

Owning Your Story Claiming Your Power



About the Illustrations

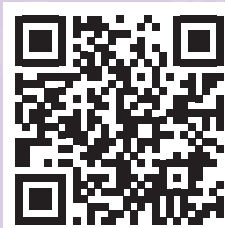
The images in this book represent people of many backgrounds, ethnicities, and races. For me, they evoke my family and all the folks who have influenced my life as an African American woman. That includes those who have survived violence and coercion from the child welfare system and those who have survived abuse from family members or intimate partners. As someone studying abolition as a practice, I am working to build a world based on love and care. Elevating the voices of people who have not been heard or believed is essential to building that loving world. I know owning our stories can ignite healing, hope, and change. I stand with all survivors who navigate the family policing system and hope these illustrations bring to your heart their strength, joy, love, and resilience.

—Ashley D. Albert, CPC

With these illustrations, we hope to convey love and respect for domestic violence (DV) survivors from our many communities. We also wanted to keep in mind the heavy burden that the family policing system places on Black, Indigenous, Latino, and immigrant populations. These groups experience more invasive interventions from the family policing system than white families do, even though they do not abuse or neglect their children more. We also know parents of all races living in poverty too often find themselves accused of neglect when what they really need is affordable housing, childcare, and healthcare. In spite of all the challenges they face, DV survivors love, protect, and uplift their children in countless ways. I hope you see your strength and love for your children reflected in each illustration.

—Margaret Hobart, PhD

You can find more information about racial disproportionality in the Child Welfare system's involvement; the difference poverty makes; how domestic violence occurs across all races, genders, and sexual orientations; and abolition by scanning this QR code or visiting our [website](#).



Owning Your Story & Claiming Your Power:

Talking About Domestic Violence and Child Protective Services

Ashley D. Albert, CPC, and Margaret Hobart, PhD



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SECTION 1

Because You Matter



This is a guide for survivors of domestic violence (DV) who want to tell their story. We hope it helps you think through what you might need to do to claim your experience and tell others about it. We hope that it helps protect your well being and joy while sharing your stories of pain and injustice. We hope you find that telling your story helps you move toward healing and strength.

This book is for:

- **Survivors of DV who have been involved with the family policing system**
- **Their children**
- **All survivors who want to point out injustices and advocate for change**

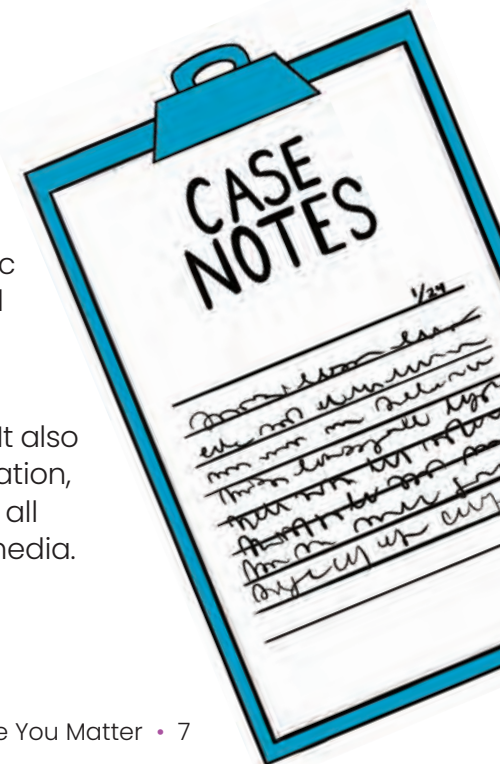
What do we mean by the family policing system?

We use the term family policing system to refer to the child welfare system or Child Protective Services (CPS). We think family policing is a good description of the role this system plays in the lives of families, because families often feel monitored, controlled, and punished by CPS. In this way, CPS acts more like the police than a system trying to help children and their families.

What do we mean by domestic violence?

DV is a pattern of abusive behavior by an intimate partner (husband, wife, boyfriend, girlfriend, romantic or sexual partner) that results in unequal power and control over the other person. DV impacts the adult survivor and any children or youth in the home.

DV can include physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. It also often includes isolation, economic control or exploitation, harming children, stalking, criticizing and controlling all kinds of behavior, and monitoring texts and social media.



SECTION 2

Your Story Matters



Why should I tell my story?

