

FORGED BY FIRE

PHOENIX LANE:

A student shares her traumatic experience to inspire and reach out to other victims of sexual assault.



**EDITOR'S NOTE:
THIS STORY
CONTAINS GRAPHIC
CONTENT.**

**NAMES WITH AN * HAVE
BEEN CHANGED.**

My hands were shaking as I wrote #MeToo.

For years I have searched for the strength to share my story. I struggle to stay present, to not be distracted by the mental and physical scars of a bad relationship that ended in sexual assault.

In the wake of more than 80 accusations of sexual assault against Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein, many people have courageously come forward to share traumatic experiences concerning entertainers and politicians alike.

The 2010-2012 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey says one in three women and one in six men in the U.S. experienced some form of contact sexual violence in their lifetime. The National Institute of Justice reported in 2009 that in 8 of 10 cases of rape, the victim knew the perpetrator.

I was impelled by listeners to share my story to remind others that they are not alone. These days, I am redefining myself. The phoenix is a bird that symbolizes renewal. It has a cycle of aging, bursting into flame and being reborn from the ashes.

As a journalist and comic book fan, I feel like Lois Lane. I embody her strength, perseverance and dedication to enact change with truth and storytelling. I have become Phoenix Lane: reborn and forged stronger after struggling through trials by fire.

He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named

I met Adrian* online. He was smart, charming and intriguing. He was a tortured genius who successfully created a popular online game that eventually garnered 40 million hits per month. The game was featured in magazines and books; he even had a fan club.

After a few months of playing this game, I applied to be a moderator. At 15, I became a staff member.

Depressed at the time, I had fallen through the cracks of a traditional education and graduated high school late due to health concerns.

When I talked seriously about ending my life, Adrian* obtained my home address, dad's work information and threatened to contact my parents. I appreciated his concern, and that moment was one of many that made me think twice about my state of mind.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY: DARIUS JOHARI
CHARACTER INSPIRED BY JOSEPH MCDERMOTT'S
"THE GIRL WITH THE RED EARRING"

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Coworkers warned me to be wary. Adrian* was known to be an eccentric, with strong views. He had difficulty empathizing and his poor anger management severely affected him and the people with whom he worked. He had an infamous temper and a reputation for being difficult to work with online, but he was sweet with me.

Before

Years later and just before we got together, Adrian* told me he had a big secret. He said a teacher had molested him in second grade. Adrian's social, sexual and psychological development had been affected, but these issues were easily sidelined by his success.

Prior to our relationship, all of his romantic interactions were through a computer. He had no practical relationship experience.

After I once again fell through the cracks in my university, he spent months building my confidence and soon became a confidant. We video chatted or texted daily. In March 2011 we met in person, and our attraction was immediately confirmed.

The fledgling relationship escalated quickly. I was 19, and he was 25. The relationship went well at first; we were young and shared a love of books. He moved to California to work with a tech startup company in Santa Monica, and we moved in together.

As time went on, Adrian's* dark side began to manifest. I noticed more controlling behavior, and he wanted to choose my friends. He was prone to angry outbursts, typically directed at his family or himself. He was raised not to believe in doctors or therapy. Instead, prayer was his only recourse.

To help him relax, I would massage his aching hands and wrists while he told me about his day. We would unwind together, and I thought we could talk about anything.

Over a year later, he unexpectedly broke up with me. He admitted he was thinking about other women. I was distraught. Despite his heartbreaking confession, I still wanted to work things out.

The Attack

In late April 2012, we decided to have dinner together at my apartment. I wore an outfit I knew he liked: a low cut, flowy, burgundy top and jeans. I was hoping to convince Adrian* to give our relationship another chance.

He asked if we could be friends with benefits instead. I was very hurt. I told him I couldn't settle for that because I was still in love with him. His

demeanor suddenly changed.

He leaned in, moving closer to me. I thought he was going to kiss me. My heart started racing as it always did when he was that close. He was looking at my face, but it wasn't him behind those brown eyes.

I began to lean away from him on the couch, saying "no" over and over again. His right forearm pressed against my throat to prevent me from breathing as he kissed me. His left hand was fumbling with his jeans. His knee pressed painfully into my abdomen.

