

SURVIVOR STORY: SHELLY

Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of FlyingFreeNow.com, and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 246 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today, we're going to meet Shelly, who was a member of Flying Free for two years, and she's been a member of Flying Higher for a year this month, I think. It'll be one year this month. And Shelly was married for how many years?

SHELLY: Eleven.

NATALIE: Eleven years, okay.

SHELLY: This recent time. I was married before that too, but.

NATALIE: Okay. And how long have you been divorced now?

SHELLY: Our divorce was final in February of 2022. So a year and a half.

NATALIE: Okay, a year and a half. Okay, so we're going to find out what her journey was like for her up and out, what that looked like, and at the very end we'll ask her what kind of advice she might have to offer those of you who are listening and maybe are on your own journey of discovery and healing. Okay, so, Shelly, why don't you tell us first of all, how and when... I don't know if you want to talk at all about your other marriage. Is it one other marriage besides this one?

SHELLY: I can give a little bit on that. I guess it helps for background. So I was married for five years that time. And if I had had any of this information at that time, my recent marriage never would have happened. But we had two daughters. We separated and then divorced when they were one and four. He was a cheater. And so that was another reason why I didn't really look into... I mean, that was just a symptom of the bigger problem, which I didn't realize at the time. People are more accepting, I think, of divorce when there's that kind of stuff going on.

And I forgave him the first time and then it had happened again. And the girls were so little and I was going to forgive him again because I just couldn't imagine living apart from my children part of the time, or the disaster and chaos that would bring into our

family. But then there was all this other stuff underneath and family things that I didn't even know about that came out during our separation and process. And he was just so awful during the separation process that I just... There was no question of forgiving and getting back together and going on like before. I just had to do the divorce and it was horrible, and I didn't learn quite enough. I didn't learn as much as I should have from that experience.

NATALIE: My guess is that you learned what you had at the time available to you, right? And that's all we can do.

SHELLY: Yep.

NATALIE: How are your girls now?

SHELLY: They're great. I feel so bad that not only did they have to go every other weekend with their father who was abusive, then I brought this other abusive man into their life that they had to live with the rest of the time for so many years. But they are doing so great now. They're twenty and seventeen now, and when I separated from my recent ex-husband, my oldest daughter was going off to college and my younger daughter came to me and said, "Can we change the custody agreement so I don't have to go out to dad's unless I want to?"

And because of all the things that he's done since then and her age — she must have been fifteen at the time — there was no reason for him to fight it. It would have been silly and expensive for him to fight it, and I guess he's still paying off his previous divorces. So we were able to get that changed. She has been with me full-time since then, and she does see him. Once or twice a month she'll go out and have dinner with him or even spend the night at his place, but they are just doing great now.

NATALIE: That's fantastic. Okay, so with this second relationship, when did you first start noticing that something was off with this one as well?

SHELLY: Not soon enough, but the night that we got married... So my girls were four and seven, and he had two older children that were twenty and fifteen when we got married. His first marriage had been, so he said, happy and great and blah, blah, blah. She died seven years before this, just tragically. The kids were fourteen and nine when that happened.

And he had just been a single dad and he'd been a really engaged, or so I thought, single dad and hadn't done any dating until I came along, but he's nine years older than

me and we worked together, so I had known him for a few years. And I always looked up to him as being this wise, mature person, and he had had this successful marriage. They were married for seventeen years, and I had been such a failure at marriage.

I had renewed my faith and had been working on learning, studying the Bible, and just learning more, growing my relationship with God, and I just really felt like this was like a blessing for my obedience that He had brought us together. And I think a lot of people who knew us really supported it too for the same reasons. They felt like it was just a really good fit and it would be wonderful.

But the night that we got married, we stayed in a hotel, and my best friend from high school had come to town and she stayed at our house. We didn't live together, but we had bought a house the week before our wedding, and she stayed at the house with the kids and she stayed up late talking to his son who was fifteen. And she called me the next day. We were going on a family moon, we called it, to Florida for the week after we were married. She called me as we were getting in the van to go to the airport and told me that the son had stayed up with her talking and had told her all about how abusive his father was.

And she was crying and she was upset and I was in total denial. "He's a teenager. He's kind of dramatic." He had these really vivid dreams that he would confuse with reality sometimes. And so I had all these ways of explaining away these little things that happened. And so I was like, "You know, he's just a dramatic teenager. It's just not true. Single parenting is really hard. I'm sure there were times that he lost his temper and the son is just blowing that out of proportion." And I had a laundry list of excuses for why that would come up.

NATALIE: And all of that makes sense. I just want to say all of that makes total sense. If you've never seen anything, how would you know what to go by?

