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'THEY'RE MY FAMILY'

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by Agnieszka Ruck

AN UNCONVENTIONAL K OF C FAMILY BEARS WITNESS TO THE MEANING OF UNCONDITIONAL LOVE



Patti and William "BJ" Harrison stand with their three children, (from left) Austin, Brooklyn and William, outside the historic Essex Railway Station, near their home in Ontario. BJ, Austin and William are all members of George Preca Maltese Council 17070 in Windsor.

Photo by Derek Cookson

Patti Harrison was just looking for hope. She was young, scared and pregnant, and didn't know where to turn.

A couple months earlier, the 15-year-old had an argument with her parents and stormed out of their house in Oshawa, Ontario. Looking for a place to sleep that night in 1995, she walked in on a transaction between a drug dealer and a prostitute.

Suddenly, she found herself in a living nightmare. She was thrown down a flight of stairs and tied to a bed in a dark, windowless room, where she was repeatedly beaten and raped by different men. She

was then given two choices: become a prostitute or carry drugs on the streets. Eventually, after two months of captivity, Patti was rescued, but she soon learned she was pregnant.

This is the story of how, amid the most difficult circumstances, Patti Harrison found the hope she was looking for. Doctors, nurses and family members told her to have an abortion, but her mother stood by her side, taking her to a pregnancy resource center for counseling and an ultrasound. Then, in a country where abortion is legal through all nine months of pregnancy, a young, traumatized teenager chose life.

In January 1996, Patti gave birth to a healthy baby boy named Austin, and years later, she married William "BJ" Harrison, who embraced his role as father to Austin and to Patti's daughter, Brooklyn. Patti likewise accepted BJ's son from a previous relationship, William, as her own. What's more, BJ became active in the Knights of Columbus, which strengthened their family life. BJ, Austin and William are now all members of George Preca Maltese Council 17070 in Windsor. Family means the world to the Harrisons, even if theirs is not a conventional one, and the Order remains for them a mainstay of moral support.

LIGHT AFTER DARKNESS

It's something few people are willing to accept happens in Canada, Patti said, recounting her story of abduction and how, for two months, she was forced into the drug trade.

"They forced me to carry pieces of plastic in my mouth and go for walks with them late at night in downtown Oshawa," she said. When buyers approached, Patti said, she was instructed to spit the plastic on the ground and wait as they retrieved it and paid her captors. After a close call with police forced her to swallow an entire stash, she learned it was crack cocaine.

People had been looking for her, though, and about two months after she left home, Patti was rescued.

"I was in really bad physical shape," said Patti. "They took me to the doctor, and I was torn and bruised and had a bad infection."

The doctor treating her then told her that she would likely never bear children because of her injuries. Patti was devastated.

"All I wanted to be when I grew up was a mom," she said.

"To know that would never happen because of the most terrible thing that had ever happened to me — it was too much."

Patti swallowed handfuls of pills in an attempt to end her life. Her mother acted quickly and rushed her to the hospital. That's when medical tests came back with the shocking result: Patti was pregnant.

"My grandfather, the decision-maker of our home, said: 'If she doesn't have an abortion, I'm disowning her,'" Patti recalled.

Doctors and nurses also urged Patti to have an abortion, telling her the child would only live as a reminder of what she had endured at the hands of her captors. She was even shunned by her Baptist church community after people learned she was pregnant out of wedlock.

But her mother took her to a pregnancy center named Rose of Durham, and the staff welcomed them.

"During the ultrasound, I heard his heartbeat and saw him," Patti recalled. "I started thinking: 'I can do this.' I fell in love with him."

Austin was born completely healthy, defying the doctors' predictions. Then, a few years later, Patti was shocked to learn she was pregnant again.

"I had a drinking problem, and I was in a situation where I passed out with some friends," she explained. "I thought, 'I was passed out. How did I get pregnant? I don't even know who the father is.'"

Patti gave birth to her daughter, Brooklyn, and in 2007 she married BJ, who faced countless questions about why he would choose to marry a woman with such a traumatic history.

"Friends said: 'How could you treat Austin like your son?'" he recalled. "At first, it felt like the world didn't want me to be this child's dad."

But BJ and Patti opened their hearts to each other and to their children.

"I love them all, and they're my family," BJ said. "It's just the way it is. They're mine."

In remarks at the National March for Life Vigil in Ottawa last year, Patti explained, "These three children who were unplanned have blessed our lives. If we had become the bullies that health care providers and family members tried to force us to be, we would have deprived the world of these amazing kids."

COMFORTED BY GOD

Today, Austin is like many young men his age. He enjoys playing video games and is busy working part-time jobs. He is also a Fourth Degree Knight. He said he joined the Order at age 19 to serve the

community and “to do stuff with Dad,” meaning BJ — the only father he’s ever known.

William, who has participated in council events since he was a boy, officially became a member last year, on his 18th birthday.

“When they become teenagers, especially, it’s hard to get time with them,” said BJ. “The Knights gave me the opportunity to have family time.”

Patti and Brooklyn also participate in K of C activities, in addition to 40 Days for Life and similar initiatives.

The family’s experience has strengthened BJ’s pro-life convictions, which he traces to the influence of his father, who was adopted at birth and never knew his own birth parents.

“My biological grandmother chose life, and if she had not, I would not exist,” said BJ, who joined the Knights in 2003. He currently serves as a district deputy, as well as retention director and e-membership director for the Ontario State Council.

“The Knights made me a better Catholic and dad,” he said, adding that he encouraged his children to join him at council events as soon as they were old enough.

As for Patti, she wasn’t introduced to the Catholic Church until she and BJ married. She was received into full communion six years ago.

“I always had a special, unexplained relationship with the Blessed Mother that I believe led me to marry a Catholic man,” Patti said. “My first time at Mass felt like home.”

During her months in captivity at age 15, Patti had sought solace in prayer. “I had no idea what the Hail Mary was, but for some reason, that prayer kept coming to me,” she said. “Every day, I prayed. At first, I prayed to God to take my life. Then, I prayed for the strength to get through the situation and that I would be rescued.”

After she was freed, Patti continued praying, reading her Bible, and seeking intercession from Mary, even though her family and church community largely rejected her.

Today, Patti finds particular solace in a passage from St. Paul: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Cor 1:3-4).

Patti recently founded Baby Steps, an organization for women grieving after miscarriage, stillbirth or abortion. When she shared her testimony of trauma, hope and healing at the National March for Life Vigil in May 2018, a young woman in the crowd, who had come with her teenage friends, was inspired to choose life for her unborn child.

"I was put through everything," Patti said. "I had two children out of rape, and why? It came down to this: Through all of my suffering, I can help others. My message to all women facing unplanned pregnancies is that choosing life is the greatest choice you will ever make."

AGNIESZKA RUCK writes for the Canadian Catholic News and the *B.C. Catholic*, the newspaper of the Archdiocese of Vancouver.

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