I struggled. I tried to throw him off. I tried pretending to give in to save my strength for one last shove.

That failed.

He put all his weight into holding me down. His forearm pinned my head and neck to the arm of the couch. I had no leverage and my hips hurt, as his legs forced mine apart.

At that moment, I felt like I was watching the scene from above. I vividly remember my decision to play dead, like I was being attacked by a bear.

He positioned himself. My vision went black. I passed out. The first thing I recall after that is him shaking me awake. I gasped for air. He was frantic, and I could tell he was himself again. I was crying and hyperventilating.

My jeans were unbuttoned. He ran his hands all over me, checking to see if I was OK. His hands smelled like iron, and I realized his fingers were bloody.

I went into the bathroom to compose myself. I evaluated the damage. My neck hurt. My back felt twisted. I was terrified that he wouldn't leave. It occurred to me that he had a key to my apartment and could come back at any time.

Steeling myself as best I could, I left the bathroom to face him. He was crying.

He said he didn't know what came over him. He said he felt so bad, and he wanted to take care of me that night to make sure I was all right. Somehow, I convinced him to leave.

Finally alone, I crawled onto my bathroom counter and stared at myself in the mirror for two hours. I tried to connect what I had just experienced to that image in the mirror. I started picking at every pore and imperfection I could find on my face until my shoulders and arms cramped up, fervent in search of something – anything – in my life I had control over.

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WINGS INSPIRED BY ALEX OLIVARES

After

This January, six years after my assault, I filed a police report. A lawyer I consulted ahead of time cautioned me not to have any expectations about Adrian* being prosecuted, since there is little to no evidence. I filed to support anyone he might harm in the future, so there is a history of reported violence.

I wish I had the courage to file a police report immediately. Instead, I focused on my recovery. I had to stop idolizing and making excuses for someone I loved and accept the facts: He almost killed me. I wanted to live, and that meant making myself a priority.

It took many years of therapy for me to come to the conclusion that I didn't "give up" during the attack and that he had only violated my body. Being attacked so intimately in my home by a man I loved made me feel like he was invading my soul. During traumatic events such as this, disassociation or a detached consciousness is common.

Accusations of misconduct could result in excommunication from his church. I couldn't take his faith away from him.

For months, I longed to get back together with him. Unaware of the attack, my family assured me we could still work things out. It was clear to them how much he cared for me. My psychiatrist told me that I was "acting like a beaten wife." At that moment, I solidified my plan to leave Santa Monica.

Moving On

I developed numerous physical and psychological issues as a result of the attack and harassment that followed. These include post traumatic stress disorder and severe muscle spasms down my right side. The spasms prevent me from obtaining my driver's license.

In the months that followed, Adrian* kept calling me "just to talk." Anytime he thought of something he wanted to share, he'd reach out. I always answered, and every conversation devolved into him screaming and me in tears barely able to breathe. I jumped every time my phone alerted me to anything.

An old adage states, "Holding onto anger is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die." My poison was anger, negativity and fear. One of the hardest parts was facing my fear of new people. Someone I trusted and loved hurt me immensely. There was no way I could trust a stranger.

The only thing that kept me going was a world history class I was taking at Santa Monica College. It kept me focused, I enjoyed it and I was doing well. I had no friends, but I formed study groups with some acquaintances. As soon as that semester ended in June, I moved 40 miles away and enrolled at Citrus College.

To dispel my depression and anxiety, I pushed my boundaries by getting involved in campus clubs and student government. I became overwhelmed quickly, and I took a three-year break from Citrus to focus on my health. Today

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I prefer working with student publications and am continually inspired by the stories of fellow students.

Even though I am now surrounded by friends and have an amazing support system, I hear a dark voice in the back of my head every day.

**You should have let him
finish you off.
You should have died.
You can't do this.
Why did you come back?
Did you even wake up?**

Luckily, I found a wonderful therapist who has given me the tools to help restructure my thought patterns. Together we used Rapid Resolution Therapy to help me replace negative patterns with positive actions.