SHELLY: He's very good at presenting his mask of the perfect Christian man and husband, and the perfect Christian man is humble, so he doesn't think he's perfect. Of course not. He sees others as being better than himself — all that stuff, which I didn't learn until later.

So the beginning, our marriage was like a fairy tale. It was so wonderful. I was so in love. That first year of marriage — having that infatuation and also living together and getting used to being married, it was so wonderful almost all the time. And then there would be little things that would happen. So I was expecting that we were going to have this mature relationship where we could come to each other, we could be honest and

authentic with each other, and we would work together through any problems or conflicts that would come up. And certainly, there'd be an adjustment period because we were both single parents who were used to living by ourselves and with children.

And so a lot of the little things that happened at first, I just blamed on him being used to being in a position of authority over the people in his house. He just wasn't used to being in a partner relationship where they were equals. And so if he was talking down to me or being condescending, it was just, "He'll adjust and we'll work through it. We'll talk through it." Yeah, none of that. If I had known DARVO, what DARVO is and what that means at the beginning of this marriage, I think I would have recognized that right away.

For anyone who doesn't know, it's when you come to your partner with a problem, they deny the problem, they attack or accuse you, and they reverse victim and offender. And oh my gosh, he is professional level at that. And I was so willing to accept any responsibility too because I felt like the deficient partner in the relationship, right? He was wise and mature so he must know. I really just looked up to him to know the right thing to do, and he had been studying the Bible and he was this really learned Christian, and I can't emphasize enough how much I trusted him and looked up to him and saw him as this wise, mature person who would know the right thing to do and that everything was going to be okay.

We would resolve any issues. There are always issues in any relationship, and so I wasn't concerned about that, but every time I would bring up even the smallest thing, I would leave the conversation just feeling like less than trash, like, "I am such a horrible person. How could I subject this poor, wonderful man to being married to horrible, horrible me who can't..." So that happened anytime there was any conflict.

Another thing that I have learned now that I didn't know that it was: word salad. When I read the description of that in the book on verbal abuse that I read, I just cried because there is a name for what he does. And he is very smart. He's just a brilliant man, and so he's very good with words. So any conversation we would have, I would end up so confused, like, "How did we get here? It's something so simple, and now we're talking about these things that happened before and things I don't even know if they happened." And it would get so confusing that I would just be like, "Okay, it must be me. I just am not smart enough to understand how to communicate." It oftentimes came down to me lacking in communication skills. That was a big one.

NATALIE: I think a lot of us were told that we didn't know how to communicate. But I'm pretty sure that everyone listening to this podcast understands what we're saying.

SHELLY: Right, yes, and that was something that was so helpful. There were a few things along the way also that pointed me to that our relationship was maybe abnormal or things were wrong. We would have great conversations. That's, I think, something people don't understand about abuse is the cycle of it, that we would go months and things would be wonderful, like absolutely wonderful. And I would think, "Wow, this is what marriage is supposed to be like. This is great. And thank goodness we got through that rough patch a few months ago."

And then a few months would go by and it would be so bad, like, nothing would go right. And I would think, "What happened? Just a few months ago we were in such a good place. Everything was great. How did it get so messed up?" And then it would go around again. Everything would be great for months, maybe even a year.

NATALIE: What were some of the things that would trigger the bad part of the cycle to start again?

SHELLY: I don't know. He's just a very atypical person, very introverted. He works overnights. And so if there would be something where he would have to go interact with people during the day, that would really upset him and he would take that out on us at home. I mean, he would never say that, but his mood would definitely change in the household.

So that was something that could kick off his... I called it "the shadow" in our relationship. Or the kids weren't doing... Like you've talked about them thinking their family are little Lego characters. I, towards the end, thought of it as like he's written a screenplay of his life and we are his characters. And if we don't follow the script, that's when he gets angry and tries to scare us back into our parts, playing the characters we're supposed to play, saying the lines we're supposed to say. And he's the star of the show.

NATALIE: I love that. That's a great analogy. And in that way trying to control each one of you guys. Interesting.

SHELLY: So I'm sure you know it's so difficult to explain any part of this. Any part of this has this huge, big background story. And I could talk for like two years about it, and if you haven't experienced it, you still wouldn't understand. So what set off those shadow times? It's complicated, and who really knows?

NATALIE: Yep, exactly. I was running into that issue even in writing my book and trying to explain... I'm not going to write a book about all the bad things that happened in my

last relationship, but how do you even just share a few? I had some beta readers say, "Could you give us some examples?" It's like, I could give you a couple of examples, and people would just go, "That doesn't make any sense," people who don't know it.

