



My Life My Story



Tina



UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

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In October of 2001, I woke up with massive pain in my head; something was off. I couldn't really see good out of my left eye. I went into the doctor and sure enough, my central vision in my left eye was gone. That was the beginning of it all.



I was born in northern Nevada in 1971. I went to a couple elementary schools, Sparks Middle School, and then Reed High School. I graduated in 1989.

I come from a Mexican family. My grandparents had six kids: one girl and five boys.

When I was six, my dad had been married twice and was divorced. He was working two jobs and trying to raise me as a single dad; my mom was not in the picture. My dad couldn't really take care of me, so my uncle Frank and aunt Barbara took me in and legally adopted me on my seventh birthday; my dad was still nearby. During the holidays, we were all together, which was really weird.

My dad passed away in 2010 and is now at the Northern Nevada Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Fernley, Nevada. He was in the Navy, and my Uncle Frank was in the Army National Guard. Nobody ever talked about their military career; we weren't really like a military family. Now, my girls and I go to the cemetery and do the flags.

I think for me looking back now as an adult, my childhood wasn't the greatest.



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When I was nine, I consumed myself with running and sports. In high school, I did cross country, track, and basketball. When I was in middle school, Frank and Barbara got divorced.

I wanted to go live with my dad. It was fun at times, but there was never really that connection; he was an alcoholic. As soon I was able to get a job, I started working, and I moved out. I was seventeen and took care of myself from then on.

One day, my aunt Alice pulled out the yearbook from Sparks High School where she and my mother had gone to school. I was kind of doing the numbers and realized my mother was pregnant her senior year in high school. Nobody ever knew where she was or talked about her after that; and I didn't let anyone know I knew.

A couple months before my high school graduation, I looked in the phone book, and there was her maiden name. I called the number and left a message. Then one day, Cal called back, and I started asking him all these questions about my mom. All his answers were yes, yes, and, yes. You could tell the hesitation in his voice like "Whaaat?" I said, "Well, I think, I am her daughter." He was hysterical saying, "I wanna see you."

He was living in Sparks. We met, and the meeting was just great. He had gotten a hold of my mom. Next thing I know, I had a plane ticket to California to see my mom. I met her and my grandma. It wasn't the greatest visit because my mom was on drugs at the time, but it was filling that hole. I was anti-drug, and here I am going to meet my mom and her drugged out boyfriend. I remember the day before I left to come home, I let them have it.

About a month later, she moved to Reno. She had left the guy; she was cleaning herself up. Now, everything is a full circle. We talk every day, and it's this great friendship. My mom is in my life, and also, in my kid's, and my grandkid's.



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At seventeen, I was working and went through some different jobs. I started Reno Business College. My dad was dating some girl who said, "I'm going to California," and I said, "I'll take you." So, off we go to California. Eventually, I moved back to Reno and got a job at a competitive wholesale gun distributor.

A girl I was working with was going to Texas to see her dad. We drove all the way to Texas; I had a blast driving cross country. I went to a temp agency and got a job working for a mortgage company. I kind of lived out of my car for a bit and slept on the couch of a co-worker. This was happening in late 1991 to the beginning of 1992.

One day, I don't have any idea what came over me, but I went down to the recruiter's station. I didn't know anything about the Marine Corps, but I walked into the Marine Corps office and said, "Here I am." I had burgundy, purplish hair, all super curly and was wearing my M.C. Hammer pants.

They didn't take me serious at all; they just chuckled and laughed at me. They were like, "Okay, we will have you take the ASVAB test;" I hadn't studied, and I'd been out of school for a while. I walked out

telling them I would be back after I had studied. I grabbed the book from the library, studied over the weekend, went back in, and took my test. They were shocked, "You're really back?"

I enlisted in February 1992.



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I originally enlisted for the intelligence field, but during boot camp, that fell apart. My drill instructor let me look at a book and pick whatever I thought I could do. That's how I became an air traffic controller in the Marine Corps.

I went to school in Millington, Tennessee, and the cool thing about my class was we were all Marines; usually, it is a mix of Navy and Marines. On the first day, our instructor came in and told us to look to our left and look to our right because they won't be there by the end of the class; they won't make it.

There were about twelve of us, and our class was silly and nuts, but we became close, and we ALL graduated. We did study groups, and we made sure everybody showed up. I met my husband there. We had only started dating the weekend before, but we were all like, "Hey, let's just get married." We knew if we got married, they would have to send us together. We got a little trailer, and we actually set up our kitchen with an airfield like they had in our training. Everybody would be practicing directing traffic, and that's how we all graduated.

Once I finished school, I had to qualify on the FAA regulations and get my FAA cards. I ended up being stationed at Marine Corps Air Station, El Toro in southern California; I liked it there.

After three years, I was divorced and remarried to another air traffic controller. I discharged in January 1995. I had my daughter in February 1995. We stayed on El Toro until 1997 and then, we got PCS orders to Iwakuni, Japan for the next three years.



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I had another daughter in June 1999. Six months later, I found out that I was pregnant again.

March of 2000, we moved to 29 Palms, California. Luckily, we were there for only two years.

In October of 2001, my eye issues began.

While I was on active duty, they had to pull me off the screen where I was controlling an aircraft. I said, "I can't find the guy, I can't see him." They wanted me to go to medical then, but I said, "No, no, no. I did it to myself." I had put pressure on my eye to relieve the pain throughout the night. I figured it was not something medical could help me with.