Friendships

The first thing I did after I started therapy was talk to my friends about what happened.

Being open and honest, as well as getting out of the house regularly to visit them, helped me find the clarity and kinship I needed to heal.

Three years ago I met an amazing family with a 2-year-old son, James*. His mother Mary* and I became fast friends with a shared love of reading. Mary* opened her home and heart to me. Her patience and nurturing allowed me to open up and overcome my fear of making new friends and cooking.

James* is now 5 years old. Like me, he was raised on books. I bought a book by B.J. Novak titled "The Book With No Pictures" to read to him. He loved it and laughed when I read it to him.

Within an hour, I returned to the room to watch him read it to himself, laughing while petting my dog at his feet. In that second, I had an indescribable moment of warmth, love and serenity. Moments like these guide me in the direction I want to grow and give me faith in the world.

Watching James* grow helped me find a will to heal myself. I used to feel tainted and unworthy of starting a family. Now I believe that one day I will be a wonderful wife, mother and chef like Mary*. Her family now resides in southern Oregon, and we plan to run a bed and breakfast together.

Reflection

I truly believe that speaking my truth will make a difference.

Moving away was a huge step in my recovery. After years of isolation, I reconnected with an old friend who is now my fiancé. He has helped me reclaim my life and trust again by being endlessly patient and understanding.

This man drew out parts of me I had never seen before. With his support, I have found beauty, interests and skills I wasn't brave enough to act on without him. He works for the federal government, organizing relief to disaster zones. He is the Superman to my Lois Lane.

I believe in my future husband and our dream of starting an organic farm.

I believe in forgiveness; people can change.

Everyone who has ever been affected by sexual misconduct needs to get help.

No one can know with certainty, but if Adrian* had gotten help after his assault, it is possible to imagine that my assault would not have happened.

Sexual assault is one of many possible traumatic childhood events known as Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs that can create dangerous levels of stress and derail healthy brain development. This can affect learning, behavior and health.

Had Adrian* sought therapy, he could have learned methods to manage his anger and violent outbursts. He likely wouldn't have suffered what my therapists described as a psychotic break when rejected.