SHELLY: Right, or, "That's normal."

NATALIE: It's the whole package.

SHELLY: And I did forgive all those things. I'm not holding those against him from the past. It's, you asked for examples, but you give someone an example and they can explain it away: "Well, I'm sure it was just whatever." But I think the difference is that they don't take responsibility for it. If I lose my temper and yell at my kids, I feel bad about that and I will apologize. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have yelled like that. Even if I didn't get enough sleep last night or I'm not feeling good or whatever the excuses, I still shouldn't have yelled at you." I feel bad. I apologize to them. I know it was something on me that I wasn't supposed to do, and I think that is what's missing.

There is never any accountability, personal responsibility, self-awareness. He was so lacking in self-awareness. We would do these questions at the dinner table, like those little question cards where you can talk around the dinner table, and there would be questions like, "What's your biggest flaw?" or "What do you pray that God would help you with?" things like that, and he would always say "My laziness." And I'd be like, "You are the least lazy person of any of us."

He was very rigid in his exercise and counting his calories and never sleeping more than eight hours. And he was always studying and he didn't watch TV or sports or any of that. He's honestly the least lazy person you could probably meet. And I would just be like, "You're not being honest, and that isn't good for the kids to see that." I never did say that because we were all terrified of him because he was just so unpredictable.

NATALIE: That's interesting because you do need self-awareness in order to do repair work. He had self-awareness around maybe he had a propensity to be lazy when he was younger — who knows — but he had awareness around that and worked to fix it. But he refused to gain self-awareness around how his behaviors were impacting his family. And so then he wasn't working on it.

Okay, so what kinds of things did you try to do to fix it? My guess is that you weren't like, "Oh, well, I'll just get another divorce." Usually, by the second round, it's like, "Well, I can't get a divorce again."

SHELLY: Right. He had promised to do whatever it took to make our marriage great. He had made these promises and he had them posted on the wall in our closet and read through them every day. And he would mark with a little bookmark which one he was working on this week. It was things like, "I will never turn away from you" and all these great.... The act that he put on was awesome. If he was that person all the time... No one's perfect. It wouldn't have been perfect. That's not what I mean.

I mean, it would have been a good, healthy marriage of two, garden-variety sinners. From that podcast, "Engaging With Someone Who Has Harmed You," he talks about the differences between the garden-variety sinner, and then I think he has, like, evil people and wicked people. So when you try to talk about these incidents, people think you're talking about garden-variety sin, and it's like, no, it's not those little selfish things we all do. It's not that. It's different.

NATALIE: Yep. So you probably felt like you had to fix it somehow, and so what are some of the things you did? It didn't work!

SHELLY: I read lots of books on communication, I did Bible studies on relationships. I actually even ended up in the mental hospital in an outpatient program because I would go to him with these things I wanted to talk about or change or whatever and we would just go around and around again and again, and he could never seem to understand what I was saying. He would always twist it into something else, and those things were building up.

So this was probably our third year of marriage, maybe. I was just so weighed down by the anxiety of everything. I had these chest pains and I felt like this huge weight on my shoulders of all these unresolved issues, like my head was just filled with black clouds. I was always just grumbly, and finally, I couldn't get through to him anything that was going on. And I wasn't suicidal or anything, but I did want to get away — I wanted to escape. I wanted to run away to the woods and never come back.

And so I went for an evaluation at the mental hospital and did this outpatient treatment for a month. And I started on medication for anxiety and we started seeing a counselor, the two of us together, and she was great, or so we thought. We both loved her, and I was just totally oblivious to anything at this time. I thought it was all me. And so we went to counseling, and he is the world's best counseling patient. She, the counselor, just loved him. She, I bet, wished that all her patients were as wonderful as him, especially the husbands who are usually reluctant to go to counseling. No — he knows all the words, he's read all the books, so he knows all the things to say.

We had several issues we just couldn't work through, and the first one, I talked through it, and as long as she was in the room, he could hear me. So I talked through one of these little things we were having with his older daughter and Bible study, and he was like, "I 100% agree with you." And I was just like, "We have been fighting about this" (well, we never fought) "arguing going round and round about this for three months. If you had just listened to me, you would have agreed with me." So there were a few smaller things like that that we were finally able to work through just because when she was there, he had no excuse for not hearing what I was saying because I'm actually a really good communicator. Shocker.

NATALIE: You know what else, too? That is a perfect example of gaslighting in a counseling session. Because he's acting like he totally gets it now and is on the same page with you when that's not actually the reality of the situation up until that moment. He's gaslighting the counselor, really, and kind of you, too.

