

Breaking away from domestic abuse

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Alyssa Garza, 27, walked away from her emotionally abusive boyfriend with help from the Hays Caldwell Women's Center. She is now pulling her life back together, attending school and looking forward to the future. (Photo by Kim Hilsenbeck)

by **KIM HILSENBECK**

Caldwell County resident Alyssa Garza*, now 27, was eight months pregnant when her husband left her for another woman.

"We were married for nine months when he decided that wasn't the life he wanted," Garza said in a recent interview. "He leads a very fast life. He likes to party and go out with a different girl every night. He has no worries in the world."

Except he has four children and not all from the same woman.

Garza's heart was broken.

It was during this time when she felt her worst that she began hanging out with and talking to Richard, 40, a friend of her ex-husband.

"He went through a divorce, too," Garza said. "He knew what I was going through. He was there for me."

They started dating not long after she gave birth to her son, now five. They moved into his home not long after that. Richard was the only father figure her son ever knew. His real dad, Garza said, has only seen his child about four times since he was born and has never paid any child support.

But Richard provided a stable home for Garza and her son. And for two years, she said, everything was okay.

"We spent all our time together," she said. "Even my parents loved him."

Little by little, Garza said Richard started to try to exert more and more control over her life. He wanted to control what she wore, where she went and who she was with, she said.

And while Garza said Richard never physically abused her, he did threaten to in several occasions.

"Once or twice he raised his hand as if he was going to hit me," she recalled.

But Richard's punishment for fights or not being able to fully control her came in the form of silence or insults.

"He would ignore me and my son for weeks," Garza said. "He told me, 'you did this – you made me mad.' So I would have to apologize over and over."

The insults came more and more frequently, she said.

"He would tell me I was fat and ugly and no one would ever want me," Garza said.

After she lost 60 pounds, she said Richard still wasn't happy.

"He told me I was too skinny and looked anorexic," she said. "He said no one would want me looking like that, either."

But it was his treatment of her son that really motivated Garza to take action.

"When he was mad at me, he would punish me by being mean to him," she said. "He would tell him hurtful things, like 'I'm not your dad' and 'I don't care about you.' It was awful."

Garza said Richard also spanked her son several times, but then he wouldn't let her comfort the boy.

"I don't believe in spanking, so that always caused more arguments," she said.

But mostly, she said he had "major trust issues" that led to him calling her while she was out asking her where she was, trying to catch her in a lie.

"He would follow me then call and ask me what I was doing. I'd tell him where I was and he would say, 'I know, I saw you.' I just couldn't do that anymore – I couldn't live that way," Garza said. "He even wanted me to quit my part-time job at a grocery store."

And she said she knew the situation could escalate.

Whether Richard was projecting his anger about his ex-wife's departure with another man or dealing with residual baggage from his own childhood, Garza was never sure.

"He didn't talk much about his parents and their family," she said.

When her mom finally suggested she talk with someone at the Hays Caldwell Women's Center (HCWC), Garza said she knew it was time. "There were still good times, but the bad outweighed them," she said.

"My mom said, 'I think you are in trouble,'" Garza said. "Even if I wasn't going to leave him, she wanted me to talk with someone about the situation."

She connected with Ruby at HCWC. She put her son in therapy as well – he was starting to act out, having fits and yelling. Garza believes he was just imitating what he saw going on between her and Richard.

Garza said Richard kicked her out of their house several times because of fights.

"Sometimes I would have to get out with just a diaper on my son and the clothes on my back," she said.

But after every episode, Garza said Richard would contact her, acting sweetly and asking her to forgive him.

Garza said one of the last straws was a day when Richard gave her son soda.

"I had a fit, but Richard was the one screaming and cussing," she said.

Last July, Garza said she finally left the man.

"When I finally left for good, he didn't call for two weeks. But then, he called and begged me to come back," she said. "Eventually I got a call from a relative saying he had a gun and was threatening to kill himself."

Apparently he even wrote a suicide note blaming Garza for his state of mind.

She called the police.

"I don't respond anymore when he tries to contact me – it's the safest thing. I don't want to give him hope," she said.

But the emotional scars linger.

"I still see myself as fat and ugly because that's what he told me for three years."

To this day, though less so now than just a few months ago, her son blames himself for her departure from Richard.

"He told me that if he hadn't taken that soda we wouldn't have left," she said. "He wanted to go back."

But Garza stayed strong. She hasn't had contact with Richard in months.

Thinking back, she said she knows she made the right decision to leave him. She credits the staff at HCWC, like her counselor, Ruby, for helping her

move ahead with her and her son's lives.

She is now taking classes and working toward an associate's degree.

"I'm rebuilding my life," she said. "At one time I believed it was my destiny to stay with Richard. But nobody deserves to be treated that poorly. I couldn't be myself. And I couldn't stand what he was doing to my son."

Taking that first step to get help was tough.

"I was scared go to the women's center but I knew it wasn't healthy to stay with Richard. There is a good possibility I could have died if I stayed with him," Garza said.

* Not her real name