- Telling your story can help others who need inspiration and encouragement
- Telling your story lets other survivors know they are not alone
- Telling your story may help change minds and, in time, the system
- Telling your story can call attention to how powerful people and institutions have affected your life



You are an expert!

You have experienced things that other people have not. You know things about DV and the family policing system that most people do not.

A lot of people do not understand the experience of living with DV or how the family policing system impacts survivors and their children. They need to hear the stories of people like you, people who've been through that system and have seen it from the inside.

You are an expert about:

- What it was like to parent a child with someone who was emotionally and physically harming you
- What you and your children needed to live peacefully and safely
- What you need now to heal, survive, and thrive
- How the family policing system responds to survivors of DV and abusive partners
- The judgment DV victims face when caught up in the family policing system
- Whether or not social workers, judges, and attorneys understood the challenges posed by your experience of abuse
- How laws and policies impacted your life as a parent, or as a child, in the system



Who should I tell my story to?

- Friends or family who you want to better understand what happened to you
- People in your community who do not understand these issues and what is at stake
- Reporters who are covering stories about DV and/or the family policing system
- Legislators who are trying to improve things for DV survivors

SECTION 3

Get Ready



Getting emotionally ready

- Start by thinking about why you are telling your story. Is it to feel heard, to push for change, to tell your truth?
- Keep in mind that every time you choose to share your story, it may feel different to you.
- Talking about what happened and what went wrong means talking about painful personal experiences. It can bring up a lot of feelings of sadness, anger, or shame. Have a plan for taking care of yourself.
- You might have fears about sharing your story—maybe you are concerned about loss of support or resources. Facing these fears, checking the facts ahead of time, and lining up support might help alleviate fears.
- Assess yourself. Are you ready to get feedback from supporters, mentors, allies, and listeners about how you are telling your story or the content of it? Getting feedback from a trusted listener will help you prepare for how other people respond to your story.



Setting up a support system

You have been through a lot, and talking about it can bring up a lot of feelings. People may ask questions or make comments that make you feel all kinds of ways. Make sure you have emotional support lined up.

- Do your friends and family already know the story you are going to tell? If not, consider going over it with them and asking for their support.
- Think about finding or creating supportive spaces for yourself. This could be therapy, a support group, a congregation, a sponsor, a consistent 12-step meeting, a regular get-together with best friends, or an online support system, like a closed or moderated support group, or a group chat with other survivor activists.
- Tell your trusted advisors and mentors that you are going to share your story. Ask for support, ask them to attend events, and ask them to listen to you practice.

Planning for reactions

Sharing your story may feel risky. Think about what risks you are willing to take and what you can do to lower them. Talking it through with someone you trust may be helpful.

Some other things to think about:

- **Your abuser.** How might they react to you speaking up? What plan can you make to be as safe as possible from them?
- **The family policing system.** If your case is still open, or your children are in the state's care, consider checking with your attorney before sharing your story.
- **The future.** Keep in mind that anything on the Internet stays there forever. Decide if you are willing to be recorded or photographed—do you want to show your face and use your real name?



If you have concerns about your safety, that is understandable. You can probably find a way to raise your voice safely. Some ways to reduce risk include:

- Planning for what your abuser might do when you tell your story
- Not giving full names of you or your children and not revealing identifying details like where you live or how many children you have
- Choosing not to be in person or on camera
- Giving someone else permission to tell your story with identifying details taken out
- Anonymously publishing writing or artwork that tells your story