SHELLY: Yeah, I didn't know that term either, and I never would have suspected that this man who said that he loved me and our marriage was wonderful and he was always very positive about everything... But yeah, he had the counselor wrapped around his finger. And then I was seeing her individually sometimes too, and I would just bawl, and I was just terrified to get the words out for these situations and that she didn't notice.

And I said things like, "He doesn't seem to see me as a real person, and he doesn't seem to hear what I'm actually saying. It's like he's got this script in his head of what I said, and it's always evil." Like, I would be saying one of our problems was his older kids would come over — because his daughter got married — so they would come over for dinner a couple times a week, and it was great. We had a good time and I liked them coming over, but it was a lot of work for me: meal planning, shopping, preparing the meal, and then we would eat, and then his rule was we all had to clean up. We all had to work together to clean up.

And I suggested, "Maybe we could leave the kids to do the dishes and clean up the kitchen, and you and I could go for a walk after dinner and spend some time together." And every time I tried to talk to him about that, he would twist it into me saying, "I want the kids to be my slaves and do all the work." And I would be like, that's not anywhere near... I'm doing all the work." And he was doing the work of going to work to make the money that bought the food. So I felt like we had done our work. Let's have the kids do some work. Anyway, that was just a silly little thing.

NATALIE: Yep. That's a great example that illustrates that.

SHELLY: I was trying to work together. I thought I saw him as my partner and I thought he saw me as his partner, but he didn't. We were always adversaries in his mind.

NATALIE: Okay, so when did you decide, "I want to get out. I can't do this anymore, and I don't care. I'm going to figure this out and get out"?

SHELLY: Well, the pandemic happened. He worked week on/week off overnights, and the first few years of our marriage, I was working too. I also worked overnights on opposite nights that he did because we had the same job, basically — we just did it different nights. And after our son was born, I gradually worked less and less. And then I became a stay-at-home mom after four or five years of marriage, maybe. So we had this week on/week off cycle where he would go to work at nine o'clock at night, and then the kids and I could relax and be ourselves.

Then he would have his week off, and depending on where we were in the cycle, sometimes it was great and we had a lot of fun, and sometimes it was not. There was a lot of walking on eggshells. So the pandemic happened, and then the kids were home. We were all home in the house all the time, and I had coped by sort of pretending it was not happening. I tried and tried and tried to do all these things, and nothing worked. It only seemed to make it worse. I'm working on myself and it's not getting any better, so I just kind of ignored it and just closed off more and more of myself around him because that was what seemed to make him mad was me being me, and so I just kind of stopped being me.

And then the pandemic happened and I was trying to do the distance learning with the kids at home. And if he was around, he was interfering, and it just escalated. It was like a magnifying glass on the shadow in our house. It just became huge. And like I said, I had bought all these books on communication and stuff, and I was trying to resolve my family of origin issues, which were supposedly the source of a lot of my problems.

And one of the books I had picked up was "The Verbally Abusive Relationship" by Patricia Evans, but I'd had this book on my shelf for ten years. And for some reason, I picked it up and wow — mind blown. She talks in there about the two realities, that the partners are living in two different realities. One is in the reality of power-over and the other is in the reality of mutuality, of a mutual relationship. And they both think that they're both in the same reality, and they're not and they can't see.

And it was like, ka-chunk. These puzzle pieces all just fit together as I looked at our past. It made so much sense. If you looked at all the things that had happened from that kind of reality, through his eyes, then so much confusion was cleared up. I had been beating

my head against the wall. This is why I didn't understand because we were never partners. He always saw me as inferior to him. He just knows that you don't say those words as the perfect Christian man. So you say that your partner is your partner and you're equals, and in fact, they're better than you because consider others better... He had these Bible verses that he would quote all the time.

So that was a big thing, reading that book. And I had confronted him about.. Things were just getting worse and worse. We had a weekly date. First it was a night, and then when the kids were in school, when our son started school, we started having it during the day. And we had a marriage journal where we would ask these questions every week. And one of the questions was something like, "Do we have any unresolved conflict from the past week?" And I could never answer that honestly. I could never answer any of the questions honestly, really. One was, "What are your highs from the week? What are your lows?" and if I ever said any lows, well, there was big trouble because we can't ever have any lows.

And so I just realized that it was ridiculous that we were pretending to have this relationship and it just wasn't real. And I just did not want to live that way. And so I thought, "I'll confront him and it will be horrible. We'll have this chaos, but eventually we'll work through this all and we'll come out so much better on the other side with this mutual, wonderful relationship the way it's supposed to be with normal problems and not what we actually have."

