



TEENS TALK

MI BARRIO

The courage to tell: An incest survivor speaks out

She was her father's victim until a Dru Hill video showed her a way out. One teen's story of the ultimate betrayal—and how she reclaimed her life.

By Alisa Rivera

It's August 1997 and Jessica Vellón sits alone in a dark room staring at a flickering television set. On the screen is Dru Hill's *Never Make a Promise* video encouraging incest victims to speak out. One scene shows a father climbing into his daughter's bed and raping her while she clutches the sheets, weeping. He staggers out of the room when he's done, leaving the girl trembling in fear and disgust. The images are disturbing, but Jessica can't tear her eyes away because Dru Hill is telling her story.

"I thought I had no one to tell. But I found out I had so many people who cared about me."

— Jessica Vellón, 17

For two years, the fourteen-year-old has endured the same torture by her father, not daring to tell anyone about it. But watching the video gives

her a glimmer of hope. In the final scene, the girl tells her boyfriend (played by lead singer, Jazz) about the abuse and he carries her off to safety. "Maybe I could tell someone too," Jessica thinks.

She could and she did, first telling her boyfriend and then the police. Jessica's father was convicted of incest, rape, sodomy, sex abuse and endangering the welfare of a child. He was sentenced three to eleven years in prison. Two years later, Jessica, now sixteen, is sharing her story to encourage other young victims to speak out.

A CHILDHOOD OF PAIN

Even before the sexual abuse began, Jessica's childhood wasn't easy. Her father, German Vellón, was having a long-term affair with her mother, Yvette Rodriguez. Jessica is

They would go to work at 9:00 A.M. and return twelve hours later, leaving Jessica in charge of dressing, bathing and feeding her ten brothers and sisters (five of them were her stepmother's children, and five were her mother's). "I would go to school maybe two days a week," Jessica says, "We weren't allowed outside the house."

When her father was home, he never showed Jessica any affection, spending most of his time either ignoring or beating her. "I used to be the one to get hit," Jessica says. "The other kids didn't get yelled at because I took the blame for things they did so they wouldn't get into trouble."

THE TERRIBLE SECRET

Jessica's father began to sexually abuse her just days after her twelfth birthday. Family photos taken at the time show that Jessica was a tiny girl, less than five feet tall who looked more like a nine-year-old rather than a pre-teen. "One night my father just said, 'We're going for a drive,'" Jessica remembers. He parked his van on a street she didn't recognize then led her to the sofa bed in the back. "A lot of cars were passing," she says, "and I kept hoping someone would stop and help me." But no one did. When it was over, her father



JESSICA WITH THE DRU HILL GANG

their oldest child. "He was drunk a lot and abusive," Rodriguez says. "He used to beat me." Still, Vellón was able to go to court and win custody of Jessica when she was just two years old. While he and Rodriguez continued their relationship and had five more children together, it would be another eleven years before Jessica saw her mother again.

Jessica was only a baby when she went to live with her father and stepmother, but she soon took on the responsibilities of a grown woman.

silently drove Jessica back to the apartment. She agonized that night about whether or not to tell her stepmother, but decided not to. "I didn't think she would believe me," Jessica says.

The abuse happened almost every night and eventually escalated from touching to sodomy to rape. Her father warned her not to tell anyone. "I tried to seem as though everything was cool, and nothing was wrong," Jessica says, "but I felt kind of small. I didn't know what to do anymore."



THE TURNING POINT

The following year, Jessica's mother remarried and was able to regain custody of her children. But her father asked for visitation rights and continued assaulting Jessica during her weekend trips to his home in Queens. The only bright spot for fourteen-year-old Jessica during these weekend nightmares was meeting her boyfriend, Alfredo Delgado. "He doesn't drink or smoke," she says of the young auto mechanic. "He goes to work, pays his bills and helps out his mother." Jessica quickly fell in love with Alfredo, but didn't share her secret with him. "I wanted to tell him what was going on, but I didn't know if I should," she says. "I thought he might break-up with me."

Jessica's final weekend with her father was in August 1997. Her father tried to justify his behavior towards her. "He told me not to blame myself," she says. "He said he wasn't doing it to hurt me, but because I looked like my mother." Jessica stayed up late that night, watching television and trying to forget her father's words—then the Dru Hill video came on.

FACING HER FATHER

Jessica called her boyfriend the next morning and asked him to meet her at her father's home. They sat on the floor in a narrow hallway, and Jessica took Alfredo's hand. "I have something to tell you," she

whispered. "My father's touching me."

Alfredo asked, "Did your father rape you?" Jessica nodded yes. Alfredo immediately took Jessica home to tell her mother and stepfather. They called the police, and Vellón was arrested two days later.

"I thank God we were able to reach somebody, that we were able to help build her confidence and encourage her to come forward." —Jazz, Dru Hill

"I felt a little bit lighter after I told someone. I didn't have to carry so much on me," Jessica says. "But I was still afraid of my father even when they arrested him."

The case went to trial in February of this year. Jessica testified against her father in court. "I was scared and a little embarrassed," she says. "I didn't want to look at him." Her father's attorney suggested that Jessica was lying because she was afraid she was pregnant by her boyfriend. But the jurors believed her painful story, and he was convicted.

A reporter for a New York City newspaper who covered the trial, contacted Dru Hill after hearing Jessica's testimony about the video. "I thank God we were able to reach somebody, that we were able to help build her confidence and encourage her to come forward," Jazz told the newspaper. On March 18th, the group

surprised Jessica with a visit. They gave her free tickets to their *Enter the Dru* concert tour. One of Jessica's favorite keepsakes is her photo album of pictures taken with Dru Hill that day.

HELP AND HEALING

Although the abuse has ended, Jessica still has many obstacles to overcome. According to Prevent Child Abuse America, an advocacy group, victims of sexual abuse often struggle with depression, suicide attempts, school problems and feelings of rage. Jessica has attended a year of therapy to cope with these issues and still occasionally talks to a school counselor. Today, Jessica is looking forward to a brighter future. She is working on getting her general equivalency diploma and dreams of attending the Fashion Institute of Technology and becoming a clothing designer. She is still seeing Alfredo and spends most of her time with him or working on her computer. When asked what advice she has for girls who are being abused, she replies, with a mixture of wonder and relief that they shouldn't hide the truth. "I thought I had no one to tell," she says. "But I found out I had so many people who cared about me." ©

If you or someone you know is being victimized, call the National Domestic Violence/Abuse Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233), open 24 hours and with counselors in English and Spanish.