

## Naomi's Story | RAINN

4-5 minutes

Naomi Mortensen is the HR Training Design and Development Manager at RAINN. As a survivor of child sexual abuse, Naomi understands firsthand the challenges that survivors face in their healing journey.

Naomi continued to navigate her healing journey and found that support from others was crucial to her progress. While her parents were incredibly supportive, it was her Aunt Noelle who made a significant impact on her healing process. When Naomi disclosed the abuse to her parents at the age of 17, they were quick to believe and support her. However, it was still difficult for Naomi to hear people talk about her abuser, her grandfather, as if nothing had happened.

"When I disclosed to my parents at 17 what had happened to me, they were easily my strongest supporters. But it was my Aunt Noelle who sticks out because she was the first person to explicitly express support and belief. She was so explicit in how much she believed me that she had seen how hard it was for me to sit there and for people to pretend that nothing had happened and just to talk about my grandfather in a way that I had never known him because I'd only known him in this horrible way that was deeply impactful to me."

Naomi shared that the most helpful thing in her own healing has been "knowing who has my back" and recognizing that "sexual abuse is largely a relational wound" that requires healing through relationships with others. While acknowledging the importance of the relationship with oneself and the work that needs to be done on one's own, Naomi emphasized the significance of emotional intimacy and physical touch, such as hugging, holding hands, and kissing, which she avoided for years. She reflected that "exploring trust and honesty with my loved ones has been crucial to my healing journey."

When asked what advice she would give to survivors of child sexual abuse who are navigating their healing, Naomi shared that trauma during childhood is "so complex and so integrated with your development that it will surface at different milestones in your life, despite your best efforts." She initially felt scared and overwhelmed by this realization, but has since come to see it as an opportunity for "immense self love" and empathy for others with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD).

She advised survivors to not be discouraged by setbacks in their healing journey, but rather to see them as a chance to develop new tools and knowledge. She added, "you will do amazing work and you will reach great places where you feel good. And if you come to a place where you are struggling and it feels like you did all of that work for nothing, you didn't do all that work for nothing. It had a real lasting effect."

Naomi highlighted the importance of emotional intimacy and physical touch, which are often challenging for survivors of sexual abuse. Her message is clear - building a support system and trusting in those relationships can aid in the healing process. As survivors navigate their healing, knowing who has their back can be a powerful tool for moving forward. "Having people who support and believe in you, and who you can trust, is crucial. It's important to know that someone has your back," she added. Naomi's call to survivors is one of hope and self-compassion. She recognizes that healing is a lifelong journey and that each chapter comes with a

different message. When asked about her message for survivors, she shared that in her darkest moments, hope was too heavy, too painful, and too disappointing. It was then that she discovered the value of curiosity. She created her own mantra - "when hope feels too painful or disappointing, it's okay to put it down and pick up the neutrality of curiosity."

Lastly, she believes that curiosity is a beautiful foundation that can help survivors move forward, even if they don't have the capacity to hope. She encourages survivors to be curious about what comes next and to wonder about the future, even if it seems bleak. She understands that it's not always easy to be hopeful and that it's okay to set hope down and pick up curiosity instead.

# Molly's Story | RAINN

5-6 minutes

# RAINN

## Meet Molly

### 5 words to describe her:

Strong

Kind

Inclusive

Optimistic

Funny

### To survivors considering disclosing:

*"If you want to get on with your life and stay safe, while keeping other people safe, reporting is really good."*

Molly Snook is a gym goer, a certified personal trainer and EMT, and a survivor of sexual abuse.

When Molly Snook first disclosed her assault, she received a mixed bag of reactions and some people didn't support her. She told her clinician at the time and described how that experience was like for her.

"It was a really good experience for me and as time went on. I came out again with my story because I started realizing how I was groomed and sexually abused. At the time of the abuse, I thought that it was normal or that I caused it. But a few months ago I wrote to my friends and they received what I wrote really well because I got

more in detail about all of the things I experienced, which was not just a violent attack. There were many other incidents and abuses before that as well. My therapist helped me be able to speak on it.”

Molly shares her message to survivors who are considering whether or not to come forward.

