

Rural Woman Begins New Life With Son After Leaving Emotionally Abusive Spouse

BY SUZANNE KEENE

EPHRATA — Her workday over, Marie Brubaker drives the short distance from Penn Dutch Farms in Ephrata to the church-sponsored day-care center where her 4-year-old son Timothy has spent his day. While he puts his toys away, Marie chats with the teacher, then helps Timothy with his coat.

As they leave Timothy stops by the kitchen to pick up a gingerbread man he made the previous day and asks if he can eat the treat now. Marie suggests he wait until they reach their apartment, and Timothy proudly carries his treasure to the white station wagon in the parking lot.

When they reach their cozy apartment along the Conestoga River, Marie and Timothy receive a zealous greeting from his pet dog Polly, then spend a few minutes playing together. Finally, Timothy is granted permission to eat his gingerbread man, which he devours with enthusiasm.

Except for a few strands of premature grey streaking her curly hair, 30-year-old Marie shows no sign of the hardship she and Timothy have endured. Nearly a year and a half has passed since they left the primitive shack near Reamstown that had been their home for four years.

Marie and her husband had moved to the tiny rural cabin in Sept. 1981, leaving behind a comfortable life on a New York dairy farm. Three and a half years into their marriage, her husband began to withdraw from contact with other people and decided to move home to Lancaster County, where they both had grown up in strict Old Order Mennonite families.

"He got to the point where he no longer desired to talk to people," Marie explains. "He slowly developed a mental problem."

Because he did not want help and was not violent, Marie was unable to get assistance for him. He often promised to get a job, but never did, Marie said.

So, with hope in her heart, she

continued her daily existence with her emotionally abusive husband. "He kept promising things in the future. I thought if I could just be patient, things would work out," she said.

The shack where they lived was a tiny, 13-by-15 one-room building with no utilities. When they moved in, the house had been vacant for over 20 years.

The Brubakers furnished the home with a sofa-bed someone had given them, a sink, a cabinet and, when Timothy arrived, a crib.

Marie did her all her laundry by hand, getting the water from a pump in the front yard, and prepared their meals on a pot-bellied wood stove. "We didn't have much to cook anyway," she adds.

Although her husband refused to work, he would not permit her to have a job either. "He wouldn't let me get a job," she said. "It was like a threat to him."

Nor would he allow her to apply for food stamps or other assistance. With no money to purchase groceries, they lived on donations and food they scavenged from grocery-store dumpsters.

Marie recalls walking seven miles one way to the local Acme store, where they would scour the dumpster in search of food and detergents. Sometimes, she said, they were only harassed, while on other occasions they were forced to leave.

But while the physical living conditions alone were challenging, Marie was also enduring emotional abuse from her husband. Although she tried to please him, he criticized her constantly.

"It just didn't matter what I said, it was the wrong thing," Marie said. "He was just totally critical."

One day, Marie remembers, they were walking along the road when a driver honked at them to move aside. Thinking they would be hit, Marie quickly jumped out of the way. When the car had passed, her husband berated her for overreacting and told her that in similar circumstances, she should

calmly walk to the side of the road. When another car passed in about 10 minutes, she followed him slowly to the roadside. Then, she said, he criticized her for moving too slowly.

"After several years, I learned that I could not please him. It really wears a person down to live like that," she said.

Living in isolation made the verbal abuse even more difficult to withstand. "I hardly talked to anyone," she said.

Marie said she would listen to the radio to keep in contact with the rest of the world. "I knew more about what was happening the Middle East than in the area," she recalls.

Sometimes, she said, she would be able to have a nice conversation with her husband, but often he withdrew from her as well. "I had a lot of time to meditate. I had a lot of dreams. I just knew it wouldn't stay this way."

While collecting firewood, she would dream of going to college and becoming a teacher. She had always enjoyed her schoolwork, and although girls raised in Old Order Mennonite families are not encouraged to attend high school, she was able to earn her diploma through a correspondence course.

Another dream, she remembers, was building a home out of stones she collected from the wood around the cabin. "Some things were kind of absurd," she notes, but they kept her going.

But despite her primitive lifestyle and her husband's abuse, Marie says, "I had hope, and as long as I had hope, I could keep going."

"I felt I was doing the best I knew how in the circumstances," she said. "In a way, I feel very fortunate to have had an experience like that." Marie said she has learned things no college course could teach her: patience, contentment and that happiness comes from within.

Although her husband usually did not physically abuse her, he shook her violently one night when they were arguing. He wanted her to agree that he should not work, but she refused. "He's not a violent-type person. He did not want to hurt me," Marie said.

However, she became frightened, ran to a nearby home and called the police. That night, the police drove her and Timothy to the Shelter for Abused Women in Lancaster city where they stayed for three weeks. The counselors there helped Marie gain confidence and taught her how to go about getting her own apartment. However, she stressed, they left all the decisions up to her.

For Timothy, the weeks away



Marie enjoys her work at the greenhouse, where she packs tomatoes, helps with the picking during busy times and does some water testing. She located the job through a free paper delivered to the primitive shack she shared with her husband for four years.

from home opened the doors to a new world. "The shelter was his first experience with the outside world," Marie recalls. "He was so fearful." Modern conveniences like the vacuum cleaner and water spigots were a novelty and frightened him.

During her stay at the shelter, Marie was surprised to meet several other rural women in similar circumstances. Many people think abusive situations occur only in the city, but that is a myth, Marie said.

Because rural women perceive themselves as the only ones with a problem, Marie says: "I think that keeps people from the country from doing something about it." The knowledge that she wasn't alone was reassuring, she noted.

After three weeks, Marie returned home to her husband. He had promised that he would find work and would allow her to get

food stamps. "I had confidence that would really change the circumstances," Marie said.

But while she did get the stamps, he never returned to work.

She began watching the "Help Wanted" ads in a local paper they received free and in May of 1985 began working at the greenhouse where she is still employed.

An elderly couple who had given them food took care of Timothy while Marie worked and helped her through making the difficult decision to leave her husband.

"I can never remember wanting someone to make a decision for me so much," she recalls. When evaluating her future, she also turned to a local Mennonite minister and his wife, who had seen the couple walking along the road. "I got a lot of support from him and his wife," Marie says. "He just felt lead by God to come

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While Marie is busy at work, Timothy spends his days playing with other children at day care. For the first two and a half years of his life, Timothy had almost no contact with other children.



After spending the day apart, Marie and Timothy enjoy a few quiet moments playing together in their cozy apartment

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