

I Didn't Find a Home. I Had to Build It.

Sheila Matias Rodriguez

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. This story references childhood sexual abuse. If this issue affects you, you can find help. Call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-4673. Or visit RAINN at <https://rainn.org/>.
2. Consider the word *refuge*. It means shelter from danger. What is the difference between a *refuge* and a home where you feel at peace?

Home and the Deepest Scars

I was seven years old when I learned that home is not always a safe place. The people who are supposed to protect you can also be the ones who leave the deepest scars. For years, I searched for a place where I could finally feel safe, until I realized that home was not something I would find—it was something I would have to build.

Home is not just where you live. Home is something you create when you finally feel safe enough to breathe. For a long time, I did not understand that.

Abuse

I was born in Puerto Rico, and my earliest memories of home were filled with warmth, family, and love. But when my parents separated, my world broke apart. I moved to Boston with my mother. We stayed with someone I was supposed to be able to trust, but instead, he abused me. I was only seven years old. I tried to tell people what happened, but no one believed me. That kind of silence changes a child forever. It steals your voice, your innocence, and your ability to feel safe. It changed the way I saw the world—and myself.

Refuge But No Peace

Later, I returned to Puerto Rico and lived with my aunt. Her house became a *refuge*. It was more



than walls and a roof. It was history, family, and belonging. It was where my family had been raised, where my roots lived. For the first time in a long time, I felt like I had come home.

But even though I was in a safer place, I was not at peace. The abuse had left me carrying fear, shame, anger, and questions that no child should ever have to carry. I found it hard to trust people, and I often felt like something inside me had been broken beyond repair. From the outside, I was finally home, but inside, I was still trapped in the memories of what had happened to me. I smiled when people expected me to smile, but deep inside, I was fighting battles no one could see.

Pain, My New Normal

Life was not simple. I became a mother at the age of 15. I was young, hurting, and unprepared. Instead of building stability, I made choices shaped by pain. I was trying to survive, but I found myself caught in violent, toxic relationships and life on the streets. I made mistakes, got

arrested, and served time. Little by little, I stopped recognizing the woman I saw in the mirror.

Every bad decision felt like another piece of me slipping away. I wasn't living. I was surviving. I kept searching for love in the wrong places because I had never truly learned what love was supposed to feel like. Pain had become so familiar that I didn't even realize it was my normal.

Through it all, my children were watching. That realization is one of the greatest heartbreaks of my life. I was supposed to be their safe place, but I was still trying to find safety myself.

I did not know if I would survive the life I was living. I was betrayed by someone I trusted, and I came close to losing everything, even my life. Then my sister died.

Facing the Truth

Losing my sister shattered something inside of me. Grief has a way of stripping away every distraction and forcing you to face the truth. I realized that life could end without warning. I began asking myself painful questions: If my life ended today, what would my children remember about me? Would they remember my love or only my struggles? My sister's death became the moment that forced me to stop running from my past and finally face it. It made me realize that tomorrow is not promised, and if I wanted a different future for my children, I had to start creating it now.

Breaking the Cycle

I realized I had a choice: continue repeating the cycles of pain that had followed my family for generations, or become the person who finally ended them.

I chose to break them.

I chose to leave behind the life that was destroying me.

I chose to become a better mother.

A better woman.

I chose to give my children what I had spent my entire life searching for: safety, unconditional love, peace, and stability.

That is when I finally understood what home truly means.

Home is healing.

Home is protecting your children.

Home is ending cycles of pain and creating something better.

Home is peace in your spirit.

Building a Home

Today, I am still growing, still healing, and still becoming the woman I was always meant to be. I am not ashamed of where I came from because every chapter of my life has shaped the woman I am today. My past may explain me, but it does not define me.

Today, I am building the kind of home that little seven-year-old Sheila desperately needed — a home filled with love instead of fear, hope instead of pain, and peace instead of survival. Home is no longer a place I am searching for. It is something I create every single day. And I believe that may be the most powerful kind of home there is.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. Re-read the title. How did Sheila make a shift in her life from *looking* for a home to *building* one?
2. Read the article on pp. 6-7 by Kelly Robinson. Compare and contrast the two stories. What is similar and what is different?
3. What does it mean to break a cycle? Share a time you have broken a cycle in your family.

Sheila Matias-Rodriguez is an HSE student at an ABE program in Massachusetts. Sheila is a proud mother who never gives up, even when life gets difficult. Since she was young, she has dreamed of becoming an interior designer. She loves decorating and believes that beautiful spaces can make people feel happy and comfortable. She is determined to continue her education and turn her dream into reality.

