



As a young girl, Williams was the victim of physical, sexual and emotional abuse by family members.

I'VE COME THIS FAR BY

FATHER

FOUR ORDINARY WOMEN SHARE THEIR INSPIRING STORIES OF HOW THEY OVERCAME EXTRAORDINARY OBSTACLES—SEXUAL ABUSE, ILLNESS, DRUG ADDICTION, A PARALYZING CAR CRASH—TO LEAD FULLER LIVES

BY CORA DANIELS AND TAMARA E. HOLMES PHOTOGRAPHY BY CEDRIC ANGELES

LISA C. WILLIAMS, 42

When Lisa Williams was a child, her favorite hiding place was behind the couch. There she hoped to get away from the flying plates, vicious words and painful fists that accompanied the frequent fights between her mother and stepfather. "I would get behind the sofa and just squat down," she says. This experience was just the beginning for the little girl who was exposed to the horrors of physical and sexual abuse from an early age. Though she prayed and attended church, as she got older she often wondered why God didn't make the violence go away.

It wasn't long before Williams became more than a spectator to the abuse. At 7, while living in Hickory, North Carolina, with her mother, sisters, grandparents and an older cousin, Williams says she was raped repeatedly by the cousin in his basement bedroom for several weeks. She endured his assaults in fearful silence to protect herself and her younger sisters. "I understood already that was my role," she says. One night she blurted out to her grandfather what her cousin had done. He threw the cousin out of the house but, according to Williams, she had trouble convincing other family members she was telling the truth. Her mother didn't come to her aid, and her grandmother didn't believe her, she says. Shortly after, Williams's mother took her daughters to Fort Bragg in North Carolina where her husband was stationed. It was there, Williams says, that the sexual abuse started again—except

this time, the perpetrator was her stepfather. "I didn't say anything because he told me no one would believe me. And I knew he was right because of what had happened the last time," she explains.

Once when she was 12, Williams tried to protect her mother from one of her stepfather's rages, only to be knocked down the stairs. >

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She stumbled to a neighbor's house and asked them to call the police. When the police arrived and asked her mother if she wanted to press charges, not only did she refuse, but “she packed my clothes, took me to the bus station and said I could no longer live in the house with them because I was ruining her marriage,” Williams says.

Williams felt abandoned by her family, and by God. She had grown up in the church hearing about God's role as a provider, yet there she was sitting in the bus station with no one to provide for her. “I had problems with God,” says the now 42-year-old who lives in Atlanta. “I was like, ‘You didn't see people beating me up, and you didn't see what those men were doing to me? God, you're not quite with me here.’” Williams reached out to a friend of her mother's for help, and he and his wife took her in. But when the military couple was ordered to report for active duty two years later, to Williams's dismay, her newly separated mother came to collect her.

By then Williams was 14 and says that she knew not to get too comfortable. “Something in my gut told me, *If you don't have money, you're going to be back on the streets,*” she says. So she took her first job selling encyclopedias after school. When her stepfather and mother reconciled three months later, that was Williams's cue to leave. “I wasn't going to go to jail over him, because if he hit me, I was going to kill him,” she says. When she left this time, it was willingly, and with money in her pocket.

Over the next few years Williams lived with relatives and friends and, at one point, in her car. She moved in for a time with an aunt who encouraged her to rethink her position on God. Her aunt taught her that God didn't always stop bad things from happening, but instead helped people rise above those bad things. Williams thought of all the people who had taken her in and wondered if they might have been God's answer to her prayers.



With her life—and faith—restored, Williams has started a home for survivors of domestic and sexual violence.

“Those little angels had helped me all through my life,” she says.

Rather than depend on Him too much, Williams became self-reliant, making sure she always had a job. She worked her way through college and later served as a commissioned officer in the military. During her stint of active duty she noticed that people with problems constantly sought her out for advice. For the first time, Williams realized that her struggles had prepared her to help others face difficult situations. In that moment, she discovered her life's purpose and reclaimed her faith. She thought again of the people who had helped her along the way. Now God was working through her. “I think this is what we're supposed to be doing for others,” she says.

Today Williams continues to motivate people through a radio and TV program, *Living in the Black*, which promotes financial independence, as well as Circle of Friends, an organization in which women come together each September to bestow gifts to women's organizations in need. This year she opened Living Water, a residential home in Atlanta where victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and the sex industry can stay for up to two years while they “redirect their lives,” she explains. “God has shown me that life is not just about you. And if you want to make it about you, you're going to miss out.” ▷