



Maria Raia

My bodybuilding journey began in circa 1981. My early years of athletics yielded a myriad of awards and valuable experience from high school and college and included competitive swimming, gymnastics, field hockey, Judo, track and field as well as being the first woman wrestler in my high school. It was a natural transition to own and operate successful Gold's gyms in California with my husband through the years 1986 through 1999. I continued to train, only taking a short hiatus to have my son. Upon restarting training after childbirth, I competed in 40 KAKOS natural shows as well NPC's, often placing first and culminating in winning Miss Universe in 1999.

While training clients at Gold's Gym, I began training my 6 year old son as well. Soon people started noticing him and I and requested we pose on stages in the area. These experiences were not only great advertisements for the gym, but my son was active in fundraising with these events on stage. He raised money for kids with cancer and special Olympics making mom proud. Life was good so I thought, until my husband of 14 years wanted a divorce and we had to sell the gyms.

It was hard starting a new life. My son lived with me and we continued to guest pose and compete in shows. I also judged the Venice beach shows in California and helped with Muscle Beach events. My son and I were making the best of our situation. I built my own training company, FossilFitness, that I continued to operate, and we were OK. Then I thought I met the man of my dreams; instead, he became my worst nightmare. He was nice at first then slowly became more and more abusive. He started calling me names, sometimes within ear shot of my clients. He would be nice to my son but behind closed doors the abusive behavior towards me was out of control. He hit me on a regular basis for no reason, there were no understandable triggers. This man tore down my self-worth and justified his behavior by telling our friends that I was crazy. Oftentimes, I feared for my life. On one day in particular he beat me and somehow I managed to break free. I ran to the neighbors who called the police. Even though he was arrested, he posted bail, and further threatened me and my son. My fear eventually led to dismissal of the charges against him. My next mistake was believing I could trust him when he wanted to get back together. The police were called again and he was removed from the house.


In the meantime, my hair fell out, my knees gave out, and my body hurt everywhere. Doctor's discovered that he had been poisoning me. When you've been beaten down with verbal, physical and mental abuse you start believing that you're worthless and powerless. I was paralyzed by fear until one day my suspicions were confirmed and he actually confessed to poisoning me when he was drunk. I eventually was able to record his admission. It took numerous court hearings, inadequate counsel and a lot of suffering due to re-living the nightmare in court.

We finally divorced and I did get better physically but not fully right for years. Miraculously I am feeling better than ever today, but it was a long journey. Emotional healing is still an ongoing process, and I still struggle everyday with doubt. I continued to work out of my home with my business, FossilFitness, I was training clients, and judging at the Venice Beach shows. My son was living in Florida and had his own successful business. One of the biggest gas leaks in the nation's history led to me making my own move to Florida for a fresh start. While I was building a training clientele in Florida, at 61, I still had the desire to compete in bodybuilding.

They say, setbacks make for stronger comebacks and that's just what I did. Overcoming a broken wrist and then covid, I was determined to keep positive by donating my time and helping others train in my home. When things started to open up I was at a fork in the road; allow myself to continue to live in the fear of my past or ask God for help. Something came over me, I realized in my heart that I wanted to set an example of how a 61-year-old lady can overcome the past and become a champion. Now I work diligently to stay in shape not only with consistent exercise but living a clean and healthy lifestyle. With an unwavering drive to keep going, I knew I would get back on stage.

So far this year I have done four NPC shows in Florida. It was so gratifying and rewarding to arrive at this level of competitiveness after fighting back from my living hell. Placing well in these contests gave me the confidence to keep going no matter what, to champion over my challenges. Having qualified for a national level show, I most recently competed in the NPC Teen, Collegiate, and Masters Bodybuilding Championships where I placed 1st in Women's Bodybuilding masters 60+ and earned a Pro Card.

I want to help to educate and encourage other women never to give up on your dreams, no matter how bad things get, put your faith in higher power, and you can be successful with hard work and a determined attitude. Many people still ask, Why did you not just leave him? My response is, even in an abusive environment, you always believe it will get better because you love them. Abusive relationships make you become codependent and it takes a tremendous amount of strength and stamina to walk away and begin again. I am more alive today than ever and believe I have just started my journey into a spiritual healing as well as personal and professional growth. I will never give up on my dreams nor will I ever stop helping people strive for a healthy lifestyle. GOD gives us all a purpose in life, it is up to us to use the battles we have fought and the tools he gives us to help others.

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