SECTION 4

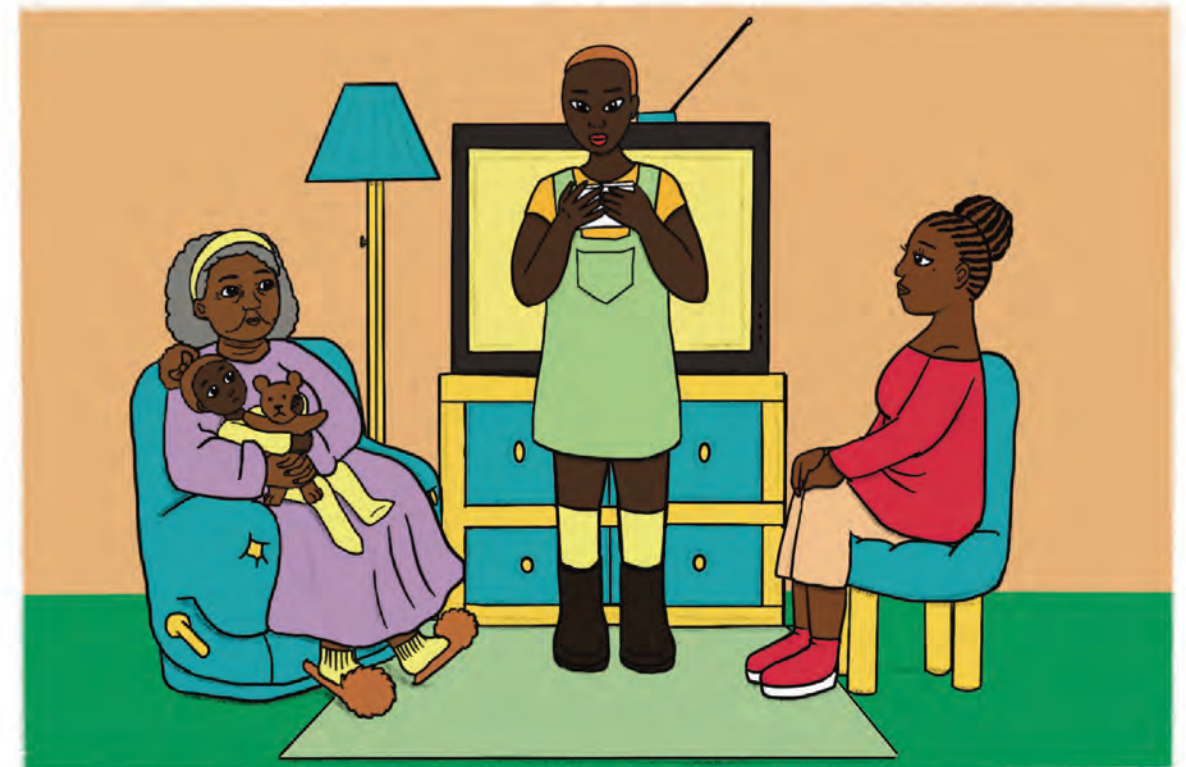
Anticipate Impacts



Your story belongs to you

Your story belongs to you, and you do not need anyone's permission to tell it. Keep in mind that what you say in public might affect relationships with friends, family, and your children.

- Have you had conversations with your children about what you will be saying about them and their experiences?
- Consider protecting your children's identities. If they are old enough, consider giving them choices about how their names or images are used, or if they are included in your story at all.
- Focus on speaking about your OWN experience. Be thoughtful about what details you share about what happened to your children.
- How old should your child be before they hear you tell your story? Consider their maturity and ability to process the challenges you've experienced.
- Conversations with children about all that has happened will change over time as they grow, and their questions may change. At some point, they might also want to talk about their own experiences.
- What about other family members? Are you worried about their feelings or judgments? Think about how you want to handle that and who will support you. Having one-to-one conversations with supportive family members about how, where, when, and why you are telling your story may be helpful.



SECTION 5

What Needs to Change?



Know your audience

Your experiences as a survivor may be complex, spanning months, years, or even decades. You get to decide what parts to share, and you may share different parts at different times. Think about the following:

- **Who is in the audience?** What do you think they need to know, given their positions or roles? Focus in on what you want THESE people to learn and do differently.
- **What do you think needs to be changed or improved?** Talk about injustices that happened to you, what you needed, what was harmful, and what helped.

Many people listening to you will want to know how to do better and what would be helpful. You do not have to have all the answers, but definitely share your ideas!



What to include or exclude

Are there parts of your story that you will not reveal, even if people ask? Identify these, maybe with a friend, advocate, or therapist. Think about how you will tell your story with honesty but also with self-care in mind. You do not have to reveal every detail. Come up with a polite but firm refusal to share even if someone asks you to.

Include the ways that policies, laws, cultural norms, and expectations shaped your experience. You can tell your story in a way that points out what went wrong and what needs to change.

Here are a few questions to help you get started placing your story in context:

- How might your experience have gone differently if your community had better support systems or better ways to hold your abuser accountable?
- How might your experience be different if it was easier to access childcare, healthcare, affordable housing, or parenting support?
- What rules made your experience easier or harder?
- What do we need more of to support DV survivors like you?
- Who had the power to make your life harder or easier? What did they know about DV, if anything? Did they understand how being abused limits a survivor's options, confidence, and social support?
- Was there anyone along the way who really helped you? What did they do?

