

The Unlikely Homeless

A worker at a crisis hotline, where those in need of protection are directed to safety.



One Woman's Experience in a Domestic-violence Shelter

by Pearl Brownstein

I am one of the unlikely homeless. I have a master's degree and a career in publishing, and I was a co-op owner in New York City's Chelsea neighborhood—yet my 10-month-old son and I now reside in a domestic-violence shelter in an area filled with crumbling tenements and public-housing towers. Oddly enough, our two months here have been a godsend for both of us.

Last summer, after I sold the co-op I'd owned for 15 years, I moved with my partner to a two-bedroom apartment in Park Slope, Brooklyn. At his urging, I quit my job to care for our infant son. On the surface, everything looked perfect, but problems between us had been brewing since I became pregnant. Then, suddenly, they escalated to such an extent that the life I'd known was shattered beyond recognition.

Two months ago, I hired a lawyer to file protection orders against my partner and his parents. I still had the jitters from what occurred during our vacation in California a few days before. We had been at a large gathering of friends and family, and when it ended I chose not to say good-bye to my partner's parents, as they had been verbally abusive to me in the past. To avoid further conflict with them, I had put the baby in the backseat of our rent-a-car and sat in the passenger seat while waiting for my partner to drive off. Suddenly my partner's mother approached the car and began banging on my window with such force that I expected the glass to shatter; then my partner's father stuck his hand inside the door as if to grab me. I screamed in terror, and my son began to cry, while my partner stayed in the driver's seat and did nothing to protect us.

The following day was Mother's Day, and my partner said that he would be spending it with his mother instead of the baby and me. In that case, I told him, he should pack his bags and leave the hotel. After that, he and his family called me repeatedly on my cell and hotel phones, but I did not pick up, as I was too frazzled from what was occurring to handle any more fighting. When I called the front desk, the staff there said that whoever was calling me sounded so angry that they were concerned for my safety. I asked them to tell whoever called next that I had checked out.

When my partner heard that I'd "checked out," he contacted the local sheriff's office and accused me of kidnapping our son. From the window of my room, I watched my partner park



the rent-a-car in the hotel lot and enter with his parents, followed a few minutes later by the police, who knocked on my door. Trying to remain calm as I held the baby in my arms, I told the police that I had no intentions of kidnapping our child, that I simply wanted to go home and was concerned that I wouldn't be able to leave without being assaulted. Mercifully, the police escorted me out of the hotel and permitted me to get on the next flight back to New York.

I booked an early flight for the following day. At the airport I happened to run into a friend. When I told her what had happened, she responded, "Do you really feel safe going home after that?" Over the coming months, the word "safe" would be echoed by legal counsel, shelter staff, and concerned friends and family. When we landed at LaGuardia airport, I called a college friend, who immediately offered my son and me her daybed.

A few days later, my lawyer relayed the details of what had happened in California to a family-court judge, also explaining other longstanding issues between my partner and me. My partner, who makes a six-figure salary, did not permit me to use our "shared" debit card or provide me with money, which left me no choice but to dip into my savings on a daily basis. The judge granted me three protection orders; my partner's parents live a few subway stops away, and the judge was concerned that they might attack me in our home and that my partner would not protect me. Then the judge asked where my son and I were living. I said that we were staying with a friend, but that I planned to rent an apartment in Rockland County, just outside New York

City. At this the judge promptly ordered me to remain within the city's five boroughs—and to stay at a shelter.

I was near tears as I left the courtroom and furious at myself for revealing to the judge my housing plans. My image of a shelter was probably many people's: a huge room filled with drug addicts, the mentally ill, and the destitute. It was certainly not a place for me—or for my son. People might have contagious diseases. While I was asleep, someone might steal my jewelry or my shoes. I said to my attorney, "Why do I need to stay at a shelter when I can rent an apartment instead?"

She explained that the judge had ordered me to stay at a domestic-violence shelter to receive services and support, since more than 50 percent of women return to their abusers. I was incredulous, since I did not consider my strained relations with my partner and his family to constitute domestic violence, as that term, to me, suggests black eyes, bruises, and other signs of horrible abuse. But when I called the hotline number I'd been given for Safe Horizon—a New York City-based victim-assistance organization—and described my experience with my partner and his parents to the person on the other end, he said that I'd receive a callback in the next few hours with my shelter-placement location.

