

"Natasha"
Queer Stories: Health Inequities in Colorado

My name is Natasha and this is the story of how I grew up and why I believe that due to the lack of money my family had growing up and my ethnicity in the United States, that I didn't receive the same level of healthcare that I know that I deserved when I was most vulnerable and needed it the most. Trigger warning to readers: my story involves statutory rape, teen pregnancy, and the obstacles I had to overcome to raise a child at 13.

I am 28, a millennial. I identify as a cisgendered woman and I am first generation Puerto Rican and Filipino. I was adopted, so it's really hard to pinpoint who my family is. I don't know what to say when people ask about my family trees, I have more of a family garden than a tree. I am bisexual, but so far all of my relationships that I've had with women have been kind of secretive and hidden. I haven't really come out to anyone yet and I'm still just trying to find some community to explore that.

I was born in New York to teenage parents. My dad was sixteen when I was born and my mom was nineteen; Completely unplanned pregnancy I didn't actually meet my biological dad until later in life when I was a teenager. I was actually their second child, so I have an older brother, and he is just a little bit over a year older than me. So I know that they were really freaking out about the first one, my brother, but somehow still had a second one, me. I am making a lot of assumptions, but I know that my parents didn't have much growing up and didn't have access to reproductive health resources, sexual education, or even anyone to provide them with contraceptives and explain why they are important. So, yeah here we have a sixteen and nineteen year old in New York, both immigrants, my dad from the Philippines and my mom from Puerto Rico. Pretty soon after I was born, my parents realized that they could not take care of us. So they decided to separate and my dad took my brother and my mom took me; She didn't want to be in the United States anymore, so we went to Puerto Rico, presumably to get away from everything that had happened in New York. Soon after arriving on the island, my biological mother put me up for adoption. She met my family, the ones that raised me, and she must have thought they seemed nice and stable and so she left me with them. I was never in the foster care system or anything. I just moved from my parents' apartment to a house with this family. I don't know how that worked exactly, but that's how I grew up.

When I was first brought into their lives, they were doing well financially, my dad owned a business, but I think around the time I was around three, they went into bankruptcy. That was really hard for them. They actually ended up turning to the church, as so many people do when they go through hard times where they just lose everything. So I actually had a really different childhood growing up compared to their biological children who were much older than me and had already left the home.

My parents became incredibly religious, Evangelical Apostolic Christians. My dad eventually became a pastor of a church, and that's basically where I grew up. For the longest time, that's all I knew, that's all I remember. My entire identity was based around the church and

being the pastor's daughter. We weren't wealthy, but in Puerto Rico, it's a very different feeling when you don't have a lot because there is a lot more community, especially when growing up in the church. I knew that we didn't have much, but I didn't necessarily feel like I ever lacked anything either. What I did lack was the sort of parents who looked out for my safety. I was sexually abused by many different men in the church and in my family. It was a lot, and I'm still dealing with the psychological scars that stuff like that leaves. My parents were well meaning, but they just didn't know any better. I look back now as a parent, a parent that has read about the signs of sexual abuse on your kids. It's hard to think about not noticing your kids going through those things. I have compassion for my parents; I think they were doing their best.

At the age of eleven, my parents decided that they wanted to leave Puerto Rico and move to the United States. There was very little planning involved. They chose a state where my sister, their oldest daughter, was living. So we moved in with my sister, and I was living there at the age of twelve, somewhere in the southwest. My parents didn't speak English, and neither did I. I started going to this middle school where it was really wealthy and really white. I was assigned to some kids who spoke Spanish to help me, but I started to feel like a burden to them. This change was really hard for me because I had always done really well at school in Puerto Rico. I started to fall really far behind. I found out that I was just not at the same level as the other kids my age, not just because of the language, but also because I didn't have the same level of education as the kids that I was going to school with; that was quite an adjustment.

Meanwhile, my parents had found a community in another church that someone recommended. That's where I met the youth pastor, Sam. He was really popular, about twenty years older than me. All the girls had a crush on him, but he paid attention to me the most. I was so glad that we had left Puerto Rico because although I was sad that we moved from a community that was so close and supportive, I also got away from all of those men who were constantly abusing me. Yet, here I was falling into the arms of a youth pastor who's paying attention to me. I disclosed all of my past trauma with men to him, and he made me feel special. In retrospect, maybe he was offering me something that I had not felt with my parents or something like that. I was eleven when all this started, he gave me a cell phone. That was the first cell phone I had ever had; it was a secret cell phone but then later on I think he convinced my parents to let me have it. He was paying for it after all, so I think that helped convince them to let me keep the phone.

