

Karen Cortes

'I was deep in drug abuse and embarrassed and ashamed.'

My name is Karen Cortes. I'm 48 years old and live in Long Beach, California. I grew up the only child with a single parent. I was very blessed to have a mother who worked hard to give me everything I needed. I mean she was never home because she always worked, but I was taken care of. She'd pre-make meals for me and always had someone checking in. Watching my mom work so hard taught me that I'd have to work hard too! One of the only memories of my father was of him hitting my mother. I'd scream at him to leave her alone. I learned at a young age to be wary of men. Growing up without a father taught me to be independent and self-sufficient, that I needed to figure out how to work on things on my own.

My story starts when I was in high school. I was living in Atlanta, Georgia. My mom always told me that I could do anything and I believed her. In high school I started thinking about what I would do with my life. I decided to go to fashion school, learn about costumes and wardrobe and get a job working in film/television someday as a costume designer. My plan was to be the first person in my family to go to college. I took out student loans and made it happen. I was determined.

In 2000, after graduating, fate kicked in and sent me to California. My stepfather at the time got transferred to a new job in Los Angeles. After three years of working in restaurants, the garment industry, and as a valet parking attendant, I met someone also working as a valet. He became my boyfriend. He did side jobs but also worked in the film industry on independent films and shows. We moved in together and he started helping me make connections. I eventually got a job on a show he was working on. He brought me on set, introduced me to the wardrobe department. I got the job! I worked on that independent show for about six months and then was referred to a union gig for a position as a production assistant in the wardrobe department. I was on top of the world! The hard work paid off. After just a few months my boss informed me of a movie I could work on and get my days to join the Costumers Union. After a few years of getting into the Union, I was killing it...on time, a good team player and doing a great job....

'My boyfriend turned out to be very controlling.'

After dating for about four years, I broke up with my boyfriend. He turned out to be extremely controlling. Two weeks later he attempted to ask me to marry him but I said no. It was over. I was extremely focused on

my goals and accomplishments. At this point it was 2006 and everything seemed great. I was working on *Pirates of The Caribbean 3*, single, making great money and making my dreams come true.

I started to go out to clubs. I wanted to balance my hard work with some party. One night I met a much younger guy who seemed like fun. This new relationship started slowly. He had a job, lived far away but that was ok as he was fun and I liked my space. For some reason eight months later, I let him move in with me. He'd lost his job and the place he was renting had been sold. This is when I realized he was a full-time drug dealer. Since I participated in doing drugs on the weekends, I thought, *well, he can file for unemployment and find what he is passionate about.* This became the beginning of the end. This helped me learn how to be selfish.

At this point, I had plenty of money and felt free to do whatever I wanted. But you can't put energy into believing in people who don't believe in themselves. It was a hard lesson for me to learn. In my mid-30s, when this all started, I was naïve of the ways people can take advantage of you. I was more open because I felt like I had done so well in my life and wanted to share dreams with others. I love to see people shine, which is why I started my whole art project, being an artist myself. However, while in a relationship, you can influence a person or you can allow them to influence you. I started going down a really bad path, hanging around with people who were there to party and do drugs. They weren't interested in being my friend. Like an idiot I blew off the most awesome friends I had ever had in LA...positive people, successful people who all worked hard and played hard, responsibly. What was I thinking?!

'I allowed myself to get completely lost.'

In that relationship, I allowed myself to get lost and completely destroyed my whole life by putting energy into the wrong people and letting them affect me emotionally and mentally. There were family issues that occurred because I started using drugs and partying too much, not holding onto my work or responsibilities. I chose to think I could do all these drugs, continue partying, and everything would be fine. Meanwhile, supporting someone financially who was not worthy of my time.

We finally broke up in 2010. I fell into depression, started doing even more drugs and stopped working in the film industry. I still was somewhat productive and got more involved in my artist collective Beyond Four Walls. Time passed and the depression got worse. It's so strange how the more you accomplish things, the more people start disliking you. I started feeling so much hatred and disrespect from people I'd known for a while. *Was it me because I was on drugs? Was I hallucinating?* I mean there were so many people. I started to constantly evaluate myself and began to feel insecure.

My relationship with my mother got unhealthy. My mom divorced and my grandfather died on the day before my birthday. While my grandfather was dying, I left my mother alone to deal with it as my grandfather and I had always had a lack of understanding. He didn't ever get me and never tried to. Due to my ego, large amount of drug consumption and self-pity, I left my mother alone to watch my grandfather die, something I will forever regret!

'Drugs make you careless and selfish.'

In 2012, a tumor started to show in my left eye. I then began to mess my life up more. Looking back, drugs really do affect the way you see things, and make you careless and selfish. All this greatly affected my mother but I left her alone. By 2013, we both became homeless. I was deep into drug abuse and was not going to ask any of my respectable friends for help because I was too embarrassed and ashamed.

