

HALO shines in helping Emma along her road to recovery from family violence

Emma* experienced a lifetime of family violence and abuse from family members and two husbands. Eventually her life fell apart when her abusive husband left her, and she was forced to clean up the mess in its wake. As a Gateway Health client, Emma was easily referred to the Holistic and Legal Outreach (HALO) program. This firmly established Health Justice Partnership was created to help people in Emma's circumstances - multiple legal problems and other significant vulnerabilities that impact health.

Having gone from a stable life, raising her children in their home, and working, to being homeless, unable to work because of mental and physical health issues, Emma needed the holistic support our legal service provides. "I had 10 years of so much stress and neglect (in the marriage) and ended up having three strokes. But I look at it as though I could have died, so I'm very lucky."

Our lawyer Rachel Judd started working with Emma to deal with the legal issues that had mounted up as a result of the domestic violence her husband perpetrated.

Divorce

Separating from her husband was an important step, and Rachel helped her through the process. Emma's husband had gaslighted her throughout the relationship, and continuing this trend, he refused to acknowledge her in correspondence. This became too stressful and Emma asked Rachel to speak to him from that point onwards.

"Rachel took such a load off me, making phone calls, sorting things out, because I have trouble comprehending sometimes and get easily flustered. The fact she took all the information and went away and sorted it out, then contacted me and said, 'That's all done now', it was like a breath of fresh air. I don't get many easy things in my life, but she made it easy."

Husband's violence behind speeding

A speeding fine for \$350 occurred while her husband was screaming and yelling at her, and calling her names. Emma admits she may have been over the speed limit, but she couldn't focus while the torrent of abuse was being hurled at her. Rachel assured Emma her circumstances could be taken into account. This was another issue Rachel had taken over, and when Emma got the waiver news, it was a huge relief.

"You have no idea the pressure that took off my shoulders. It would be on the shelf because I wouldn't be able to deal with it. I wouldn't be answering the phone or opening letters, just to avoid dealing with the situation. Rachel will never know how much of a burden she has taken off my life."

Fines and accident another stressor

Adding to Emma's worry were two fines valued at \$460 for not voting in council elections. Rachel was able to get both waived, one under the Fines Victoria Family Violence Scheme and the other under exceptional circumstances. Rachel advocated to an insurance company who was chasing Emma for money after a car crash on the border. The insurance agreed not to pursue Emma for the \$3300 owing because of the financial hardship she was experiencing.

Homelessness hits hard

Emma was forced to sell everything she owned to pay off her ex-husband's debt. As a result she became homeless and couch surfing between her adult children's places was her only option for accommodation. "That made me feel less than the dirt that you walk on. I walked away with my grandfather's desk and my dog, few clothes and bits and pieces." She will have to start from scratch, if and when she can access housing in such a tight market with next-to-no supply. "If I had a home now, I haven't got a bed, or a table or a fridge, the basics that you need for a home, I've got nothing." Working with Beyond Housing, Emma hopes to get a two-bedroom unit to at least feel like she has her own home, as part of the project to increase social housing in the region.

Accepting domestic violence and coercion

Like many women report, Emma couldn't see the coercive control and psychological abuse her husband was subjecting her to constantly. Although her children tried to convince her of what was happening, it wasn't until they told her to watch a TV series that she fully comprehended what had occurred. "I watched the show and saw my life unfold before my eyes. Everything the kids in the show said to their mother, my kids said to me. The excuses the woman made, I made them."

"It was an eye-opener for what women actually go through. It showed you how in a domestic violence situation someone can have so much control over your brain, that even when your children are saying stuff to you, you don't hear it."

From strong, independent woman to unclear future

Her disability has affected her job prospects, and Emma sees little hope of finding an employer who will be flexible when she needs time off. Being unable to work on the projects that once provided a good, steady income is a painful reality. "I've gone from being a position where I could sustain my life quite well, I can't do that now. I raised four kids on my own for 11 years. I was a strong, independent woman. My kids never missed out, they got an education and have all gone on to have brilliant jobs."

Community legal service is vital for women

Emma has no idea how women would deal with legal problems if the free legal service wasn't available, particularly as they try to deal with trauma, stress and other issues affecting their lives.

"They have always been super helpful, they have always been honest and upfront about everything. Every time I have gone there, they have made my process very easy."

"If they weren't there, I don't know what I would do. They are an integral part of our community and they need to always be there. There's a lot of women in my situation."