

Juana's Story

CURATED AND WRITTEN BY JESSICA WAHLSTROM

If you or someone you know is a victim or survivor and needs help, please reach out to us, we are here 24-hours a day.

THIS STORY CONTAINS IMAGES AND DESCRIPTIONS OF ABUSE THAT CAN BE TRIGGERING.



Juana loves to kayak.

Where she lives now, she has easy access to a lake. She takes her kids to that lake and out with her on the water. She and her son slip into an easy rhythm with the paddles — alternating sides, digging and reaching. Her five-year old daughter sits

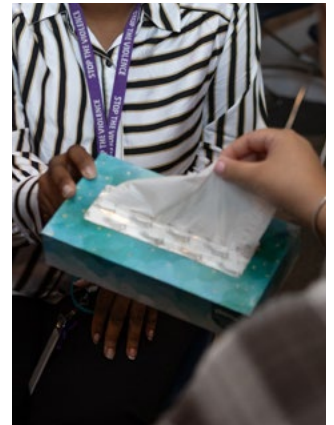
in the middle, between them. Sometimes they rest their paddles on their laps and glide to a stop so that they can jump in and swim. She and her son love the water, but Juana's daughter is afraid to leave the kayak. Juana's daughter is nervous about what is beyond its edge, beneath the surface, but watches her mom and brother float on their backs and tread with their legs and arms. Juana encourages her daughter — gently and patiently — to join them.

The water in the lake near where Juana lives now is nothing like the water she grew up beside. As a child, living on an island in the Caribbean, Juana was surrounded by salt water and a big family. Her parents divorced when she was ten and, as a child herself, Juana took over the role of parenting her younger sister. Despite the burdens placed on her little shoulders, Juana was spirited and energetic. She loved to laugh and dance. Juana emits light. When she married and had a baby at twenty, however, the shape of her relationship with her husband changed. Her husband made it clear that he did not want her to shine. He did not like the way that she laughed easily or instinctively moved when she heard music. Juana both resented and was terrified of the ways he tried to subdue her with control and abuse. While her son was still a toddler, Juana made the difficult decision to leave her marriage and the island she was raised on.

After arriving in New York City, Juana found work. After some time, she met a man who wanted to build a new life with her. She and her young son moved into the home where the man was living, excited about the future. Within months, Juana was pregnant. Shortly after she learned of the pregnancy, the man hit her for the first time. The abuse — physical, verbal, emotional, and sexual — that followed was so shocking and persistent that she felt she was drowning. She listened as her abuser told her, over and over, that no one else would love her. She didn't want to enrage him further by telling him that he was

wrong. He told her that she would be alone if she ever left him. She couldn't imagine feeling more alone than she did. She started to wonder if he was right. Her abuser forced her to lease a car in his name. She made all payments on it but often wasn't allowed to use the vehicle. When he was angry or wanted to assert control, her abuser would call the police and report that the car had been stolen. After one call, Juana was forced — while pregnant and with her young son in tow — out of the car by police and into the winter cold on a street without a ride. Juana felt stuck on her own island, increasingly isolated from friends and family and the rest of the world. When she was six months pregnant, a social worker treating Juana's son noticed signs of distress and abuse in and on her. She referred Juana to Center for Safety & Change.

Juana took a taxi to the Center the first time she visited because her abuser had taken the car away from her. After arriving and meeting staff, Juana caught a fleeting glimpse of life beyond her isolation, but she was profoundly overwhelmed. It was hard for her to acknowledge what was happening to her, to accept that she found herself struggling. She decided not to share the most painful details of the abuse she was enduring during the first visit. Center staff did not push her further than where she was ready to be, that night or at any point after. They offered her basic comforts during the initial visit — something to drink, a snack for her son, information about services available to her when she was ready — and a place to rest while she considered what was next. She returned home.



After her initial visit to the Center, Juana stayed connected to an advocate there and quietly sought a place to move to with her son, away from her abuser. She was told repeatedly by potential landlords renting single rooms that the baby she was expecting would be too loud for those spaces. Having financially supported her abuser and several family members while living in New York, she couldn't afford to make any other move. Her mother, then living nearby, refused to let her daughter and grandchildren move in with her, encouraging Juana to stay put and work things out with her abuser. She understood

that there was nothing for her to work out, but she couldn't yet see her way out. Her abuser refused to contribute to rent or other living expenses. After her daughter was born, he told Juana that the beautiful baby was ugly and denied that she was his child. During that time, Juana learned that her abuser had hidden cameras in the home they shared; they were set up in the kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom of the house. He was watching and controlling her every move. She wanted to leave but it felt impossible.

Juana decided that it was impossible to stay when her abuser drunkenly and brutally attacked her a few months after her daughter was born. [She called the police and, when they dropped her back at Center for Safety & Change that night, she told her](#)



[full story to the staff who met her with open arms, ready to listen to what she was ready to share.](#) Juana hated the idea that her children — with continued exposure to her abuser — would become accustomed to the sound of hatred

in a voice. She refused to let them grow up believing that abuse was something that could be accepted or worked out. She made the decision to move with her children into the Center's shelter for a few months. While living there, Juana and her son received regular therapy. She connected with other women who were victims of abuse. Away from her abuser, she had the space to understand what she needed to build the life she wanted for her family. She felt herself easing out of her isolation and moving toward that life. Juana began to see what was possible.

[Center for Safety & Change supported Juana after she moved out of the shelter and continued building the life she wanted.](#) During the first year after she'd ended the relationship with her abuser, he returned repeatedly to where she lived. On more than one occasion he damaged the car she had leased in her own name, knowing and not caring that it was the only way for her to get to work and transport the children. [Juana used the legal and therapeutic support that the Center offered to face those and other challenges.](#) She learned strategies for advocating for herself and her children that have helped her navigate many complex situations, including recently finding a way around her abuser's refusal to sign forms for their daughter's school registration. Juana wonders sometimes if her abuser will make things right with child support in the future but she does not expect to hear from him. She

understands that her daughter is better off without him. She knows that they deserve the financial support that he owes but she does not want to hear his voice. She does not want the sound of it to be familiar to her children.

Juana moved even further north a couple of years back. Where she lives now, there are sites to camp at and parks to play in and open land for her children to explore. She likes the seasons—the spring growth and warm summers, the piles of leaves beneath her trees in the fall. She doesn't even mind the cold. Juana works as a nursing assistant for veterans and is deeply satisfied by how she spends her days. She is proud of her work. She enjoys the time she regularly spends in her children's classrooms teaching other young students about the language and beautiful parts of her culture. There are things from where Juana came — from her islands and family and past experiences — that she holds onto and others that she will release. Sometimes she will do both. Using her grandmother's recipe, Juana has recently started a business selling homemade soap at a farmer's market. She volunteers to support families who have moved to her area from other countries. She wants to help them feel welcome. [Her network of friends and community members is strong and loving and reaching; they surround her.](#)

Juana tells people that she is living her dream. She will never forget what it took for her to have the courage to dream and build her life. [She is grateful to the Center for sitting with her, in many rooms and ways, for years as she eased into the space where she now exists, buoyed by her own strength.](#) Juana



is looking forward to the return of summer, when she and her children put their kayak in the lake again. As she and her son swim, Juana knows that she will watch her daughter out of the corner of her eye, recognizing the way the girl dips

her toes and dangles her fingers over the edge of the boat, considering what it would feel like beyond its edge. Juana understands that her daughter will join them eventually, when she is ready, when she can see her way in. Juana looks forward to swimming with her children. She imagines resting her head back on the warm surface of the lake as she floats, water and sun shining on her skin.