“I would say to come forward. The thing I value the most was protecting other people and my abuser would say things about younger girls while also showing interest in them. And so for me, I had to report it. In order for me to move on with my life, I had to come forward for my safety from him. If you want to get on with your life and stay safe, while keeping other people safe, reporting is really good.”

Molly reflected on the misconceptions surrounding sexual abuse.

“Just because someone is not in jail does not mean they aren't an abuser or innocent...but that is not true. There's a lack of discussion around the difficulties surrounding trials. You might not get justice, but when someone is on record that makes a difference too.”

In her healing journey, Molly has found a lot of spaces for recovery in the body and in her life.

“Regaining a sense of safety was really important. Getting a restraining order and a therapist was also really helpful. Being healthy again and working out helped because when I was going through my abuse, I had an eating disorder and I lost my job because I was scared to go to work. When I was being abused, I just started college and I wasn't doing well with anything but when I got back up, I got my personal training and EMT certification and I started working in jobs within that realm.” Getting on the firefighter eligibility list was the first time she felt really strong again.

Having purpose, disclosing to others, understanding what happened to you, and getting healthy again has been a force in her healing. She shared that “it's more about being you and yourself again outside of abuse.”

For sexual abuse survivors of survivors of grooming, Molly has a message to share.

“You need to learn what is normal and what is not, especially in a society where so many things are normalized like women being expected to have dinner ready and to have sex when their husbands want to. Consent isn't based on threats, deception, stalking, power differentials, and intimidation regardless of how abusers try to convince us it's love. Consent can't exist if you have no say. A lot of people will say that's normal but it is not. In addition, going over what's consensual and processing that is really good to do in therapy. Having a sexual abuse therapist is essential.”

The article called “Grooming” on [abuseandrelationships.org](http://abuseandrelationships.org) explained exactly what she experienced and that website was a great resource for her. Learning about grooming and non-consensual relationships and how they develop helped her come to terms with the abuse, which she discussed with a therapist.

Molly continues to add on and explained that “when the perpetrator is someone that builds you up and you think really cares about you, and isn't always violent towards you, that can be really confusing to differentiate the abuse; that is what happened to me and you can still have eating disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Through therapy, you can find out who's a safe person and who is not. Reporting can also help you get your needs met.”

Asking for help and support from the right people is what really helped Molly in her life. She shares that "I used to think everyone was scary, but that is not true."

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## Melisa's Story | RAINN

5-6 minutes

# RAINN

Melisa Ruscsak is half Native American and half White, a speaker, an advocate, a survivor of domestic violence/sexual abuse, and a mother.

Melisa Ruscsak first disclosed the abuse she faced from a family member to her grandmother when she was sixteen. However, it wasn't until later in her life, when she spoke at a RAINN event, that she felt that disclosing what she had survived was met with positive support.

"The first time [receiving a supportive reaction] was actually at a RAINN event. And afterwards, I had a wonderful experience, that a woman that I'd never seen [and have] never seen since, came up to me, hugged me, and said, 'You just saved my life.'"

Melisa Ruscsak experienced and survived violence and abuse as a child as well as an adult. Throughout her life, she has experienced different forms and methods of healing. Melisa Ruscsak explained the different methods of healing she chose to explore, which ones worked and which ones didn't.

"[When seeking professional mental help] I never received the help that I needed. I was always being talked down to, because I'm a 'victim'. But I am not a victim - I'm a survivor. There's a difference."

While Melisa Ruscsak felt that professional help did not improve her healing, help from her family did. Melisa Ruscsak began training in martial arts from a very young age and she cites this training as something that, if anything, has saved her life.

"He [Melisa Ruscsak's maternal grandfather] started me at age 6. He didn't just take me to a martial artist, he started teaching me. So I had my then step-dad, my grandfather from my paternal side teaching me boxing,

and my maternal grandfather teaching me martial arts. All three of them are strong men [and] are veterans. [They] said, 'We don't raise victims, we raise survivors.'"

When asked what she would say to others contemplating the decision to speak out about abuse, Melisa Ruscsak shared her thoughts on why it is important to speak out and why she has dedicated a majority of her life to speaking out against abuse.

