



Darlene Tarnoski

Victorious Woman

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Darlene Tarnoski spent a lot of her childhood being shuffled around by parents whose priorities didn't include their children. What happened back then explains her really strong adult feelings about children with similar experiences, including her belief that "no one should feel alone or unwanted." That outlook is how a casual conversation with a customer at work turned into Darlene's passionate mission.

When she was a child, Darlene was in and out of foster care. She says her parents were "deeply disturbed" people and, when they split up, they couldn't care for Darlene and her two brothers. She was in foster care and about to be adopted when her father, remarried to a woman with her own children, brought Darlene and her brothers to live with his new family.

The young trio quickly realized their stepmother wasn't very happy about having them in the house. Calling her the "step-monster", Darlene says the woman would lock her and her brothers outside in a "dog run" whenever she took her own children out. She often didn't feed them and when she did, Darlene remembers, "Meal times were always miserable, so I weighed a buck nothing. Almost every teacher I had reported me as malnourished."

When the couple divorced, her father got married for a third time, to a woman whose own abusive parents were her parenting model. "The littlest thing - like a crumb on the table - would set her off," Darlene remembers. That kind of "infraction" was always met with some severe punishment - like rubbing Darlene's face with chili powder.

Throughout her very difficult early childhood, Darlene developed a survival coping mechanism that became her saving grace. She explains, "I never looked at them as parents. So when they were violent or mean, I just thought of them as mean people. I didn't look to them for parenting." And very early on she decided that no one was going to hurt her. She also realized that if she wanted to survive and succeed...*and she did*...she had to be smart and make good choices.

When Darlene was ten years old her father and second stepmother separated. When they did, her father bluntly asked Darlene, "Do you want to go to your aunt's or what?" She didn't know what the "or what" was so she picked Aunt Vicki. Within days she was dropped off to live with her aunt's family.

For the first time, Darlene knew what it was like to have a "normal" home. Though they didn't have much money, Darlene says her aunt "had a heart of gold" and provided a stability that she had never known. In fact, on her first night there, when Aunt Vicki sent her to bed with a "God bless you, I love you", Darlene "freaked out." No one ever said they loved her, so she presumed she was about to die and her aunt was saying goodbye; adjusting to a "normal" life took a while.

The new home was happy for Darlene. She says her aunt "used to sing and act silly" and was known in the community for her work with different groups, including the PTA. In spite of her past, Aunt Vicki and Uncle Ron always told Darlene, "Be proud of who you are, be proud of where you're going and be proud of where you've been."

After a few years, her aunt and uncle became her legal guardians. They - and especially her aunt - provided her with the "love, support and guidance" she needed. Aunt Vicki became one of Darlene's mom-models; the other was television's Mrs. Brady. Darlene sheepishly admits, "As silly as it sounds, I watched the Brady Bunch, thinking to myself "that's the kind of mom I want to be. I also decided that was the type of life I wanted - surrounded by love and respect."

As a teen, Darlene says she was a "pistol" and didn't always make those years easy on her aunt, uncle and cousins. Then Darlene had a turning point moment. As she describes it, "I was hanging out with a group of not so good people at a party; I even thought to myself that no one would

care if I died. I looked around the room and said “I’m better than this” and this was not the life I wanted. So I left and walked home.” After that Darlene never turned back.

While still in high school, Darlene moved into a tiny apartment. She thinks it was because “I had to prove myself, and also prove my parents wrong and make my brothers proud.” As she finished her senior year, she worked at a local restaurant. While the other teens were buying clothes and makeup, Darlene was paying rent and supporting herself.

When Darlene was nineteen, she had a short-lived marriage that produced three children. Then she met Rob at the local gym; they quickly became friends and then married. Darlene was determined to give the three children a better life than her parents gave her. Aunt Vicki’s positive attitude and kindness (*and Mrs. Brady’s too!*) became the foundation for the life she and Rob would make for their family – the kind of life Darlene always dreamed of for herself.

For a while, Darlene considered becoming a foster parent as a way to show her gratitude for the blessings she’d enjoyed. She attended classes designed to help prospective foster parents understand their role. By the end of the sessions, however, Darlene realized being a foster parent wouldn’t be a good idea for her and her family. Still, she wanted to do *something*.

One day she was selling her jewelry at a local winery’s weekly craft fair when she met an FBI agent whose business was rescuing children. The agent described to Darlene how fatherly-looking guys find young girls and offer them a place to stay, giving the girls the impression that they’d be safe. However, once in place, the girls would be sold for sex - over and over again. The agent made rescuing those girls and getting them to a safe place his personal project.

As soon as Darlene heard how there was little to no help for these young girls, she was filled with compassion. “What are your needs,” she asked? “They need dignity bags,” the agent said immediately. Darlene had no idea what he was talking about. The agent explained that when the children are found, they are taken to a hospital or safe house. Everything they have or are wearing is taken for evidence at the FBI interrogation room. The Dignity Bags, backpacks containing clothing, toiletries, water and snacks, help the rescued teens have something of their own as they move to the next place. Darlene immediately understood the need and decided if the FBI couldn’t supply them, she could...and told the agent so.

Quickly Darlene was put in touch with Operation Safe House, a local eighteen bed sanctuary for rescued girls. Then she began networking with every group she could find, asking for donations of either money or supplies. With whatever people contribute, Darlene and her volunteers assemble Dignity Bags and deliver them to the safe house. In addition to donations from others, Darlene also began donating a portion of her jewelry sales to the charity.

Though all three children are in college now, Darlene won’t be facing an empty nest. She’s already filled it with purposeful work that makes her family and friends proud. And, she says, *it would have made Aunt Vicki proud too!*

For other women who have had difficult childhoods, Darlene offers a few tips:

- ♦ **Decide you deserve good in your life.** Everyone knows right from wrong-if you know it’s not right or good for you-then change it. We were born with this instinct. We seem to reprogram ourselves to be ok with abuse or hurt. Well it’s not ok! And no one deserves to hurt you! Not verbally, emotionally or physically.
- ♦ **Surround yourself with good people.** This is best advice I can give other women. My aunt would say, ‘you’re only as good as the company you keep.’ I knew my parents were not nice people and I knew from an early age this shouldn’t be happening to me. Just because they are family doesn’t make it ok or right for them to hurt you.
- ♦ **Make a decision to not let anyone mistreat you or your children.** No one should make you feel pain or inadequate. Love is not painful; love does not hit, give you away, push you down or belittle you.
- ♦ **Do what you need to have a better life.** Know there is help out there and ask for it. Know that you deserve the best and you deserve to be happy. You can be whatever you want. Study something new, take classes or apply for that new job. Just do something you’re proud of.
- ♦ **Live the life you dream.**

Great Job, Darlene!

So many of us have scars from uncaring parents and the lives they gave us. You show us that their mistakes don't have to sabotage our lives. Instead, you made the conscious decision to be safe and happy and pass that safety and happiness to others.

Darlene Tarnoski assembles Dignity Bags weekly and collects money to help run the shelter. You can read more about the safe house and the needs/wish list at www.temeculashop.com. A link to the Shelter can be found there also. You can reach Darlene at the Temecula Gift Shop, Shop for Charity, temeculashop@gmail.com