

# **UNCLENCHING THEIR FISTS**

**Lessons Learned from Abusive Men on the  
Journey to Nonviolence**

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# Scott's Journey to Nonviolence

After this interview, Scott & Nancy separated for 6 months. Nancy's need for support led to the creation of the Partner Support Program at Men Overcoming Violence.

After Scott was able to take more responsibility for past abuse and manage his emotions differently, they reconciled.

Scott stayed with the program for several more years, to address his subtler levels of abuse & control.

After seven years of working on himself, Scott became certified as a batterer intervention group leader.



# Can more men become abuse free?

Some abusive men do become nonviolent.

Their successes are one of the most underreported good news stories from our efforts to end domestic violence.

Why don't we pay more attention to their stories?



# Skepticism is Understandable

- Many abusers never take responsibility for their behavior.
- Many judges do not refer domestic violence offenders to the programs they need.
- Some batterer intervention programs have poor reputations in their communities.
- Some abusers claim to be violence free when in fact they have just become more sophisticated at using emotional abuse, manipulation & control.



# The Danger of Hope

- Abused women often stay in their relationships hoping for change. Batterer programs may reinforce that hope.
- A powerful way to respond to these hopes is by providing real stories of men who've worked hard to change their behaviors and beliefs; stories that show the amount of time it takes to overcome violence.



# The Danger of Ignoring what is Hopeful

- Some men have learned nonviolence as a result of participating in batterer intervention programs.
- Though only a minority of abusive men have been able to go the distance and make comprehensive change...their successes can help inform our work.



# Unclenching Our Fists

Abusive Men on the  
Journey to Nonviolence



SARA ELINOFF ACKER



# Important Questions

- What kind of supports and sanctions were necessary to help abusive men make the long term commitment to nonviolence?
- What were the transformational experiences that moved them out of resistance & denial into full accountability?
- How did they shift from blaming their partners to having empathy for them?
- What did the men themselves say was critical to their process of change?