"It's a personal decision and I'm actually working with a group of women right now that are in that [space/moment of] 'I'm here, I want to heal, I don't know how to get there.' It's a personal decision that you have to make if you want to speak up and help someone. Because your story, regardless of what it is, we've all been there...but unless we speak up, we can't help those who need to hear, 'we are not alone.'"

Melisa Ruscsak states specifically that speaking up and speaking out against abuse has helped her the most in her healing journey. She shares that "If it wasn't for me speaking up and putting myself on video, putting myself out there, I would still be a victim of my own mental traps. I would still be trapped by myself and abusing myself because I believed the words that were told to me, to keep me in that abusive relationship. **Until you are ready to speak up and speak positively about yourself, you are still trapped within yourself.**"

Melisa Ruscsak spoke about her work as a public speaker and as a licensed life coach. She highlighted her trips and speaking events that have taken place in Hong Kong, Germany, and a future trip to India where she will be speaking to a crowd of 20,000 people. Melisa Ruscsak highlighted the sole reason why she continues to do public speaking,

"I don't care; as long as I reach the one person in the way back that's having a hard time hearing me - that needs to hear the message. I speak for them."

Melisa Ruscsak's shares a message to survivors of abuse.

"Leave the relationship, it doesn't matter what kind of relationship it is. Leave it. There's no material thing out there that is worth staying in that kind of relationship. Leave. You can start over."

Melisa Ruscsak's final message to everyone reading her story is one of personal empowerment and strength.

"You are not alone. I've been at rock bottom, I've started at rock bottom and I have built my company before I built myself. I used my company to build me because that's how I needed to heal. Find your rock and go from there."

#### Meet Melisa

#### 5 words to describe her:

- *Tenacious*
- *A Fighter*
- *Survivor*

- *Loud*
- *Beautiful*

### **To survivors considering disclosing:**

*"It's a personal decision...It's a personal decision that you have to make if you want to speak up and help someone...Unless we speak up we can't help those who need to hear "we are not alone."*

## **Es difícil saber qué hacer, qué sentir y cuáles son sus opciones después de un abuso sexual.**

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## Mirna's Story | RAINN

6-8 minutes

Mirna Navarro-Garcia is a mother, a realtor, an advocate, a speaker, and a survivor of rape.

In 1991, Rudolph Acosta crawled through a cracked window and into Mirna Garcia's bedroom. Garcia, 16-years-old, became Acosta's first rape victim that night. Over the next few months, Acosta stalked and attacked at least twenty more women. Following this, police set up a sting operation and caught him.

But nearly 28 years later, Mirna received a letter in the mail from the California Department of Corrections & Rehabilitation that changed everything: Acosta was up for parole. When Acosta committed the crime, he was under the age of 25, which qualified him as a youthful offender under California law at the time. This meant that after serving half of his sentence, he could be paroled and released. Mirna knew that Prop 57 resulted in the early release of many inmates and had been expanded to sexual offenders. She believed the perpetrator would have an excellent chance of being released if she didn't speak up.

When Mirna first disclosed, she shared that it “continues to still be a struggle. It's not something that people are comfortable with or are able to talk about... but the closest to feeling support was when the rapist was up for parole and I went to seek help to figure out how to keep him behind bars. I met with Esmeralda Soria, City of Fresno Council member, and she was one of my biggest support systems in helping me get the story out there. It was the first time that I felt like someone understands and even though they don't know the ins and outs of what I'm going through...it helped me get to where I'm at.”

Mirna had a range of emotions, but in her spiritual life, she felt called to come forward.

“I felt like I couldn't lay my head down...but at the same time, I felt like God was pushing me to do this and I had options; I could write a letter or send a video. But I chose to show up and Esmeralda helped me get the media involved to reach out to the rest of the victims. I didn't know how I would let the rest of the survivors know that the perpetrator was up for parole.”

She helped gather City of Fresno council members from California and other survivors of Acosta to send a letter to the CDCR board which was sent to Governor Gavin Newsom and they supported the efforts to keep the perpetrator behind bars. “Esmeralda was key, for someone in her position, to rally and help me with it. Everything aligned beautifully and all these people came around me to help keep him in prison. It took a village to do what was right and stand behind our community because we would have all been impacted had he been released.”

