



Annual Refuse To Abuse® 5k helped domestic violence survivor heal a lifetime of trauma.

By Rebecca Hale

Amy had finally started to get her bearings. After finding the strength to leave an abusive husband, spending three years in therapy and helping her children heal, she took her counselor's advice and decided to do something just for herself.

"I had a friend who had started running. It was not something I ever thought about doing; I'm not a small person, I'm a bigger person. This body was not meant for running," said Amy, who asked to be identified only by her first name.

She had been active before, but over her difficult 13-year relationship, Amy spent all her energy just surviving and keeping her kids safe. Still, she decided to give it a try.

Participants at the start line of the 2017 Refuse To Abuse® 5k, to benefit the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

"I decided to run to the end of the block. I couldn't catch my breath. I thought I was dying," she said.

When a friend invited her to join her at a 5k in Auburn, even though she had just started running, Amy said yes.

"I was scared because I'd never run even three miles. I thought I'd show up and people would laugh at me, like 'What is this girl doing, she's not a runner.' But everyone was so nice. They cheered for you if you were first or last. I was so happy to find a place where people were so kind to each other," said Amy.

Not long after that first 5k, Amy heard about a unique event that seemed to be made just for her – the Goodwill Refuse To Abuse® 5k at Safeco Field, an annual run by the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, an outgrowth of the two-decade partnership between

the Mariners and the Coalition. Since 2012, the event has raised over \$600,000 for statewide violence prevention programs.

"I almost didn't get through it. I was sobbing. But I felt like, 'You (her ex-husband) can't win.' And I got to the finish line and it was amazing," said Amy.

Running gave her control over her life. "It was so hard. But every time I pushed through I felt like I regained something I lost."

For most of her life, Amy felt lost. She grew up in an abusive home. Her mom abandoned her when she was 12 years old and Amy ended up in foster care. When she met Steve (not his real name), Amy felt like he was her knight in shining armor. He paid attention to her, listened to her saddest moments

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and deepest concerns. What Amy didn't know was that Steve was cataloging information he would eventually use to coerce and control her.

Steve monitored her whereabouts. He isolated her from her friends. A chance encounter at the bank with a boy she knew in high school sent him into a rage.

Because Steve had driven away most of Amy's friends, and she had no family, she suffered in silence. "I knew he was bad to me, but I thought as long as it's just me, I can handle it. I just want my kids to have a family," she said.

Besides, he had Amy convinced that she was responsible for all their problems.

"I thought if I just do this better he'll be nicer to me. If I do this better, he won't get mad. He kept me from doing anything because I was so broken down emotionally," said Amy.

She also stayed because they were in the process of adopting two boys, aged two-and-a-half and 10 months. They had fostered the boys from the time they were born. Amy desperately wanted them to be part of her family, to help someone facing the same thing she experienced as a child. She just needed to hang on until the adoption was final. After that, she and the children would get away.

But before that happened, Amy learned that her husband had been sexually abusing her 13-year old daughter,

and she finally found the strength to confront him.

"I said get out. I don't care what you do to me. Kill me. But I'll do anything to protect my children. Get out of my house."

Because the adoption process was so far along, Amy thought she would be able to finalize it on her own. However, when she told Child Protective Services about her changed circumstances, CPS immediately picked up the boys from daycare. She didn't even have a chance to say goodbye.

"I was crushed. That night, I tried to take my life," said Amy.

It was the lowest, darkest time of her life, but it brought Amy a sliver of hope.

Even though she had kicked him out, Steve came to the hospital while she recovered. It didn't take long before doctors realized he was an abuser. They referred Amy to a domestic violence counselor and security banished Steve from the hospital.

That gave her the space she needed to focus on therapy and begin healing a lifetime of trauma. The longer she was away from Steve, the stronger Amy got. It took three more years, but Amy finally took the advice of her counselor and started doing something just for her.



Amy has amassed a collection of memorabilia, bibs and finishing medals from the dozens of runs she has participated in since she started running four years ago.

"The first couple of years, I'd say, every run I cried. Now, I run and I'm smiling and laughing and I've made an amazing group of friends through running. They're my family," said Amy.

Over the last four years, she's done dozens of 5k, 10k and 12k runs and 40 half-marathons. Last month, she ran her first marathon. In July, she will participate in her second Ragnar Relay, a two-day, non-stop 200-mile team relay from Blaine to Langley, Whidbey Island. She will also run in her fourth Refuse To Abuse® 5k on July 21 at Safeco Field. It's all a warm up for her first Iron Man in 2019.

"Running saved my life. It not only saved me, it gave me this outlet of joy. It gave me a belief in me. Now I feel like me, but an even better version of me. It means a lot to me that my children have seen their mom get healthy," said Amy.

Her daughter, who is now 20, is training to be a paramedic, and her son, who is a junior in high school, is getting straight A's.

"I tell them not everyone gets to choose what happens to them. But you do get to choose what you do with it. You can be bitter or you can be better. You can take what happened and be an amazing person and make life better for someone else. It's definitely a happy ending," said Amy.

The Seventh Annual Goodwill Refuse To Abuse® 5k is July 21 at Safeco Field. To learn more, or register to participate, log onto RefuseToAbuse5k.org.

The Refuse To Abuse® 5k route goes all around Safeco Field, ending at the finish line just past third base.



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