I was always talking to him. It's crazy to think back and remember myself thinking that I was in love. You know, there was this man who's twenty years older than me, paid for my cell and brought me gifts. He just quickly integrated himself as part of the family. Honestly, I don't know why I didn't think there was anything wrong with this. In my head, we had a relationship. I started sneaking out of the house to meet him or he would come over to the house when my parents weren't there. I was on a track team but my parents never showed up for any of my races; He did, he was at all my races.

I felt really vulnerable at that time of my life. I had just moved from a whole different culture. I didn't speak the language. I was having a really hard time in school. I was having a really hard time relating to any of the kids because they were all mainly white and their families had a lot of money. Even at that age, I would look at them and know full well that these kids had never had to wonder where their next meal was coming from; this made us different. Here I was living in my sister's house, fresh from the island, sleeping on the floor for about six months. My dad, when he wasn't working at the church, he was a mechanic, but he struggled to find a job as a Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican in his sixties. It was a really difficult situation. Looking back, I realized that I just didn't have any support outside of the church; outside the youth pastor. I just felt so isolated. And it took me a really long time to look back and realize that I was a victim and what was about to happen was not my fault, I was a kid.

After about a year living at my sister's house, it got really difficult living there. So my parents decided to move out, with all the money they had saved since arriving in this country. They got us an apartment, but it was in a very scary part of town. I didn't feel safe but my parents seemed relieved to finally have a place to call home. There was a lot of crime and the police were constantly around. I remember feeling really bad at first. We had a few incidents where people broke our windows and it seemed like my parents were just unfazed by it. I came around eventually, my environment started to feel normal and I accepted that this is the only place we could afford.

I remember there was a moment where I got a small glimpse of an outsider's perspective of my living situation. One evening my mom couldn't pick me from track practice, so my coach offered to drop me off at home. It was late and the sun was going down so I accepted the ride home. As we pulled up to my house, I remember sensing that my coach was uncomfortable, she didn't feel comfortable leaving me there. She kept asking me, "Are you sure you live here?" "I can't leave you here. You're not safe here". I just had to laugh because I was like, "Yes I'm sure this is where I live. It's all good. Look, that's my house. I'm gonna go now." She probably just ran out of that neighborhood as soon as she could, because she was just so scared and couldn't believe that I lived there.

It wasn't a perfect place to live, but at least, we had some sort of independence that we didn't have when we were living with family. We struggled to get by and my parents were often out of the house trying to put food on the table. While they were out the youth pastor would come visit me. One day, at a track meet I remember feeling really proud because I had placed for state and I looked out into the crowd of parents as I crossed the finish line and my parents weren't there, but *he* was there. He offered to give me a ride back home, so I got in his car and that's when I got my first kiss; I think I was thirteen or twelve at the time, I don't know. Then that kiss led to more, and I lost my virginity to him in the back of his car. When I look back now, I know that this was clearly rape, a twelve year old cannot consent. But at the time, in my twelve year old head, feeling so isolated from everything and everyone, his attention felt magical. It was this kind of fairy tale. The "fairy tale" continued for a few months until I realized that I was pregnant. Realizing I was pregnant, it's kinda weird to say but it felt like a blessing and disguise. I'm not religious. I don't really believe in god or blessings or miracles. But I use that phrase

because I had been sexually assaulted by so many men and to me becoming pregnant meant that, this man, the youth pastor, was the last one. It felt like, finally I was free, this doesn't have to keep happening to me.

As soon as I told him, we confirmed it with SO many pregnancy tests. He then took it upon himself to figure out how I could have an abortion before it became evident that I was pregnant. So I remember taking all kinds of medicines and herbal remedies. It was disgusting. There are still certain smells that when I smell them, they just trigger something in me and I feel like I'm teleported back to that time in my life and it just makes me want to puke.