Mirna shares what it was like when her story came out in the media.

“There were a few news channels that requested an interview for English and Spanish stations. I met with Brianna Vaccari who was the journalist for Fresno Bee and who was also involved in the proceedings...There was a part that scared me [about having my story in the media]. I was opening my past and present to the world. It was really difficult to leave myself so exposed...it almost felt like I was naked...but I really felt like it

needed to be done to help the rest of the survivors and victims, their family members, and our community. I needed to expose everything and that was really hard.”

Mirna was able to connect with the other women that were raped by Rudolph.

“Being that there were 20 of us who were raped by Rudolph, and eight of us only had enough evidence at the time to take him to court back in the 90s. I only had the eight names on the court document when he was sentenced and since this happened in the 90s, many of their names only had their maiden names.”

Mirna looked into the history of their family members and was able to connect to a daughter of one of the victims who died by suicide.

“It was really hard and I get it; it impacts your life. It changes your life and you are never the same person again. For instance, the work that RAINN does is impactful and I was able to have someone assist me during court. She was there for me and gave me a care package and shared with me what my rights were...I just wish that young woman knew that there was help out there and that RAINN and other organizations were there to support her through this....For me, RAINN helped me choose my journey. I find healing in sharing my story and in fighting for change to help as many people as I can..[so they can] live and thrive.”

Rudolph Acosta was denied parole and required to stay behind bars. Mirna reflects on the entire process of keeping him behind bars.

“Getting the letter in the mail, that the perpetrator was up for parole and facing this head on and dealing with it, has been freeing. It’s been amazing to be able to say this is what happened to me but this is not who I am.”

Mirna continues to tell her story, including with local high schools, and offer insight to other survivors in the world.

To someone who is weighing the decision of whether or not to come forward, Mirna says, “There is no right or wrong answer on how to come forward. The last thing you want is someone judging you for your decision of how you chose to handle it. You have to do what is best for you. That's number one. If I was talking to myself when I was 15-years-old, I would have wanted to hear someone say, you are not alone. I’ll protect you. I’ll be your voice; I’ll be the person you can lean on. I would want to know that there is something there because you can feel so alone...maybe the first door you knock on isn’t the right one. But you can’t give up. You can’t stop. If you need help, you have to find it. There is help out there even if you have to knock on a few doors.”

Mirna has found a peaceful place in her life full of healing and restoration.

“Even though I have gone through all of this, I am still standing here. I have a family of nine beautiful children, three girls, five boys, and one little angel. I’m thriving and will continue to live a life with no regrets...I am happy. I am living my best life! That one moment in my life, the rape, did not have to define the rest of my life. I choose me and I choose to live.”

Mirna’s email is [MirnaNGarcia@gmail.com](mailto:MirnaNGarcia@gmail.com).

## Val's Story | RAINN

7-9 minutes

# RAINN

*"I can't tell you that I'm not scared every day of my life; I am. But I choose to push on."*

Val Hill, member of the RAINN Speakers Bureau, has been sharing her story and supporting others as part of her healing journey. She was sexually assaulted by someone she considered a friend since childhood. The morning after the assault, she told her best friend, who supported her and validated that what happened was wrong. "It wasn't a stranger in a back alley, it was someone I knew since I was 11 years old—someone I trusted. It's made it hard to trust anyone again."



A few days later she told her fiancée at the time, now wife, what happened, and she was also very supportive. "We were attempting to be intimate, and I just broke down crying and told her I couldn't. I told her what happened to me, and she held me as I cried and didn't ask for any details."

She became pregnant from the assault and made the decision to have an abortion. At the time, the law in Georgia, where she planned to have the abortion, required that she hear the heartbeat. Once she learned there was a heartbeat, she canceled her appointment. "I was in the Army, I am tough. But there was something about the thought of having to hear a heartbeat coming from my own body, a heartbeat that did not belong to me. I just couldn't go through with it."

She decided to continue with the pregnancy and told her family about it. They said that being a good mother was the most important thing, and that for the sake of the baby she should involve the father in the pregnancy. "I told the man that raped me that I was pregnant. He agreed that abortion was the best idea and paid me \$460 for the procedure, then asked if I'd let him punch me in the stomach instead."