Check out the Appendix for more topics and questions that can help you decide what to include in your story.



Preparing for pushback

Some questions come up again and again when we talk about DV. Some of these questions are victim blaming—they place responsibility for stopping abuse on the DV survivor instead of on the person choosing to be abusive. Or they fail to place responsibility on our communities and institutions to prevent DV or respond to it in helpful ways.

You may get asked these questions, so it's good to think ahead of time about how to respond:

- Why did you stay?
- Why didn't you just leave?
- Why did you let the abuser back into your home/life?
- Why did you stay in touch with the abuser?
- If you knew CPS was going to take your kids if you did not leave him/her, why didn't you just leave?
- Did you choose your abuser over your children?

When these questions come up, you can:

- Reframe the question. Say something like, "It's more useful to ask (a different question of your choosing)," and then answer that question.
- Redirect attention to your story ("I am here to talk about...") or point out the judgments behind the question ("That question assumes the victim is responsible for the abuse").
- Decline to answer the question.

SECTION 6

Is It the Right Time?



It is a privilege for others to hear your story

Being invited to tell your story may feel like an honor, but remember: it's a privilege for others to hear your story. You get to choose who you think is worthy of hearing it and when to tell it.

- Remember you can decide not to tell your story at any time.
- Just because you are invited to tell your story does not mean you have to say yes. And even when you say yes, you can change your mind.
- Find out who will be in the audience and why they are attending. Consider: Do you want to tell your story to this particular group of people?
- Be clear with organizers about your boundaries and what you won't speak about.

About money:

- You get to decide when you are willing to offer your expertise for free and when you need to be paid.
- You might decide to give some time as a volunteer (unpaid) because you are passionate and have the energy.
- Telling your story for free sometimes does not mean that you have to work for free all the time.
- Ask for details about speaking fees. Many times, speakers are reimbursed for travel, meals, childcare, or hotel stays. Be frank about what you need to be present at a meeting or event.
- You should expect to be paid if you are:
 - Speaking at a conference where others are being paid
 - Providing advice and expertise to an organization that has funding

Pro Tip:

Laying your hand on your heart can help you remember to be gentle

with yourself
and other people



In the weeks before:

- Clarify: Will the event be recorded and made available later? Will video or participant names be posted on the Internet? If you don't want to be recorded, or to use your real name, have organizers agree to your conditions in writing.
- Tell organizers about your access needs, for example, do you need an extra wide chair? Are stairs a barrier? Would you prefer to have an interpreter?
- Find out how much time you will have to speak.
- If you will be interviewed, you may want to see questions ahead of time.
- Think about what the audience needs to know.
- Make notes about what you want to say.
- Let important people in your life know you'll be speaking out.
- Invite a friend, family member, or mentor to attend and support you.
- Practice telling your story and use a timer to make sure you can say what you want to in the amount of time you will have at the event.
- Consider practicing with a friend or colleague and asking them to tell you if anything you say is unclear.
- Get plenty of connection with people who love you.
- Make a plan for handling rude, invasive, or inappropriate questions (for example, "I am not talking about that right now," or, "That is not helpful here").
- Take care of yourself physically, spiritually, and emotionally.

The day before:

- Set yourself up to sleep well: get outside, exercise, leave time to wind down, avoid caffeine late in the day, and set your clothes out.
- Nourish yourself with food that helps you feel good the next day.
- Surround yourself with people who make you feel loved.
- Do some extra self-care, like meditating, listening to a podcast, reading a book you love, talking to a friend, or painting your nails.
- Picture yourself calm and centered during your event.



During the event itself:

- Arrive 30 minutes early, even if the event is online.
- Make sure your access needs are met.
- Make sure tech issues won't be a distraction, and ask for help with online access or mics if you need it.
- Connect with your hosts and with others who are speaking.
- Make sure any agreements about recording or being on camera will be honored.
- Get familiar with the space.
- Have some water nearby.
- Find a friendly face or two in the audience to focus on.
- Remember to breathe!
- If people are inappropriate, invasive, or rude, try to avoid getting caught up in anger or negative feelings. Instead, stay calm and compassionate. Detach from other people's judgments or ignorance. Placing your hand over your heart can serve as a reminder to treat yourself and others gently.
- Ask for help from the event organizers if you need it.