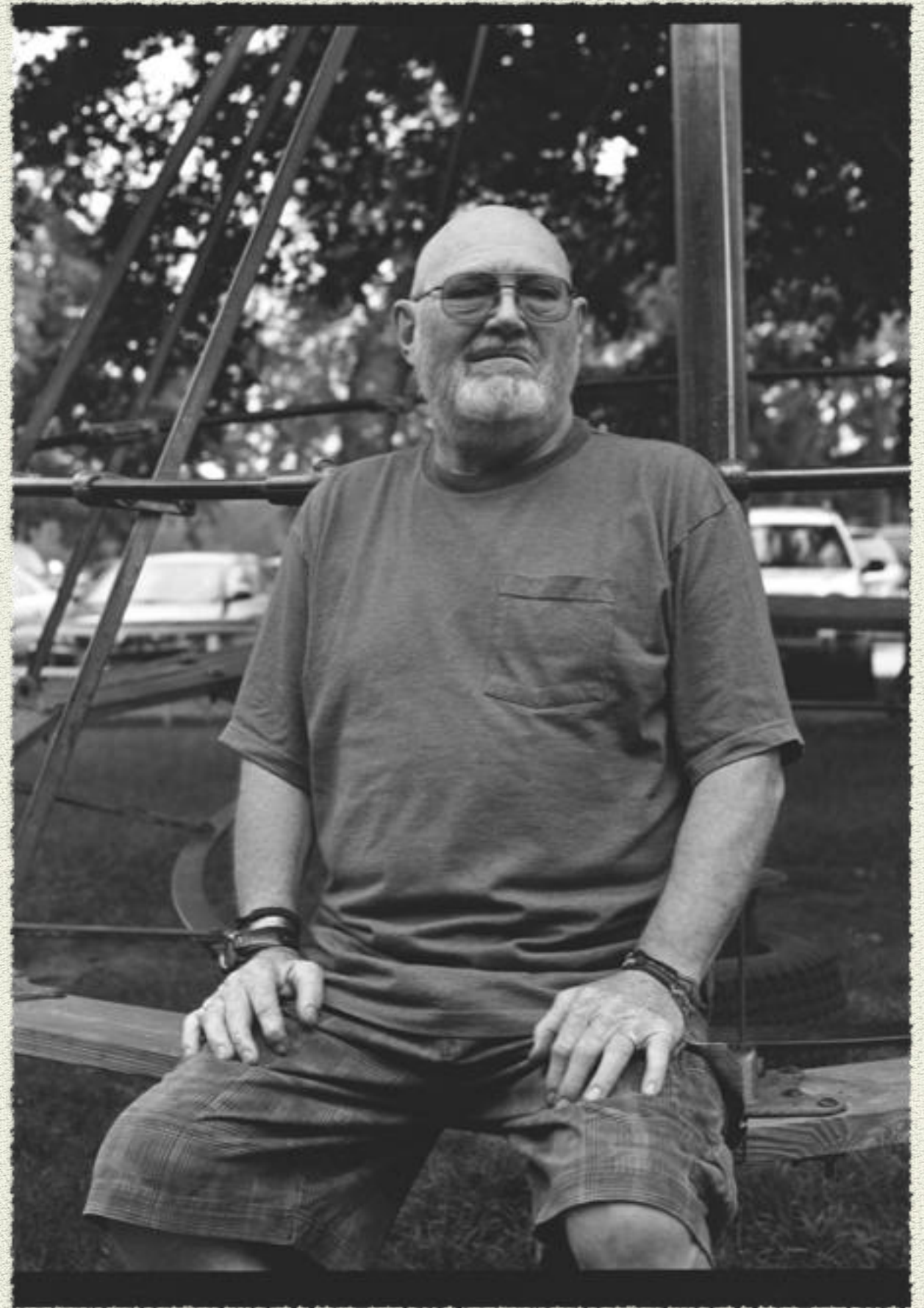
# Chuck

post office mechanic  
Vietnam Vet

married to M'Liss since 1962  
severely abused & neglected as  
a child

First abusive incident: wedding night  
Assaulted M'Liss for 20 years  
until she went to police

Stayed in BIP program for 6 years followed by  
years of psychotherapy to address depression





# Steve

Instructor in Sport Management

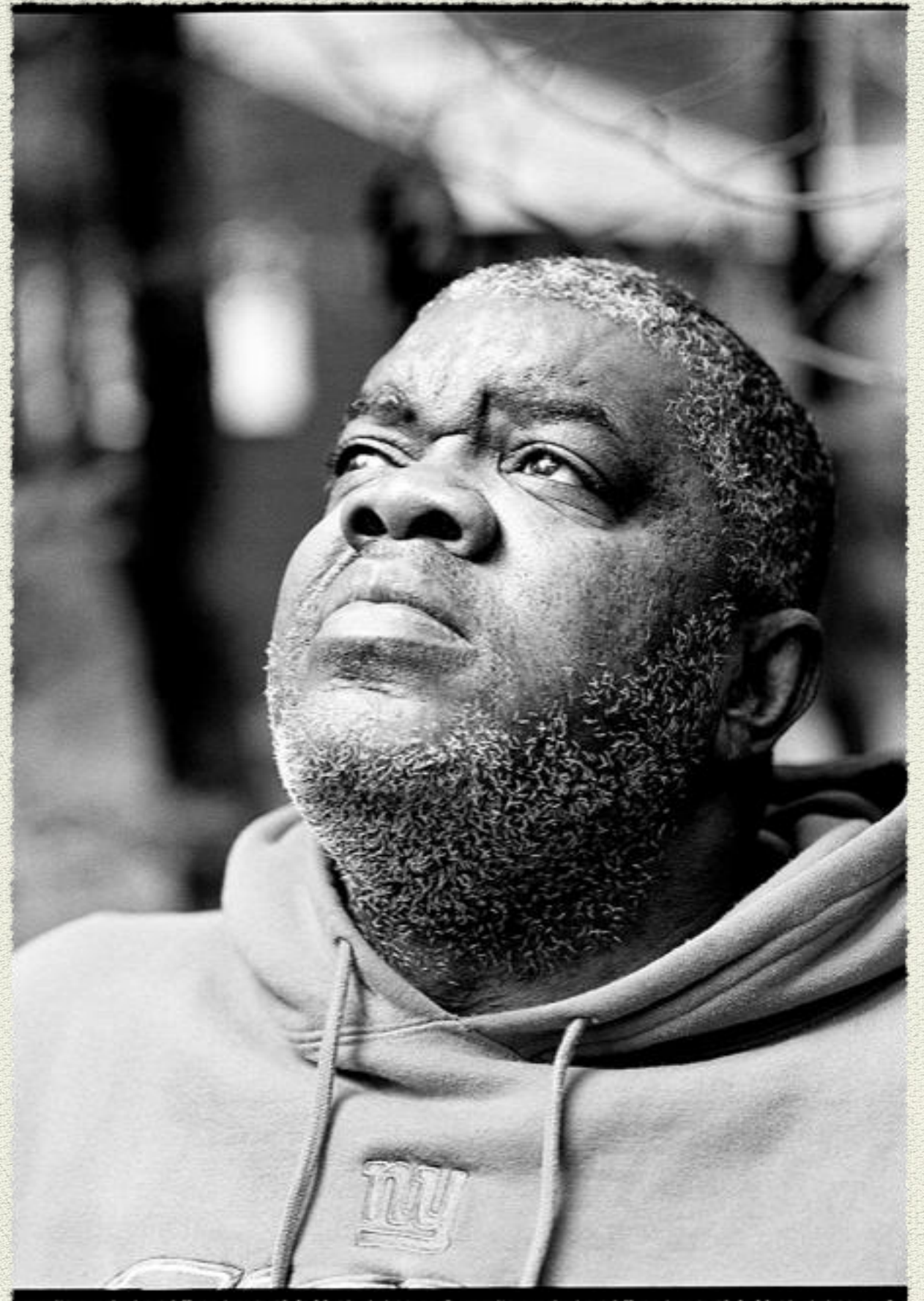
Father of 3 daughters

Child Abuse survivor—beaten by father  
until age 15

Emotionally abusive, sexually  
coercive

Entered BIP after surviving near-fatal  
illness. After his intake, it took him six  
months to start his group.