I was lucky enough to have a good friend take me to the hospital and force me to get my tumor looked at. In 2014, I had my first surgery. They left a major portion of the tumor in my brain and I lost complete vision in my left eye. Being so out of it, I didn't properly take care of myself to manage the doctor's directions. I'd chosen to stop communicating with my mother who would have looked out for me. With nowhere to go, and not knowing how to even begin to get out of this, I lived in my storage space for two months, couch surfed, then ended up living on the street, in a park close to downtown LA.

I started meeting people and would stay anywhere I could. Learning I was never safe and to hold onto my things as they would get stolen. I discovered the ways of the streets. I recycled to get money and would find things I could trade for drugs. I stole from stores, got clothes from shelters, searched out abandoned places to live in, broke into buildings to take showers. I was lucky enough to have people show me the way to survive. The homeless were blessed to have the nuns from a homeless organization feed us throughout the week. There was also a group that would bring us soup. I learned fast that it was always better to stay with someone other than be alone. So, I always tried to have a boyfriend or friends who I thought were watching my back. Realizing the streets have no loyalty; everyone was out for their next fix.

Street life started to become normal. I'd find a place and if it started to feel unsafe, I'd move again. My ex-boyfriend was following me. Each time we tried to be together again, it got worse. He started hitting me, having sex with other people in front of me, drugging me and letting other people have sex with me. I left him, moved in with another friend, got drugged and raped again.

Looking back now, and seeing sex trafficking come up in the news during Donald Trump's presidency, I'm most definitely convinced that affluent secret societies, criminal organizations and gangs are

all involved in the street game and gain something from it.

Although I do have PTSD, I'm thankful that I was drugged (during rapes) and didn't have to see or feel what they were doing to me. It still does affect me now. If I don't manage my thoughts properly, I'll be back in a deep depression. While on the street, I started to get paranoid and scared. I tried to call 211 or MyLA311 for information regarding shelters. They were always full and general relief didn't have information for me. It was so difficult to get help. Being a woman alone without children made it even harder. It seemed impossible to get off the streets. Having a tumor did not make a difference.

The drug use really started to get to me. I started seeing things, like spirits, having hallucinations, feeling darkness everywhere. I'd hear about people getting killed or disappeared. I never felt the police were around to help. Being bilingual helped me live on the streets. I helped people around me when confronted by the police. This gave me an out-of-trouble ticket so most gangs would leave me alone.

After about a year of getting threatened, sexually abused and beaten up, I decided I'd had enough. It was time to go back to my family, with my tail between my legs, and ask for help. My mother said I could stay with them. We made a plan to get medical attention for my tumor and work on a way to get myself off the streets, permanently. Despite my family being so supportive and letting me in their one-room apartment, I kept drugs.

One morning I was out recycling and an old friend came out of nowhere calling my name. I had met him many years earlier when he, too, was a drug addict. Since then, he'd gone to rehab, gotten a full-time job and was living back with his family. While talking, he took me to breakfast and we discussed going to check out a rehab. At the rehab, I signed up and was told I needed to call in everyday to see if they had a bed available. After calling for a few days, I gave up. I was on drugs and so stubborn, still making bad decisions, still stupid. I am so blessed to have an awesome loving supporting family and yet I didn't get my shit together.

I decided to go to rehab.'

Looking back, I'm so pissed off at myself for continually putting my parents through all this. Even though I was kicked out, my mom didn't give up her support for me and started helping me look for a room to rent or to share a space with someone. I ended up meeting someone -- No. 2 street boyfriend -- who seemed to care and would watch out for me. Shortly after, he began to beat me up and cheat with other girls in front of me. After 8 months, I took my old friend's advice and decided to go to rehab. I first went to a 28-day program, then a rehab for three months. I must say going to rehab was the best decision of my life.

The LVN (licensed practical nurse) at rehab suggested that I go to the hospital or get an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging); maybe they could do something for my tumor. Now that I've been sober for two and a half years, I feel like I'm not even me. I have migraines, I can't sleep well, mad depression, a lot of ailments from the tumor that weren't there when I was on drugs. The MRI assisted me in getting the information to go to another hospital to get a checkup and get a social worker. The social worker got me into a recuperative care center, basically a shelter for people with illnesses, and got me a worker who assisted me in applying for disability and housing. Now I live in my own one-bedroom apartment. The programs helped me with furniture and utilities. Although, I am still fighting to get disability and will be attending a court hearing soon.

Recorded at:
Long Beach, CA
12/1/2020
12:47 pm

I'm in a much better place, getting my life back together. I suppose if you never give up and you're willing to work hard and focus on what you really need and deserve, you can get it. Never stop believing in yourself no matter what anyone says. Always remember the decisions you make will determine your life. Your thoughts are your reality, you deserve the best. Believe it and make the movements towards it. Anything is possible.