Afterwards:

- Celebrate your courage!
- Take care of yourself: go to your favorite 12-step group, meet with your therapist, or schedule a get-together with a friend.
- Debrief with someone you trust who understands why you are putting yourself out there.
- Avoid isolation in the next few days—public speaking takes a lot out of you, so nourish yourself with positive, loving people.



SECTION 7

A Movement



A movement for change is happening, and when you tell your story, you become part of it. We hope you tell your story, whether it is to one trusted friend or to a crowd. Storytelling is an ancient and powerful way to think about our traumas, problems, and visions for the future. When you tell your story, you join a movement of brave people who have spoken up about DV, the family policing system, what we want for our children, and what needs to change.



SECTION 8

Appendix



Storytelling helps to make change

The world sometimes tries to convince us that we have to just accept how things are. But we don't have to put up with poor treatment from police, courts, and family policing systems. We don't have to accept cultural norms that harm us or lack of resources in our communities. We can demand change for ourselves and the next person. Storytelling is an important part of pushing for change.

When our lawmakers are considering new laws or revising old ones, they need to hear stories from people who are affected by those laws. Your story can help them understand why a proposed or existing law is a good idea or a terrible one.

Trauma response and PTSD

Surviving DV and the family policing system means you have experienced trauma. Sometimes, even when the events happened a long time ago, and you have moved on, you can still have a “trauma response” when you start talking about them. Check out WSCADV resources (QR code below) to learn more about coping with trauma responses. You can also find examples of people using storytelling to make change on the WSCADV website (QR code below).

Please scan the QR code or visit our [website](#) to find a digital copy of this booklet, information, and resources about:

- Domestic violence
- The child welfare system (family policing system)
- Trauma
- Storytelling
- Movement building



Starting points for thinking about your story

What difference bias and discrimination makes

Sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, or other forms of oppression may be part of your story. These forces shape all our institutions, including the family policing system, so it's important to point out how this impacts survivors:

- Did you avoid reaching out for help because you were worried the people in charge would be racist, not understand your culture, or report you to immigration authorities?
- Were you worried that the people you went to for help might blame you for the abuse or make the problem worse?
- Was language a barrier? Were there people to turn to who shared your culture and language?
- Could you afford childcare in order to work, go to the doctor, or take care of yourself in other ways?
- Did your community have affordable and readily available housing? Could you afford rent on your own?

How society and culture affect you

What messages did you get from your community about:

- How you deserve to be treated in a relationship?
- When, why, and if it is okay to end a relationship?
- Raising healthy, happy children?
- Needing support as a parent?
- What to do if your partner hurt you physically or emotionally?

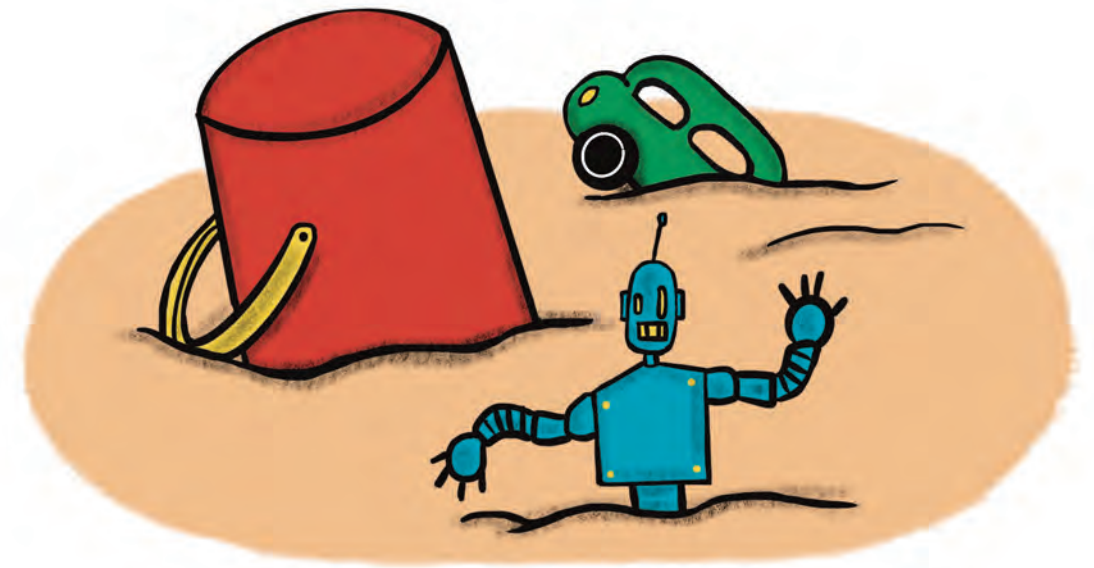


The impact of abuse on you, your kids, and your parenting

- How did your partner's choices to be abusive to you impact your children?
- How did experiencing DV impact your parenting?
- How did your partner's choice to be abusive impact your housing stability, employment, or school attendance?
- What roles did guilt, shame, forgiveness, and empathy play in your story?