Remained in program for 3 years.





# “James”

oncology surgeon & professor  
upper middle class family/ son  
of doctor  
was badly bullied as child

stalked every woman who ended a  
relationship with him

reputation at hospital for being arrogant &  
dictatorial

required to attend BIP program by  
physicians oversight committee





# Ron

computer programmer  
father of twin boys  
member of Lion's Club

Physical assault  
Emotional Abuse  
Stalking

Arrested 3 times for stalking  
before being mandated into BIP  
Only entered program to avoid jail.





# Robin

EMT and cardiac nurse  
grew up in projects in St. Paul  
part of child welfare system at age 8  
witnessed domestic violence & drug  
abuse

Physically violent to partners &  
other men  
multiple arrests  
flunked out of BIP twice  
given one last chance to avoid  
incarceration







## Abusive Men on the Journey to Nonviolence

*What can we learn from their experiences?*



# How They Started

- Rarely entered programs by choice
- Admitted some forms of abuse early on, but minimized or denied many other behaviors, especially emotional abuse and control
- Very apprehensive about being part of a group; expected to be shamed; tried to set themselves apart from the others
- All had either witnessed family violence or been abused or bullied as children.
- All blamed their partners for their actions.



# Beginning Stage

- Admits he has a problem with abusive behavior
- Recognizes that his behavior is always a choice
- Takes an inventory of his emotionally abusive & controlling behaviors
- Recognizes the ways he has minimized, justified or denied his abuse in the past
- Understood that anger and abuse are often masking other emotional states.
- Uses skills and tools for de-escalation and to prevent incidents.



# Detours & Dead-Ends

- Any new violent incident
- Refusing to participate in discussions or disrupting group
- Not practicing tools at home
- Using program ideas to displace responsibility or blame his partner
- Failing to report incidents at home (importance of partner contact)



# Deepening Stage

- Discovers a more personal motivation for change
- Consistently practices tools---able to prevent most incidents, learns from mistakes
- Able to discuss worst incident of violence from partner's point of view without minimizing
- Explores the source of his abuse & violence in attitudes & beliefs about women and his own socialization as a man
- Begins to empathize with experience of partner & children
- Hits bottom emotionally



# Detours & Dead Ends

- Failing to identify controlling & emotionally abusive behaviors
- Becoming resentful when partner raises concerns or wants to talk about the past
- Feeling overconfident & relaxing his vigilance
- Expecting his partner to applaud him, support him, reconcile with him, forgive him.



# Sustaining Stage

- Working on subtle forms of control & entitlement
- Being fully accountable to partner & others
- Handles conflict without abuse
- Improving parenting, communication skills
- Is less isolated, has honest & genuine friendships
- Practices better self-care
- Understands that he is always at risk. Continues to be vigilant for warning signs and high risk situations.



# What Mattered to the Men

- Being challenged about their behavior while still being seen as a worthwhile human being
- The support of the group helped them with the shame they experienced when they revealed their worst behaviors
- A message of hope and belief in their ability to change was critical
- Learning from other men who were farther along in the process was very helpful: men modeling accountability



# What Mattered to the Men

- Learning new skill sets: how to navigate conflict without stuffing feelings or escalating
- Focusing on how they could set things right in the present, and be accountable for the past
- Needed to understand their partner's process & triggers, and not expect immediate forgiveness or support



# What We Learned

- Some backsliding appears to be inevitable, especially during high stress times.
- Developing true empathy for their partners and ex- partners was a major turning point
- True accountability is a process, not a single apology
- Even when men are successful in overcoming their behavior, their relationships may not survive.
- Men care about what other men think of them and pay attention to what other men say. Being exposed to other men taking responsibility for their violence was critical.



# Emiliano

witnessed domestic violence as a child  
was abusive in his own intimate relationships  
as a teenager

attended intervention program in high school  
Works as men's engagement specialist for the  
Texas Association Against Sexual Assault

Some formerly abusive men can play  
a role to play in our ongoing efforts to  
end domestic & sexual violence...

...as mentors, speakers, group  
leaders, activists—reaching out to  
other men who are abusive.





# A Future without Violence

Domestic abuse has occurred for centuries...

We are living in a unique historical period...changing roles and norms for both men and women.

Our goal:

To create a world where no woman or child is afraid of being hurt by the men in their lives.

To create a world where boys and men can have loving, egalitarian relationships and where they can grow up to become, as Ron said, “good and gentle men.”



# Thank You!

Please feel free to contact me:

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