Brooklyn, where I'd been living, was deemed off-limits as an "unsafe borough" for me, as was Queens, where my partner worked. All I knew was that I would soon be residing in Manhattan, Staten Island, or the Bronx. While I waited for the call,

my friend and I packed my bags. An hour later the phone rang, and the person on the other end asked, "Are you safe to talk?" She then provided me with the address of a McDonald's in an unfamiliar neighborhood, where I was to wait for staff to escort my son and me to the shelter. To get there I took a cab, a last remnant of the more affluent life I'd been leading.

I soon discovered that where I had been placed was nothing like the nightmare I'd envisioned: it was a modern, five-story brick building. Here, every resident is provided with her own apartment, and depending on how many children she has, the sizes range from studios to three-bedrooms. My apartment would be 4D, a studio that contains a crib, a twin bed, a table and chairs, and an armchair and side table. There is also a kitchen area, a bathroom, a closet, and built-in shelves. The studio is one-quarter the size of my Park Slope apartment, but it is clean, new—the shelter is just six years old—and outfitted with

Below: Shelter staff walk the residential floors hourly, monitoring for potential concerns such as stove top smoke, keys left in residents' doors, and children crying uncontrollably. Right: There is no place like home—the writer's is 4D—even if it is only temporary.



everything my son and I need. When I first walked through the door, plastic bowls, plates, and cups, as well as cutlery and cookware, were arranged on the kitchen table. “To get you started,” one of the staff said quietly. The following day, a dolly arrived filled with various foods as well as shampoo, diapers, a baby bottle, and toothpaste.

This shelter, as I was told by the social worker who handled my intake process, is a short-term (emergency) 90-day facility for women with children. However, if one takes part in the shelter’s daily activities, among them community meetings; the domestic-violence support group; housing, entitlement, and financial workshops; the anger and parenting group; and individual meetings with one’s social worker, one’s family can remain in the shelter for up to 135 days. Presumably this would be sufficient time to put some distance between my partner and his parents, and I would be less likely to return to an increasingly unmanageable situation.

All of the staff repeatedly reminded me to not tell anyone where I was living; if I met up with friends, they said, I must do so at least 20 blocks away. Even though I did not consider my situation to be extreme enough to warrant such strict measures, I have abided by them, for fear that otherwise I will be asked to leave. For safety purposes, even shelter staff must keep their workplace address confidential. “If a bouquet of flowers arrives here on someone’s birthday or anniversary, they’ll be fired on the spot,” one of the staff told me.

There are numerous other rules, too, many of which I initially found rigid, though I have now grown used to them. Only one resident at a time may use the laundry room. The shelter curfew is 10 p.m. on weekdays and 12 a.m. on weekends. When a resident signs in for the night, she cannot leave the building again under any circumstances. (I felt the sting of this rule one Sunday evening after signing in and realizing that my son had lost all of his pacifiers, which would have made for a sleepless night for both of us. Thankfully, my next-door neighbor gave me one, first pulling the pacifier from her daughter’s mouth and wiping it on her sleeve.)

My first few weeks at the shelter were a blur of appointments with various staff, including the associate director, the child-care director, the housing director, the nurse, the psychiatrist, and my social worker. I also met with the entitlement specialist, who assists residents with attaining public assistance (P.A.). She explained that the eligibility cutoff for food

stamps and Medicaid is \$2,000 or less in one’s bank account, and that because my savings exceed that number, I have no choice but to purchase food and any other necessities for my son and me out of pocket. Most women here qualify for P.A., as they have little or no savings and do not have jobs. (According to sources including the Allstate Foundation, lack of financial security is one of the primary reasons women end up trapped in abusive relationships and often do not leave home until the violence becomes unbearable.)

Domestic violence is the chief cause of injury to females aged 15 to 44.

Other differences between me and the other shelter residents are immediately apparent. I am the only white woman—many still mistake me for shelter staff—and, in my early 40s, I am older than most of them. Many have not graduated from high school and have no job skills. Some residents do not speak English at all. Some are undocumented immigrants from Mexico, and a handful come from Africa. And yet, when we join together for the various classes held throughout the day, these differences feel inconsequential as the similarities among us come to light.

Like many of the women here, I do not have a strong familial support system (my parents died years ago and I have no siblings). A majority of the residents arrive at the shelter with infants or toddlers in tow, just as I did; my social worker explained that relationships often turn abusive when women become pregnant.



