

In Her Own Words: Marissa Alexander Tells Her Story

BY JEANNINE AMBER · ESSENCE · MARCH 4, 2015

SENTENCED TO 20 YEARS IN PRISON AFTER FIRING A SINGLE SHOT TO SCARE OFF THE HUSBAND SHE SAYS ABUSED HER, MARISSA ALEXANDER IS HOME AND SHARING THE DETAILS OF HER HARROWING ORDEAL IN THIS ESSENCE EXCLUSIVE.



A single gunshot, aimed high at a wall and injuring no one, forever changed Marissa Alexander's life.

On July 31, 2010, Alexander, then a 29-year-old mother of three, returned to the Jacksonville, Florida, home she once shared with her estranged husband, Rico Gray, to collect some belongings. Gray, who had been arrested three times in the past on charges of domestic violence, showed up unexpectedly with his two sons from previous relationships. According to Alexander, Gray flew into a rage and threatened to kill her after seeing some text messages on her phone.

Alexander says she ran to her truck, but was unable to leave because the garage door was broken. She then retrieved her gun from her vehicle's glove compartment, went back inside and fired a warning shot into the kitchen wall. Gray left the house and called 911, telling the operator that Alexander had shot at him and his children. Alexander, who had given birth to the couple's daughter only nine days before the incident, was subsequently charged with three counts of aggravated assault.

Four months after the event, Gray gave a sworn deposition to the state's prosecutors in which he admitted to a history of physically abusing Alexander and other women with whom he'd had relationships. "I got five baby mamas and I put my hand on every last one of them except one," he said under oath. "The way I was with women, they was like they had to walk on eggshells around me. You know, they never knew what I was thinking or what I might do. Hit them, push them." In his 64-page deposition, a copy of which has been obtained by ESSENCE, Gray said his initial report to the police, in which he claimed Alexander had pointed a gun at him and his children, had been a lie.

A few months later, during Alexander's assault trial, Gray recanted his deposition, insisting he hadn't abused Alexander nor threatened to kill her, but rather that she had pulled a gun on him in anger and that he had "begged for [his] life." [Gray did not respond to repeated interview requests from ESSENCE.] The jury deliberated for less than 15 minutes and found Alexander, who had no prior criminal history, guilty. In May 2012, she was sentenced to 20 years behind bars, the mandatory minimum sentence in Florida for discharging a weapon. The harshness of her sentence set off a national outcry about the application of that state's Stand Your Ground and minimum sentencing laws, domestic abuse and, ultimately, race.

"The Florida criminal justice system has sent two clear messages today," wrote Florida Congresswoman Corrine Brown in response to the verdict. "One is that if women who are victims of domestic violence try to protect themselves, the Stand Your Ground law will not apply to them...the second is that if you are Black, the system will treat you differently."

Following the trial, State Attorney Angela Corey's office released a statement about the case to Florida lawmakers, which stated, "The cold, hard facts were that Alexander deliberately fired a gun toward Rico and his children."

For months, people protested, signed petitions and rallied. A "Free Marissa" Web site posted the support of over 150 state and national organizations, including chapters of the NAACP and the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Then, after months of intense legal wrangling, Alexander's conviction was overturned when a judge ruled the jury had been given incorrect instructions. Alexander eventually struck a deal with the state, pleading guilty to three felony charges of aggravated assault. She was sentenced to three years in prison, which included the more than 1,000 days she'd already spent behind bars. On January 27, 2015, she returned home.

On February 12, I sat with Alexander in her sunlit living room, where a "Welcome Home Rissa" banner and blue and yellow Mylar balloons hung. She shone brightly as she shared her account of alleged abuse and unshakable faith. Here, in her own words, is her story. —J.A.

Shot Fired

Before all this happened I was working as a client services manager at a payroll company, coming up on my tenth year. I really enjoyed what I did: It was challenging, intense and a good fit for me. I had twins from my first marriage and a great coparenting relationship with my ex. I met Rico Gray, the man who would eventually become my second husband, on a blind date in 2009.

