

## **A Sister Experience**

### **Breaking Free: Sandra's Journey from Silence to Empowerment**

I spent the last eighteen years in a marriage that suffocated me with control. In many ways, it felt a lot like my first marriage, which was to a pastor. That relationship was tough, but I eventually found the strength to leave after he crossed the line with infidelity and addiction.

Shortly after my divorce, I met my second husband through a church introduction. We married quickly. In retrospect, too quick. Almost immediately, he began controlling every aspect of my life, especially financially. At the time, I had trained as a cosmetologist, excited about my new career, but he insisted I stay home because he earned enough for both of us. He even called my employer to ensure I wouldn't return to work, cutting off my financial independence at the source.

We built a business together, which did really well, but I never saw any of that success in my own bank account. Aside from being extremely controlling, he was derogatory towards me. He once joked that I came "trained" from my previous marriage, trivializing the emotional and psychological control I had endured.

Each time I sought help from our church and the wider Christian community during my struggles, the counsel I received was dishearteningly consistent. Regardless of the specifics of my situation, the advice was always to endure, to pray harder, and to work on the marriage. It felt like there was no way out, that this was simply my burden to bear, as if the vows I took meant I had to accept any treatment, no matter how damaging.

Over time, after doing some self-reflection and personal growth, I began to stand up for myself more, something my husband deeply disliked. As I became more assertive, it became clear to me that I needed to leave, but my final breaking point was devastating. He forced himself on me despite my clear refusal—a violation in the truest sense. He'll deny it, but the truth is, he raped me. That was it; I was done.

One of the biggest challenges I faced when leaving my marriage wasn't just walking away—it was being told that because I left, I deserved nothing. That I would get nothing.

The truth is, I did have things in my name but as his spending habits pushed us deeper into debt, he started putting purchases under my name when his credit ran out. Now, as we sort through the separation, he retains the business and everything associated with the property, while I'm left with only half of it.

It's not about what I lost, though. It's about what I'm gaining—peace, freedom, and a fresh start. Because no amount of possessions can compare to finally stepping into a life where I get to rebuild on my own terms.

As I navigated through all of this, I realized I needed more than just legal help—I needed support that understood my emotional and spiritual struggles as well. When I finally found and connected with Hagar's Sisters, it was a breath of fresh air. Unlike before, where the advice was to endure, they didn't push me in any direction; instead, they helped me see the idea that suffering in silence was somehow noble—wasn't supported by any scripture. They showed me that no religious teaching condones abuse. It was the first time I heard the truth, the real truth, and God spoke to me directly through Hagar's Sisters.

This new perspective was liberating. It helped me understand that I wasn't obligated to stay unhappy and mistreated. Now, I'm focused on rebuilding my life and using my experiences to help others. I'm hopeful about getting more involved with Hagar's Sisters, maybe even helping others who have been in similar situations. It's about turning a tough past into something that can lift others up, showing them that they too have the right to seek happiness and respect.