In 2002, my husband and I moved to a base in Fort Worth, Texas. We lived in Crowley, Texas until December 2005.

I left my husband in December 2005. I had a five-year-old, a six-year-old, and a ten-year-old. My counselor had told me to read a book about verbally abusive relationships, which I did. My husband had never actually hit me; but there was restraining, pushing, grabbing, a lot of verbal and emotional abuse. The threats were bad. He was deployed at the time, and I couldn't drive because I'd lost more of my sight; I had lost all of the sight on the left side and quite a bit on my right.

The counselor and I decided it was time. I called movers and had them pack up as much as they could. I took what I thought we would need to get by; the rest, I left. The girls and I moved back to Sparks.

Prior to this, I was going to the police station and writing up reports about the abusive incidents as they happened because I didn't want the police to come to the house; that would make things worse.



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When the time came for me to leave, I went down to the station again and said, “I am not abandoning or kidnapping my children. I’m losing my sight, and I need to be with my family.”

I called his command and let them know as well. I don’t know what he did, but they sent him home from overseas immediately because I was leaving. Fortunately, I was already gone.

He showed up January or February. He said he would go to counseling and do everything to get us back, which he had said before. He really just wanted Jessie to come with him. I really couldn’t stop him at this point either.

Jessie came back quick – after two weeks. In the meantime, he was supposed to be doing counseling; he wasn’t doing anything. I hired an attorney from Texas.

The kids weren’t residents in Nevada until after six months, so I had to wait. We got the divorce. I found out he had another lady with three daughters about the same age as mine moving in with him. The harassment ended, but it was stressful every time there was visitation. Not one time was smooth and easy; the stress levels were really bad.

At fifteen, Jessie was the hard, defiant one. She was hanging out with the wrong crowd. As much as I didn’t want the girls going to their dad, it was kind of the only option.

I was looking for boot camps or even places that counseled kids who were into drugs and alcohol; but our insurance had nothing in our whole region.

For the next four years, I had no contact with Jessie. I would try to call and send gifts, but there were no conversations with me whatsoever; they basically brainwashed her.



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She did graduated high school by doing online classes, and she enlisted in the Air Force. She graduated tech school and was stationed at Tinker Air Force Base, Oklahoma. I got a call from her. Jessie was really hesitant, just like that moment with my mom. She said she was getting married in two weeks, and she wanted me at the wedding. I would make arrangements to be there

She said, “Just so you know, dad is not allowed at the wedding; and well, I also wanted to let you know that I am pregnant, and the baby is due in September.” This was in 2014.

Jessie had the baby, and now I have two grandsons. She, too, is in an abusive household experiencing what I went through with her dad and with my own dad. I am trying to help her break that cycle; I don't want my grandkids to be abusers.



In September of last year, Jessie ended up having brain surgery for Arnold-Chiari Malformation. She is in a lot of pain, but she doesn't want to do a second one. Hannah, my eighteen-year-old, helped after the surgery with the two boys; and my Sami was off to fend for herself at seventeen.

I have struggled with the blindness, trying to raise three kids as a single mom. My left eye is total darkness; and in my right, I can only see a pin hole. It has been getting better

because I'd started hyperbaric oxygen treatments. I had all my central vision back, but I had no lower peripheral vision. This condition is known as Devic's Disease or Neuromyelitis Optica.



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My VIST coordinator at the VA was my angel. She was calling me all the time saying, “Let’s do archery, let’s do this, and that...” She knows I’m blind, how am I supposed to do archery? Really? She also told me about a national winter sports clinic in Colorado. I went there three years in a row.

The second year, I met a Vietnam Veteran at a Marine reunion who asked me, “Are you a Marine?” I said, “Yeah, I’m a Marine.” Everyone thought I was a spouse or a caretaker. He said, “You’re not wearing anything to show you are a Marine.” After an hour of talking – I got lectured, and we were both in tears. His whole point was he doesn’t wear the emblem to show it off but for the guys that didn’t make it back out of Vietnam. I came home and started wearing Marine Corps stuff.

Through the years, I’ve met some great people. I met Steve Baskis, a vet who got blown up in Iraq and lost all of his vision. He now runs the Blind Endeavors Foundation. I also met Lonnie Bedwell, the first totally



blind person to solo kayak the Grand Canyon.

I have my bad days and my off days but getting involved in activities keeps me going. I still have a digital clock next to my bed and as long as I can see the numbers, I’m fine.

Now, I have the opportunity to do activities and sports, and it has really helped me to heal mentally; I’m a stronger person. I did a bike trip, and I rode about 200 miles in Colorado.



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I started a kayaking chapter here in Reno for Team River Runner. I'm involved in the Northern Nevada's Veterans Writing Project, which has seminars every year. I also volunteer at the VA for other blind veterans. I bowl every Tuesday, and I am a board member of The Blind Veteran Association for Operation Peer Support.

Last February, I went with OPS to Florida with Team River Runner. We took six blind veterans kayaking. We

also support an annual turkey and deer hunt, a marathon, an Army Ranger Camp, ski trips, and other activities for the blind.

Other blind veterans have inspired me to keep going and to give back instead of only being a participant.