Rico and I had a lot of chemistry. When our relationship was good, it was excellent. When it was bad, it was really bad. In the beginning, there was behavior I used to interpret as affection, like, He wants to know where I'm going and be with me all the time because he loves me. Suddenly, he turned into the kind of person who would clock me when I would just be going to the grocery store. Later that year, Rico beat me so badly I ended up getting a restraining order against him. But then we started seeing each other again. [Editor's Note: A criminal charge stemming from this incident was subsequently dropped after Alexander decided not to proceed with the case.] It's embarrassing. I'm strong and determined and I had never experienced a relationship like this. So every time something bad happened, I would rationalize it and give Rico the benefit of the doubt. Or we would break up and he'd come back looking like a puppy dog, all lovey-dovey.

In January 2010, I found out I was pregnant. Rico was on his best behavior, and we decided to get married, work on our relationship, and make things right so we could be a family. But our relationship was still very stressful.

When I was five months pregnant, I went into preterm labor. After I got out of the hospital, I went to live with my mother. My plan was to move my things out of the house I had been sharing with Rico. But I needed to be careful. I was leaving, but I couldn't tell him that I was. So I gradually took my things out, a little bit here and there, and I played nice.

When I was eight months pregnant, my water broke. Our daughter Rihanna was born weighing only 4 pounds, 12 ounces and was admitted to the NICU. I spent every waking minute at the hospital or pumping milk. Sometimes I would feed her, then sleep in my truck waiting for the next feeding. I was exhausted.

A week after Rihanna was born, it was time for her first bath. Rico was supposed to meet me at the hospital, but he couldn't make it. So I gave her a bath and took some pictures on my phone. I texted the photos to my ex-husband, who was in Orlando at Disney World with our twins. I wanted him to show the kids their new sister.

After that, I went to my old house to get more of my things. My sister was going to meet me there. I was surprised when Rico showed up with his two sons. But I thought, I'll just be cordial. I showed him the pictures of Rihanna on my phone. I remember saying, "Look, she's smiling." Then, after I left to go to the bathroom, he started going through my text messages. He saw that I had sent my ex-husband pictures of the baby and he lost his mind. I had never seen him that angry.

He started cursing at me through the bathroom door. Eventually, I was able to run to the garage and get into my truck to leave, but the garage door wasn't working, so I grabbed my gun and went back in the house. I was raised with guns. My daddy is a military man. He took all his girls to the range and taught us self-defense.

At first I thought Rico had left. When I saw him, it was like we startled each other. He said, "Bitch, I'll kill you." So I fired a warning shot into the wall above him. His children were not beside him; I assumed he had sent them out of the house and had come back to deal with me.

After he left, all I wanted to do was gather my things and get out of the house. I called my father and my brother to tell them what had happened. The whole time I was talking, I saw another call coming through, but I didn't pick up because I didn't recognize the number. Then my sister called. She was outside of the house. She said, "Rissa do not come outside. There are police out here. That's a police officer trying to call on your phone." I couldn't believe it. I was so scared. I got on the phone with the officer and said, "I'm coming outside. Please do not shoot me."

Harsh Punishment

I was charged with aggravated assault and ended up staying at the police station overnight, until my family could post the \$125,000 bond. By that time, my breasts were so engorged with milk, the first thing I did was ask the bondsman if I could pump in his back room. After that I was on autopilot. I would go from my mom's house to the hospital to see the baby, completely out of it. I was just trying to maintain so I could take care of Rihanna.

Florida has a mandatory minimum 20-year sentence for firing a gun and you can't get time off for good behavior. You have to do every single one of those days. You'd think that kind of sentencing is intended for violent offenders who use guns while committing crimes, not somebody who is protecting herself. It just didn't register with me that this was what I was facing. My attorney kept saying, "You do realize how serious this is..." but no, I didn't.

One day, while I was out on bond, Rico contacted my attorneys. He ended up giving a sworn deposition that corroborated what I'd told the police, saying I hadn't shot at him and his children. After that, the prosecutor was going to drop the charges. It was going to be all over.

