

The path to independence; from survivor to self-reliant

When Vicky* – a kind-hearted, caring woman in her 30s – met her partner, she thought she'd found a brand-new start. Having fled from an abusive relationship before, she felt safe and secure in her new location, with her new, loving partner. She was excitedly looking forward to a bright future with a new family. As they welcomed a baby boy together, Vicky thought she had found it all.

Not very long later, however, Vicky instead found herself once more in a toxic, violent environment. All she had wanted was to be safe and loved, but instead she felt trapped and alone, with a nine-month-old baby, and completely at the mercy of her partner.

Now, after almost six months at Gilgal, Vicky hardly recognises herself.

"When I first arrived I didn't want to be here, I just wanted to stay in my room and keep to myself. But the staff here are so nice and welcoming, I started to realise this was an amazing place to be."

One of the most active members of our little community, Vicky takes part

in as many of our activities she can, attends regular counselling sessions, and even helps out the other young mums living in the refuge.

Hindsight is a powerful tool, and with the help of our Support Workers, Vicky has been looking back on her past and beginning to recognise the patterns of abuse. For weeks after her arrival, she was adamant that her partner – who has multiple criminal convictions, including several past cases of abuse – had not really been abusive, that his violent tendencies had never been aimed at her, and that he was really "just a pussycat". But eventually during a counselling session she broke down and admitted she had been lying to herself in order to survive.

"There's a reason why I end up in these relationships. It's normal to me, the things they do and the things they say, it's all I've ever known. It didn't matter what my friends said, when they were telling me 'he shouldn't talk to you like that' – I'd made him angry, what else would he do?"

For the first time in her life, Vicky is surrounded by people who understand what she has been

**name has been changed for privacy*



through; who want to listen to her, to hear her story, and to support her in her recovery. She is full of ambitious ideas and a strong driving motivation to better herself and those around her. She has eagerly tried every activity on offer to her at Gilgal, even those she thought wouldn't interest her, and has discovered a hidden artistic streak during painting sessions with local artist Bridget Rush. Along with ambitions to go back to school and get a degree in social work, Vicky is determined to never need to ask a man for help again.

"I want to empower myself, I want to learn DIY – how to lay a carpet, build a wardrobe. I want to learn to drive so I can be independent, so I can say 'I don't need a man to pick me up, I can drive myself, I can build that myself!'"

"...it's not even becoming a new person, it's becoming the person you were always meant to be."

Vicky thanks her friends for sticking by her and not giving up on her, even though they didn't fully understand what was going on.

"I was so scared, but also really embarrassed. I couldn't leave him, but I couldn't explain why to anyone. If your friend is struggling, have patience, because the day will come when they are ready to leave him, and that is when they will need you the most."

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Vicky hasn't just found a new lease on life; for the first time, she is being seen, heard, and supported, and it has been eye-opening for her.

"If I had stayed, I would probably be dead."

With these chilling words, she urges anyone who thinks they may be in an abusive relationship to seek help immediately.

"You need to just do it. It's your one chance at a whole new life. There's a stigma around refuges and you might think you're better off taking your chances with your abuser, but get yourself out, leave that person behind, get yourself into a refuge and never go back.

"Getting out of that situation, getting to somewhere safe like Gilgal... it's not even becoming a new person, it's becoming the person you were always meant to be."

If you - or someone you know - are in need help, call Gilgal now on 0800 008 662, or email us on mail@gilgalbham.org.uk

We offer 100% private and confidential advice and 24/7 emergency help.