A few months went by until my parents found out about my pregnancy. I remember internally I was freaking out. I don't remember much of my middle school experience because the only thing on my mind was the fact that I was in eighth grade and pregnant. At some point, I felt like I just had to tell the parents. I remember I was sitting in bed watching a movie with my mom when I finally told her, and she started crying. She said she suspected something was wrong because I stopped asking her for any period stuff for a while now. She said she noticed small changes in my body, but I guess she wanted to stay in denial so she wrote it off as nothing.

Sometimes, I find myself thinking about how this all could have gone differently. What if my family had money? What if we were well-connected and respected members of our communities and had significant resources at our disposal? Would things be any different if we weren't brown and our English was more fluent? What if this had happened to any of the far more privileged white girls at my school? How would things have gone for them? I, like so many other daughters of immigrants, have to grow up fast because we have to help our parents with a lot of medical things and financial things. It puts you in a position when you're at an age where all a kid should be doing is hanging out with friends and doing kid stuff but instead you're maybe ten years older, mentally, because you're having to co-manage a household with your parents that speak less English than you and so you're exposed to so much stuff that matures you before your time. Even before being pregnant I was burdened with responsibilities I shouldn't have had. I was just a teenager, vulnerable, and just trying to figure out who I was and...yeah it was a lot.

I know what I would have done if I was in this position, now that I'm older and have the benefit of hindsight and experience navigating systems in this country. If it were my teenage daughter, who had gone through this, the initial conversation would have gone very differently than when I told my mom I was pregnant. With her the conversation went immediately into shame, guilt, and religion came into into it, and she was like "I told you not to have sex! I told you! Close your legs and don't pay attention to boys!"

And I guess that means I had to be asexual, because I did pay attention to girls, but I also felt like, you know, acting on those feelings wasn't really an option and I wasn't about to come out to my parents who demonize anything that is remotely gay or queer in anyway. So

couldn't be into boys and I couldn't be into girls and so I just felt like I was being expected to be this perfectly celibate asexual being. Which is not who I am and so living up those expectations was difficult.

So if this situation were happening right now with my daughter, there would be none of this guilt and shame around being a sexual person; sexuality is a normal part of being a human. We're sexual beings by nature. It's very traumatic for anyone to find out that they're pregnant when they didn't intend to be pregnant, even if you're an adult! So ideally if there was another 13 year old in this situation they would go to the hospital, see a doctor, confirm the pregnancy, and then I assume you talk about options but honestly I'm not sure because in my scenario I was not given an option. A thirteen year old, a minor, cannot consent to sex. Especially if it's with someone who's much older than them. You just can't. A child that young doesn't understand what they're consenting to. And so if I think about how this situation would have gone with my more privileged friends, I think the conversation would have gone very differently. First off, I think that guy would have gone to jail much faster, and secondly I think I would have been seen more as a child and more options would have been talked about at the hospital. This is the thing I have the most trouble wrapping my head around honestly. I went to the hospital with my parents and I was treated like an *adult*. I was treated like an adult by my parents because that's just a cultural thing where the adultification or parentification of me happened because I had to help them with so many things and was accountable for so many responsibilities around the house. They felt like they were having conversations with me as an adult. This happened on a regular basis, but the reality is that I was not an adult. I think because of this I felt like I had to behave and carry myself in this sort of way that maybe I came across as older or more mature than I actually was. So because I felt like and was treated by parents as an adult when I went into that doctor's office, I felt like I was treated, like an adult by the doctor. I don't know what the doctor thought. We never really had a conversation about how I would like this to go, or if I wanted to carry this child term, at the perfect age of thirteen. There was nothing like that, nothing on the sort. It was as if I was a twenty three year old walking in and saying, "hey, I'm pregnant! Let's go through the process, give me the vitamins. Let's talk about when the due date is and when I can find out the sex."

Being a pregnant 13 year old was probably the hardest thing I've been through because everywhere I went I felt like people looked at me with judgment in their eyes. They saw how young I was and then they saw I was pregnant. When I spoke they heard my broken English spoken through a Puerto Rican accent. I was brown and I was an immigrant; I feel like people assumed that I couldn't possibly be the victim. The level of maturity I displayed and the color of my skin caused people to assume that I knew what I had gotten myself into; that I was promiscuous. I was called a slut. I lost friends. I was shunned by people around me. I felt like I had completely lost my dignity and my self respect. I lost myself completely in that situation and I didn't feel like I was strong enough to stand up for myself. I have so much compassion for thirteen year old me, so I don't blame her, but I know that I was lost.

