

My name is Joanna Chaney. I am a mother of two kind, compassionate, intelligent, and funny sons; Kael who is 14 and Alastair who is 11. It is for my two boys that I found my life's path completely altered from the typical ideals of family. I had a moment of realization that if I did not change things in my life my children would possibly grow up to believe that their fathers' behavior towards me was acceptable, that their mother was not strong enough to have her own voice. Standing in the kitchen, my husband laughing because I had asked for help to get my oldest to not be disrespectful towards me, I realized my children deserved a life free from witnessing abuse and, just as importantly, I deserved a life free from being the target of abuse. I knew I needed to regain my self-worth, my ability to be my own person free from another's control and the ability to financially take care of myself and my children (I was primarily a stay-at-home parent). So, I made a plan.

I started by going back to college in the beginning of 2018. I was working part time at a preschool while my boys were at school and really loved it. I knew I needed to find an occupation that would allow me to be financially independent while giving me the time I needed to be with my children. I decided to work towards being a preschool teacher. I spoke to my employer about my situation and she graciously expanded her program to allow me full time employment there. I took classes in early childhood development as well as general education. One particular class stood out, Positive Child Guidance. I learned a lot from Ms. Bettye Ann Stephens. Going into the class I expected to learn about teaching others children. I did not expect to gain so much insight into my own thoughts as a parent. Nor did I expect to find renewed strength in my philosophies towards raising my children. I had always believed strongly in raising children through kindness and teaching lessons not through punishment but instead through thoughtful conversations and offering suggestions. Giving my children the power to do the right thing by coming to it on their own with guidance where needed. However, over the course of my journey as a parent those ideas had been ridiculed. If my children had moments where they were challenging (what child doesn't) it was because I was too soft...I did not do what needed done in order to keep them in line. So, while I was standing by my ideas at the same time I could feel them being crushed...feel doubt creeping in. Being in classes that supported what I had been told was too idealistic for children gave me the courage to once again stand up for what for a long time was the only thing I was willing to fight for. I did not anticipate the wide breadth of knowledge I would gather in my classes. Not only was my return to education helping me to get better pay, it was also indirectly helping me to become a stronger person, more wise to the world as a whole and my place in it.

As of the last year and a half I have been completely separated from my husband. I was scared and uncertain, eighteen years of being told I could not be successful on my own left it's mark. I have had the support, guidance, and love from many people. Despite that I have to admit that sometimes I am scared and uncertain still. Rebuilding myself into the person I started out as, the person I was meant to be, has been a challenging journey. Not one I will ever give up on. My mother, brother and dearest friend have helped me tremendously as I rebuilt a life for my children and myself from nothing. While our lives are not glamorous, it is safe and

full of love and a place of support and growth. I am also fortunate to have found a mentor in my employer. Her constant guidance and encouragement when it comes to parenting and rebuilding a stronger sense of self are invaluable. I was encouraged early on by my friend to seek therapy for what I have gone through. After seeing a few therapist's, I was eventually recommended to seek assistance from Catalyst. There I found Max. For the last year this was the real turning point in my path to rebuilding my self-worth and learning how to navigate through the events that have taken place in the past. I have learned how to have a voice, and that it doesn't make me a terrible person. I have learned that I don't have to compromise the values I hold most dear, kindness and compassion. I can achieve a life for my children and I while maintaining who I am. In fact Max was the one who told me about this award. Part of my work with her is learning to celebrate my successes, writing them formally is a bigger step towards that.

I have worked hard to support my children through this difficult transition. I have managed to give each child a comfortable space to call their own and just be the teenager and preteen that they need to be. I have made every attempt to adapt to their different developmental stages (because lets get real puberty is rough!) and be thoughtful of the life changes they are experiencing. I speak to their therapists, my own, my family and friends (including my employer) to try to gain as much insight as possible to find the best course of action in different situations. I am proud to say that my children are clothed, fed, happy and even sometimes spoiled when I have something to spare, especially given we started with nothing. I am also very proud of the courage I found, something that would have been impossible a year ago, to stand up for what I need from their father to better the time they spend with him. I recently by giving testimony in court was able to have the judge order parenting classes for their father on Autism for our youngest and co-parenting classes to obtain more consistent parenting for both boys.

I am so much stronger. My husband has told me many times over the last two years that he did not recognize me, I wasn't the woman he married. This used to hurt. Today I wear it as a badge of honor. I know that I have many more things to accomplish. I know that my mental health needs more care. I wake each day stepping forward prepared to use all of the tools Max and others have given me. This gives me power to maintain my path, even build it longer than I dared dream when I first laid the stones of my plan. I look forward to a day when I am not drowning in bills left to me by my ex. When I don't have to worry about finances when the kids need something as basic as a new pair of shoes. I look forward to finding my own little home just for me and the kids, I am excited to someday open my own little preschool. I am looking forward to a day when I can just take my children on a little trip they so deserve. Today I have two children who do very well in school, they are respectful and kind. They have understanding, respect and compassion for everyone around them. Most of all for our future I look forward to two grown boys that understand the power and strength of their mother. Who can see that through adversity even still anything can be achieved and that they will each respect their future partners. I know this will happen because I will never give up.

Yours very truly,

Joanna Chaney