During her pregnancy she left college, lost her job, and experienced a period of homelessness. "But I decided that even though I was pregnant from rape, I would still be the best mother I could be. I ate well and didn't take any medications; I was so careful. When I went to my check-ups the perpetrator would show up to them too, even though I didn't want him there. He just stood in the corner silently and watched."

## Meet Val

### 5 words that describe me:

- Lion-hearted
- Compassionate
- Strong-willed

- Tenacious
- Ambitious

### **On healing:**

*"Being open and honest about my feelings and seeking treatment for my mental health has been the most helpful in my healing process. I find it cathartic to serve my community and show love to those who are less fortunate."*

### **On being an LGBTQ+ survivor:**

*"When I came out as a 14-year-old in the rural south, I was treated horribly. To this day, it is still tough and painful, because my wife is not welcomed by most of my family members. The perpetrator's attorney also threatened to use our sexual orientation against us in the case to prove we are unfit parents."*

Following giving birth to her daughter, she had severe postpartum depression. After her daughter was born, her family told her that she had to get along with the perpetrator as co-parents, regardless of what happened. "I confronted him and told him that he raped me. He laughed in my face. I will never forget that. His mother was sitting right there the whole time and never said a word."

Soon after, the perpetrator sued Val for custody and visitation rights of her daughter. She had not reported the assault to police previously because she felt a lot of self-blame, denial, and fear. A year after the assault, she chose to report. She had enough evidence for her case to be forwarded to the district attorney. Her case went in front of a grand jury, which chose not to indict the perpetrator. Because Tennessee law required a conviction before a court could terminate a rapist's parental rights, the perpetrator in this case was able to win weekly visitation.

She has continued to do her best to be a good mother while also regularly telling her story and seeking justice for herself, her daughter, and the other people assaulted by the same perpetrator. The perpetrator threatened her, saying that if she did not stop accusing him of rape, he would sue her for full custody. In 2018, the judge presiding over the custody case granted the perpetrator an Order of Protection, which meant Val could no longer mention the sexual assault as part of the custody case.

During this period Val was diagnosed with PTSD, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Because of the court-ordered visitation, she was forced to see the perpetrator weekly. "I would have panic attacks every time I had to drop my baby off with the man who raped me. I cried all the way home. When I picked her up, I would take her home and just hold her in a rocking chair and cry. This has been the worst thing I have ever been through in my entire life. I feel like I have lost years of my life being his prisoner."

Val has found therapy and using RAINN's hotline to be helpful in her healing. "I have called RAINN more times than I can count. I have always found it to be helpful and often necessary in desperate times. The conversations I've had through the hotline make me believe in myself and gives me hope for the future."

She is also very grateful for her wife's ongoing support. "She has been my rock. She's cared for me when I couldn't care for myself. She listens and is always there. She is so kind, compassionate, and understanding. Had it not been for my wife, I wouldn't have survived this."

Val feels trapped by the court order granting the perpetrator visitation and custodial rights to her daughter. "I'm not free to move more than 50 miles without the judge granting it. I feel like I was given the life sentence that he deserves. Believe victims—place the perpetrator on trial rather than the survivor."

Val says that if her daughter ever reads this, she wants her to know the truth of her story. "I want her to know that regardless of how difficult this situation has been, I look at her beautiful face and I am so thankful that I made the choice to keep her, because I love her so much. I want her to know that I have fought relentlessly to protect her and his other victims who remain silent. I want her to know that I choose to be a pioneer in changing the world she lives in. I hope, if anything, she gains my courage, above all."

Val is currently a full-time mother. She is also involved in local politics and is an advocate for LGBTQ+ rights, homelessness, and anti-sexual violence. She regularly speaks out publicly about her story, and currently serves on the NAACP's LGBTQ+ board. Val says that the best advice she ever received was that you have to stand up for yourself before you can take care of everybody else.

*"Survivors aren't required to do anything. All I want for survivors is healing. Some survivors, like me, find healing through advocacy, and some don't. I would encourage other survivors to report, but it's not fair to judge someone for not coming forward and not speaking."*

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