smithbauer Center  
4400 Venoy Road  
Wayne, MI 48184

firststep-mi.org  
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First Step, 44567 Pinetree Drive, Plymouth, MI 48170

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For information about the newsletter or to unsubscribe, contact Theresa Bizoe: 734.656.0730, [tbizoe@firststep-mi.org](mailto:tbizoe@firststep-mi.org)

**THE MISSION OF FIRST STEP IS TO ELIMINATE BOTH DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND TO PROVIDE COMPREHENSIVE SERVICES TO INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES IMPACTED BY THESE CRIMES.**