Getting help

- When did you feel safe and supported?
- When have you been met with compassion and empathy? By whom? How did these experiences impact your ability to get help, get safety, and heal?
- What did you need from your children's school, your religious community, your workplace, and your family members?
- What were your thoughts and fears about calling the police, going to court to get a Protection Order, or filing for divorce or a parenting plan in court?



The impact of the family policing system

- Did you ever hesitate to tell someone about DV because you were worried they would report you to CPS?
- If someone reported that your children were abused or neglected, how did you feel when that happened? Did it change who you trusted?
- Did you tell anyone in the family policing system about DV? Did they ask?
- Did involvement with the family policing system help with DV or make it worse? Did it change how your abuser sought control?
- Did you feel supported or empowered by your social worker? Were there services that you received that you were glad you got?
- If your children were removed from your care, how do you think that impacted them and your relationship with them?
- How did involvement with the family policing system impact your children? How has it changed your relationship with them?
- What felt unfair when you were dealing with the family policing system? What felt fair?

The future you want to see

Sometimes it is easier to see what needs to be torn down than what should be built up. These questions are meant to help you focus on what needs to happen to make things better:

- When your partner began being abusive or controlling, what did you need? What did you want?
- What would have helped you before things got really hard?
- Who was most helpful to you? What was it about them that made them helpful?
- What supports or services did you wish for?
- What supports or services were the most helpful to you?
- What did you wish your family knew about DV or the family policing system before things got bad?

The experiences of other survivors

You might relate to these things DV survivors have said about the family policing system. You can talk about how the system made you feel when telling your story.

- The family policing system felt a lot like my abuser.
- I did not know there were other people like me, I thought I deserved to be treated this way.
- I felt how they were treating me was a punishment that I deserved.
- I was just trying to make sure no one took advantage of me again, but they saw me as combative and resistant.
- It's always "if you don't do x, then this will get taken away from you."
- I was full of adrenaline; it all felt high stakes. I was in flight-or-fight mode.
- I did not know the best way to proceed to keep my kids.
- My mind could not process what my heart was experiencing.
- It took me time to figure out what was happening, but the process moved so fast.
- The way the system used power felt so familiar and so bad.







About the Authors

Ashley D. Albert, Certified Peer Counselor (CPC)

Ashley grew up in the Rainier Valley area of Seattle, WA. As a youth, she was involved in the foster care, mental health, and juvenile criminal systems. Pregnant at fourteen and giving birth to her first child at fifteen, she is a formerly incarcerated girl/woman affected by the family policing system as both a youth and parent. She draws on her experiences to help others achieve freedom around family separation, suicide, addiction, DV, and sexual assault. She loves being of service and sits on committees and advisory boards focused on ending the family policing system at the state and national level. She finds pleasure and healing by being of service to her community. Ashley is a Washington State Certified Peer Counselor (CPC).

Margaret Hobart, PhD

Margaret has been an advocate for DV survivors since 1986 and has spent a great deal of time talking to survivors about their experiences with the criminal legal, family law, and child welfare systems. She has worked at DV advocacy organizations, the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WSCADV), and the National Institute on LGBTQ IPV. She received her PhD in political science from the University of Washington.

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The Heal 2 Action organizing academy for survivors through Seattle's Collective Justice provided support and mentorship by creating an environment to hold survivors who have been harmed through state and community violence and laying the groundwork of the restorative justice.

We also want to thank the Inatai Foundation (formerly Group Health Foundation) for their generous financial support.

Lastly, we acknowledge the many domestic violence survivors who have spoken truth to power about their experiences in support groups, memoirs, art, on social media, in books, and in front of legislatures. Your courage inspires us to continue to work towards communities grounded in love and respect. We honor the fight for liberation of all survivors, and we stand with you as you discover your truth and tell it. May your children and your children's children live in a world that they deserve.





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AGAINST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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