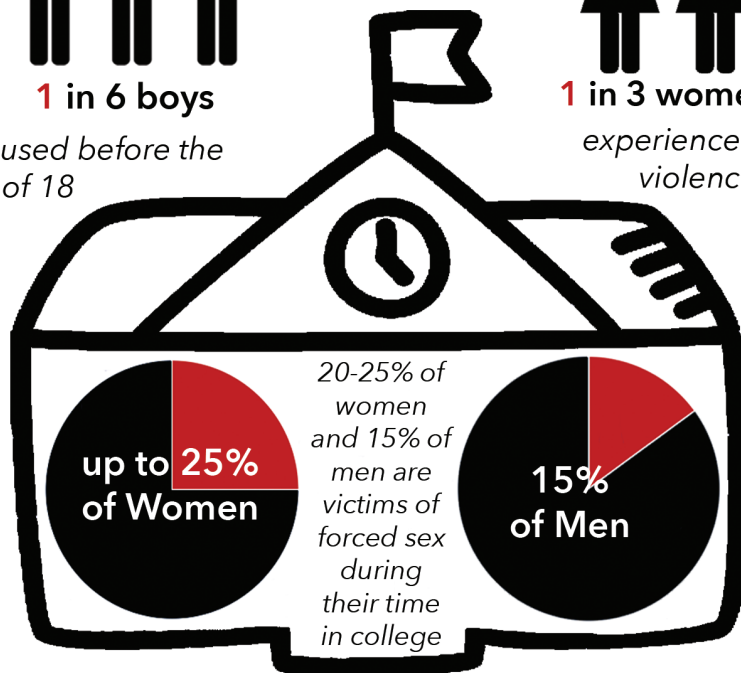
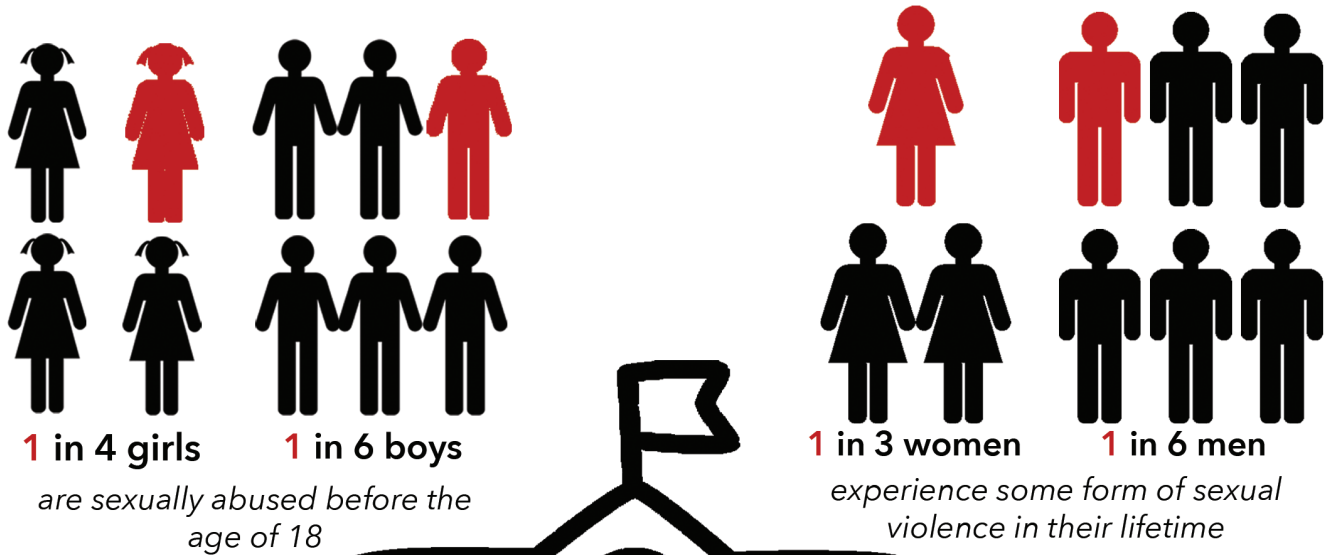
The accused are vilified by the media, but monsters are created not born. Never be afraid or ashamed to tell your story. It is the only way for abusers to face the consequences of their actions. These issues matter, and we must address them head on. You are not alone.

I support friends coming forward with their stories, emboldened by the discussion that has begun thanks to the #MeToo movement. I have grown beyond the paralysis of victimhood. Today I am a chef, dancer, writer and so much more than that dark voice ever said I could be.

As Phoenix Lane I have risen, found my voice and become the supportive friend necessary to help others assuage the shame victims often feel about their assault. These experiences have tempered me to become an inspiration to my friends and family. I continue to grow as I tell the remarkable stories of my peers, thriving as a nurturing and supportive presence to anyone sharing their story. **■**

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Every 98 seconds another American is sexually assaulted



Sources: <https://www.nsvrc.org/statistics>;
Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics,
National Crime Victimization Survey, 2010-2014 (2015)

INFOGRAPHIC BY: ALANA DALY

Campus Non-Confidential Resources

Consider reporting the assault to the campus Title IX Coordinator and/or the police. Telling the police does not commit you to further legal action.
Manager of Human Resources and Staff Diversity/
Title IX Coordinator,
Ms. Brenda Fink at 626-914-8830

Campus Safety: 626-914-8611

The Student Health Center is on the first floor of the Student Services Building. Contact them at 626-914-8671. Mental health services, including short-term individual and group therapy, are available in SS 147

Glendora Police Department: 626-914-8250

Off-Campus/Confidential Resources

A 24-hour rape crisis hotline is available where help may be sought by calling 909-626-4357

National Sexual Assault Hotline:
1-800-656-HOPE

Peace Over Violence: 626-966-4155

Project Sister Family Services is dedicated to providing services to survivors of sexual assault and child abuse in eastern Los Angeles and western San Bernardino counties.
24/7 Helpline: 909-626-HELP or 626-966-4155

Family Counseling Services: 626-308-1414