

'Sometimes you have to put yourself first'

Like many women, Guadalupe put everyone else's needs ahead of her own—until one day she finally had enough

A chill ran down my spine as I leaned against the door and watched my two young children sleeping peacefully. Just a few hours before, I'd stuffed our clothing into garbage bags and moved out of the home I'd shared with my husband, John.

Suddenly I began to shiver uncontrollably; I was terrified. At 32, I was alone for the first time in my life. I had two children to raise and I couldn't depend on my husband to support us any longer. How could I make ends meet working as a lab assistant at a local college earning only \$5 an hour?

A life falls apart

It wasn't supposed to be this way. When I first met John, I fell madly in love. He was handsome and charming, and since we had grown up in the same town, I felt sure we were destined to be together.

John had seemed so in love

with me when we were dating. The night he said, "You're gorgeous, but isn't that skirt just a little too short? I don't want other men ogling



'I felt so proud of all my achievements'

my girl," I felt like the luckiest woman in the world.

But after we got married, John became more and more demanding, criticizing everything I did—the way I folded laundry, how I dressed our children, my cooking. . .

"Why do you complain about everything I do?" I'd ask through my tears.

"If you did things the right way, I wouldn't be complaining," he'd always say.

All couples fight, I'd think. Besides, I kept telling myself, my duty was to please him.

Years passed. No matter how hard I worked to make things perfect, John picked it all apart.

"Your hair is too long. That's why men stare at you," he said one evening.

"But you always loved my hair this length," I said in confusion.

"Well, I don't anymore."

Before I knew what was happening, John grabbed the scissors and started cutting off my hair, until it dangled just above my shoulders.

That night I cried myself to sleep. But because I still blamed myself for not making John happy, my self-esteem deteriorated. I became depressed and started binge-eating.

"Look at you, you're getting fatter and fatter," I'd say whenever I looked at myself in the mirror.

The final confrontation

Finally one night, I snapped. John came into the kitchen and told me he couldn't pay our rent because he'd loaned some money to a friend.



"What about your family?" I screamed at him. "How could you do this to us?"

"Because I can do anything I want to do!" he yelled back, pulling the telephone out of the wall and throwing it down on my foot. Then he stormed out the front door.

I sank to the floor, grabbing my throbbing toe. *I knew* it was broken. I heard my children laughing and playing in the next room and thought: *I won't let my children grow up in an unhappy home.*

Words to ponder

"You may be disappointed if you fail, but you are doomed if you don't try."
—BEVERLY SILLS

A path to happiness

You just have to take it one step at a time

Starting over is a lot easier with a game plan, says Gail Blanke, author of *In My Wildest Dreams*. Here, her five step strategy:

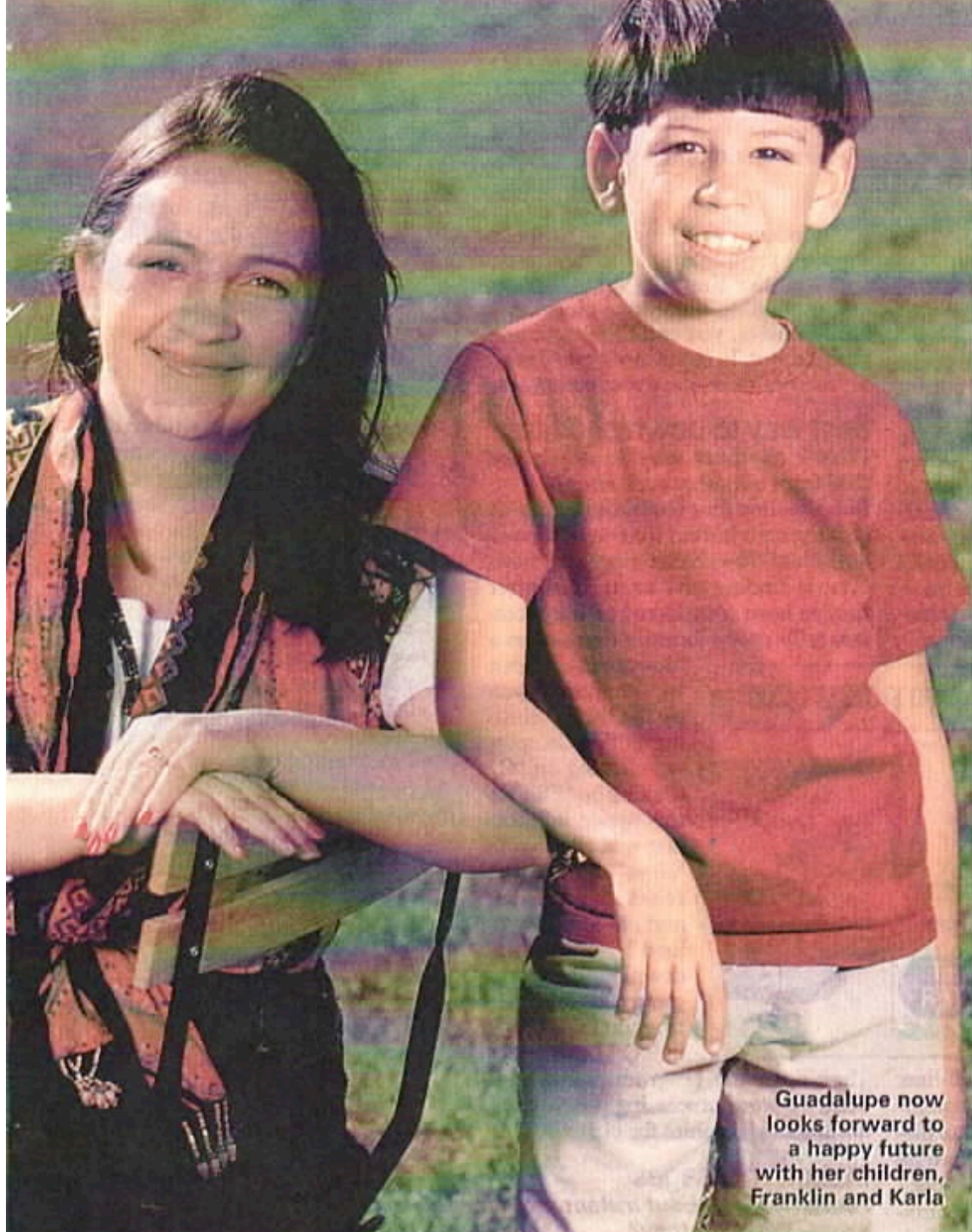
1 Make a promise Say aloud, "I've made a decision to change my life." Studies prove that when you begin to vocalize positive thoughts, you send a message to your subconscious mind, encouraging it to really take hold.

2 Find your passion Ask yourself, "What makes me happiest?" Draw a circle on a piece of paper and write down at random everything that excites you. This circle represents who you are: Your interests, dreams and hopes for the future.

3 Set goals Then, draw a mountain and put one of the items from your circle at the peak. For example, you might have written "dieting" or "working with children." Next to your goal, write a target date.

4 Plan in reverse Imagine yourself already living your goal. Then, ask yourself what you have to do to make this goal become a reality. Write your answers in descending order of importance under the peak of the mountain.

5 Record your accomplishments Every few weeks, jot down what you've done, such as joining a gym, to work toward your goal. "With each small step, you'll see yourself getting closer to the summit of that mountain!"



Guadalupe now looks forward to a happy future with her children, Franklin and Karla

I called a shelter I'd heard about and moved out that same night. As I dialed the number, I vowed: *I will do whatever it takes to make a better life for us.*

The road to recovery

The next morning, I saw an announcement for the Soroptimist International's Women's Opportunity Awards, a program that gives money to women in need so they can further their education. Tears welled up as I filled out

the application. "I'm a single mom," I wrote, "who's willing to work hard to give her children the life they deserve."

A few months later, when the president of the organization called to say I'd won \$14,000, I literally jumped for joy. That moment made the struggle worthwhile. I was able to give up my menial job and begin work on a degree in psychology.

If I hadn't put myself first, I wouldn't have the wonderful life I have today. My children

live with me in a beautiful home in a good neighborhood and attend one of the best schools in the state. I work as a professor's assistant while studying for my Ph.D. in criminology.

More important, I've become a role model for my children. By taking control of my life, I've shown them that anything is possible. You've just got to get out there and make it happen.

—GUADALUPE VIDALES
AS TOLD TO AMY CAPETTA