On December 30, 2010, a few days before I was to appear in court, I needed Rico to sign some papers so I could put Rihanna on my health insurance. I went to his house and we had another incident. I ended up at the hospital with injuries on my arms from blocking his punches. He told the police that I'd injured his eye. I was arrested, my bond was revoked, and I was put back in jail.

During my incarceration, I was in frequent contact with my twins, through letters, phone calls and visits. I tried to be as truthful as possible about what was going on, but I knew they were hurting; it was like a bright light inside them had dimmed.

In the beginning, I saw Rihanna when my mama brought her to visit. Then one day the two of us were on the phone when suddenly I could hear Rico's voice. He had filed for temporary custody and showed up at my mama's house with a police officer. From jail I could hear my baby crying over the phone. I felt like I was dying inside.

Rico drives trucks for a living, so I didn't even know who was going to be keeping Rihanna while he was on the road. I had no control: I had no money, no power and I was physically bound. The only way I was able to cope was to tell myself that for that period of time I had two children, not three. I had to rely on the power greater than all to keep Rihanna safe. I had to give my child to God.

Higher Power

Before all this happened, I wasn't very religious. I went to church every now and then, but I never had to exercise those scriptures. For the first time, I dove into the Word. I learned it's one thing to read it and quote it. It's a whole other thing to live it, especially in captivity.

The scripture I knew would ultimately bring me home was Jeremiah 29:11–13: “I know my plans for you, to prosper you not to bring you harm. You would come and seek me and I would deliver you from your captivity.” That’s what I stood on. He said He can make the impossible possible. So I thought, I’m going to hold You to it. Show me. Make me a believer. He said He would set me free, and I believed that was going to happen.

My faith was really tested on March 17, 2012, the day I received that guilty verdict. I got back to my cell and just cried. I told God I was so angry and hurt, but I was going to trust Him anyway. Even though I was in an environment where I could see no sign of God whatsoever, I still chose to believe. Sitting there in my cell, I was suddenly inspired by the Holy Spirit to write down everything that had happened. For three hours I sat on my bed and wrote. When I was finished, I gave the letter to my family and my attorney and said, “Get this to anybody who will read it.” One of the first people I wanted them to contact was Nancy Lockhart, a woman I’d read about in an old issue of ESSENCE magazine I had found in jail. [Legal analyst Lockhart helped bring attention to the plight of Mississippi sisters Jamie and Gladys Scott, who had been sentenced to two life terms after being found guilty of an \$11 robbery. Their story was featured in the November 2011 issue of this magazine.] Ms. Lockhart put my story online—and that’s when people started coming out in support.

I was so overwhelmed when I began receiving letters from people all over the world. That encouragement, along with my lawyers, family and my best friend, Joyceline, who wrote me every single day, helped sustain me through my darkest moments.

Locked Up

After I was sentenced, I was taken to Lowell Correctional Facility in Marion County Florida, about two hours from where my twins were living with their father. I was a fish out of water. I figured the best thing I could do was to keep my eyes open and my mouth shut, ever listening, with my back against the wall. That’s how I survived. I stayed to myself and read my Bible. But as time went on, I grew to feel a lot of love and compassion for the women I met there. Sometimes I would help them with legal questions they might have had, or letters they were writing. Now that I am out of jail, I don’t take it for granted. I am on community control for the next two years, which means I have to wear an ankle bracelet and am only allowed to pick up my kids or go to school, work or church, so I am not able to do everything I want. But when the time comes, I will definitely do my part to advocate and help enlighten on behalf of those who are still incarcerated. I especially want to help women and young people.

These two years will not be wasted time. In the spring I am going to begin my studies to get my paralegal certificate at the University of North Florida.

Right now, my main priority is reconnecting with my children. I am living with my twins, who are now 14, and my ex-husband, Lincoln, who has been a great friend to me. Rico and I have joint custody of Rihanna, who’s now 4 years old. I’m waiting for our divorce to be finalized and working hard to reestablish the bond with my baby girl. My future is bright. I tell everybody: Reach for heaven, and if you get the stars, you’re doing pretty good. That’s exactly what I intend to do.

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