In an ideal world, a young pregnant girl like that would have at least been given the option to abort the pregnancy because of the circumstance under which the pregnancy

happened. To this day I don't even know if abortion was illegal in the state I was living in or if there was some other legal reason why this was not brought up. I don't want to look because I would just feel outraged all over again. I feel like ever since then, I've been having to fight the system at every step of the way.

I raised my daughter. She is now fourteen, and she's a cool kid. I love her very much. I still go back and think about this stuff, not because I don't love my daughter, I love her very much, but because so much was stripped away: my childhood, my teenage years, all of it. To this day, I struggle with things about myself like my sexual orientation because I didn't really have a chance to explore those kind of things when I was a teenager. So I feel for anyone who has been or is in my shoes; I mean ideally no one is having to give birth to a child under the circumstances that I was put through but I know that we don't live in a perfect world. My one wish is that, if I had to go through this all over again, I wish people would have been a little less ignorant, and had the grace and wisdom to understand that life is complicated; that situations like this are very hard and we don't all have equal access to the same educational, medical, financial, and legal resources. Not to mention the added barrier of being new to a country, not speaking the language, and having to navigate a new culture and all the systems in place, having to figure out this entire new life. It makes it damn near impossible to thrive and get ahead in life; instead we settle for just surviving and getting by.

The decision to have an abortion is difficult for anyone, but I strongly believe that the right to make that choice should be up to the individual and that all pregnant people should have that right. Of course, I had my kid, a child born out of statutory rape. My wish for other people, if they find themselves in a situation like mine that they be made aware that abortion is a valid option and that there are no moral judgements attached to that option.

I'm trying to leave a cycle of poverty that has been following my family for generations; poverty and mental health issues. There's so much that we're trying to overcome. There's so much that I personally was trying to overcome. So on top of all that work of breaking generational cycles, I had to be a thirteen year old kid raising a kid. I am stubborn and determined as hell, yes, but when people tell me that I'm amazing, I don't necessarily feel I deserve that compliment. I mean, sure, I'm determined, but I have had so many people come to my aid when I decided that I wanted to go college and that I wanted to do well in school. So in that way, I have been very fortunate. I've had families who have kind of taken me in as their kid and have paid for many things that I wouldn't have been able to pay on my own. So many advisors and teachers and friends stepped up when I said I needed help, and continue to even to this day. They say it takes a village to raise a child and this has been very true for me. I don't know where I would be if I didn't have my community, so full of compassion and kindness, to help me and my kid every step of the way. Thanks to them I've been able to get a high school degree, an undergraduate degree, a graduate degree, and soon I may even have a PhD! And I can say with 100% certainty that I would not have been able to do that alone.

I hate when people say things like "everything happens for a reason" or even worse "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger". Honestly, fuck that! If I didn't have to go through this,

things would have been so much easier. My daughter wouldn't have had to be raised by another kid. I didn't ask to be "tough", "strong", or "resilient". If there are other people out there going through what I did and there is an option to abort, I would strongly suggest considering that option. To people that now find themselves in states where abortion is illegal, I'm so sorry, that makes me sick. The government should have no say in what we do with our bodies; And if I'm being forced as a thirteen year old to have a kid, then I expect whoever is forcing me to have a kid, to provide everything that I need for my child's needs so that we don't have to struggle just to survive and instead we can focus on thriving and getting ahead in life like everyone else.

As far as the youth pastor goes, well he was sentenced to twelve years in prison. Police came to my house when my daughter was a few months old and they interviewed me, it was this whole process. I later found out that he had actually pleaded guilty to two counts of child endangerment. So he basically played the system, and he got a deal. That guy should never have been released, but he got out early, I think he only served ten years in prison and then got out on good behavior. I'm sure he's at another church somewhere, probably doing the same thing he did to me to somebody else; And he'll probably get away with it again.

So that's part of the reason why I chose to write this anonymously, under a pseudonym. I am generally a very private person. I am not on social media very often and I never post pictures with my daughter because you know, certain guys might try to get in contact with me or worse, with her. I've worked so hard to protect myself and my daughter and do everything in my power so that I can provide for us so that we can not just survive, but thrive. In a world that feels like voices like mine are silenced I would feel remiss if I didn't share my story when given the opportunity and so that is why I am choosing to put my story out there.

So that's my story, thanks for reading!