In our anger and parenting class, which meets twice weekly, we are urged to release our negative feelings in a healthy way. Jan, the social worker who leads the class, encourages us to hit a chair with a towel or beat a pillow. Almost all of us resist, though a few residents freely admit to having punched their abusers in the face. We're told that if we let our feelings out before they build up, we're less likely to get into altercations that might lead to assault charges and a night behind bars. One of the women, Lorna, who has previously been silent in class, walks to the front of the room, takes the towel from Jan, and begins beating one of the chairs. "Say what you're feeling," Jan encourages, and for the first time I hear Lorna's voice rise. "I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!" As she continues whipping the chair, she shifts her fury onto herself. "I'm so stupid! I'm so stupid! I'm so stupid! I'm so stupid!" Eventually, tired, she returns to her seat. "Do you feel better?" Jan asks. Lorna, still catching her breath, nods her head, and I can see plainly that where her facial expression had been strained, there is now relief.

During a meeting of the domestic-violence support group, which is led by Felicia, my social worker, a resident admits that she is considering returning to her abuser. She is overwhelmed by having to care for her six-year-old, one-year-old, and newborn on her own. All of the women—we sit in a circle—try to persuade her to stay in the shelter. Felicia says that it takes a woman, on average, seven attempts to leave her abuser. This stark statistic silences us—before she adds, "But then there are women like you who are brave enough to leave on the first try." The social worker leading the group the following week says, "If you think your abuser was controlling before, he'll be 100 percent more controlling if you go back to him." I keep that thought in the back of my mind at all times. During these and other meetings, residents must leave their children in the child-care center down the hall, which, to ensure the safety of the children, is always locked with a deadbolt.

All residents and staff are required to attend the weekly community meetings (which are simultaneously translated into Spanish), during which various topics are discussed, such as "setting proper boundaries." A couple of months ago, the Manhattan Educational Opportunity Center presented to the group on its various educational services, which include free GED and ESL (English as a Second Language) classes as well as vocational and college-planning programs.

Besides these required meetings, there is a host of other activities offered throughout the day to both mothers and children.

Every Monday a schedule of the week's events is provided at the reception desk. The occupational-therapy department runs daily classes ranging from "Mommy and Me" to cooking and money management. For the children, there are local swimming lessons and outings to the movies, the Bronx Zoo, and Central Park, while some of the older children attend a two-week sleep-away camp.

At one of the recent community meetings, we are told about the surgeon general's statement that domestic violence is the most common health problem among American women. It is currently the chief cause of injury to females aged 15 to 44. The shelter's associate director tells me that the rise in violence is directly related to the shrinking economy. "When unemployed men feel helpless, they can make themselves feel more powerful, at least momentarily, by taking it out on their families," she explains. Besides the weak economy, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan also account for the rise in violence, as an increasing number of women entering the shelter, according to the associate director, are partnered with men who returned from overseas and suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

This shelter, which has 44 apartments and sleeps 96, is now filled to capacity. Even more disconcerting is that once a family's 135-day stay is over, the choices for what's next are increasingly limited. New York City's budget has been so severely cut that there are no new housing subsidies this year. Most families who do not return to their abusers or leave the state with the approval of a family-court judge are brought to PATH (Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing), a homeless shelter placement facility in the Bronx. Often, PATH will send a family to a transitional shelter until permanent public housing becomes available. Currently there are more than 160,000 families on the waiting list.

Unlike a majority of the women here, I will be renting an apartment at market value. The housing director encourages me to start small—"rent a studio," she says. To save money, I had hoped to rent a two-bedroom with another resident and her son, but her former boss just offered her a job—the only hitch being that she has to move to California. Although I have a few months left to remain in the shelter, I still find myself staying up late to surf the Internet for cheap rents—which are few and far between in the safer neighborhoods—while my son sleeps in his crib just a few feet away. This is not an ideal time to get an apartment. According to my social worker, only 1% of the city's rental housing is now vacant, which accounts for the sharp spike in prices. I can no longer afford Park Slope, where most of my friends live, as a studio now goes for \$1,700 per month.

And even though my books, photographs, couch, coffee table, winter clothes, and most of my other belongings are now in storage, there is a part of me that does not want to leave this shelter and settle into an apartment of my own. Here, I am never alone. Despite our differences, there are women with children, living upstairs, downstairs, and across the hall, who are just like me. Most of the women here will have far fewer opportunities than I will when they leave, and yet their bravery

strengthens me. The staff, all of whom knew my and my son's names from the very first day, encourage me. We are a temporary community. Being here offers us the necessary distance from our abusers in order to begin healing. And with each passing day, we are further away from what brought us here—be it economic, verbal, emotional, or physical abuse—and one day closer to our new lives. ■



A child observes city life from his residence at a women's shelter.