And so I made the mistake that I think a lot of women make: I told him that I thought he was abusive. And at first, for about thirty seconds, he was like, "What do I do?" And I was like, "I think you need to see someone and work on this." And I had such hope that... He had always promised that he would do anything to make our marriage better, to make our family great. And so I had full expectation that he would get help and it would be really hard, but we would get through it together.

So that was the beginning. That was December 2020 when I started waking up to what was really happening, that it actually wasn't me. And I was looking through my journals a little bit before this meeting, and that is my main question: "How much of this is me?" And he would say I'm so hard to deal with and he just doesn't understand me. He's trying so hard to understand me all the time. If only he could understand my love language. And he would describe what it was like to be in relationship with him.

And now I know how much people like this project and that it was projection that he was doing, but at the time I was, "Sure, I'll fix it." And he told people that suddenly he was having to walk on eggshells, and I was thinking, "But the kids and I have been doing

that with you for ten years. Nobody cares about that." So that was when he ordered the books on BPD. I talked about that a bit in the forum.

NATALIE: So BPD, just for listeners who don't know, is borderline personality disorder. And that is a very typical thing that gets thrown back in survivors' faces, that they have borderline personality disorder. But the important thing to understand about that diagnosis... Which, by the way, your husband can't diagnose you with that. You have to see a psychiatrist for that.

SHELLY: It was his family doctor that diagnosed me that has never met me. He told his family doctor that he'd been walking on eggshells and he suggested, "Well, maybe she has BPD, and you should read these books."

NATALIE: So did that doctor meet with you and did you do a full psych workup?

SHELLY: No.

NATALIE: Okay, so then they shouldn't diagnose you with that.

SHELLY: It's hard to know exactly what he did say.

NATALIE: So if you look at the symptoms of BPD and complex post-traumatic stress disorder, there's some crossover in symptoms. And I just want people to understand that because if you go out and Google it if you feel like you're going crazy in your relationship, you're going to see some of those symptoms of complex post-traumatic stress disorder. But some of those same symptoms show up in borderline personality disorder as well.

The difference is that once you're out of that toxic environment and you're no longer being triggered like that, your symptoms will begin to dissipate, whereas if you have borderline, if you truly do have BPD, you have that for your whole life and you will have had it long before the relationship ever started. You will have struggled with those symptoms your whole life and you will continue to struggle with them. So anyway, I just want to clarify that.

SHELLY: Right. And I talked to my counselor about it and I talked to my daughter's counselor about it because she happened to have one of the books on her shelf when we were meeting with her, and they both pointed out that if that's what it was, I would have issues in other relationships or areas of my life, like my job or my friends or anything else. And I didn't. It was only this one relationship... I mean, well, my family of

origin — I have some relationships that are problematic, but again, at work I've never had any of these problems, with my friends I haven't had any of these problems.

But I was all on board with “Maybe this is the problem.” I was okay with that because I was willing to get help. Like, “I want to do whatever. Check me into the mental institution. I'll stay there for years. And I just wanted to stop hurting the kids. If it's me, if there's something I can do, I want to do it. I had no pride about it. Okay, BPD? Great. Maybe that's what the problem is. Let me fix it,” but that's not what the problem was. So I had Googled and looked at the books that he... And I was like, “It just doesn't sound like me. I just can't see myself or fit myself into any of that.”

NATALIE: Which makes you feel even crazier, right?

SHELLY: Yes. I just don't really think about that time so much now, but yeah. There was a lot of highs and lows, ups and downs, just feeling totally crazy, like, “I must be crazy — what am I doing? And everyone is so supportive of him — how can all those people be wrong? Because they know me. They don't really know him because nobody really knows him. He doesn't really go out and have relationships like normal people do.” But I did. I was involved in church. I worked in a confirmation program. I was building this, so I thought, community. We had a small group. And so I had these relationships, I thought, that were built to help us. If another couple in our small group was struggling in their marriage, I would want to jump in and help, like, “What can we do to help?”

NATALIE: Yeah. Can I just jump in and say something really quick here? Because this is just a strategy. I see so many survivors, especially towards the end when they're trying to get help, trying to explain things. They're an open book, just completely honest, making themselves very vulnerable. They're basically opening up their heart to everybody in hopes that everyone will see the problem. And you said, “But they don't know him.” They don't know the abuser because the abuser is a closed book, the abuser is hiding.

So the strategy is, those of you who are listening, you can do this or not, but if I had it to do all over again, I would totally do this instead of what I did, instead of being vulnerable and opening myself up: I would offer no explanations for anything. I would offer no information about anything in our relationship. I would simply say, “I'm getting out of this relationship,” and if people said, “Well, you can't do that,” or “What are you doing wrong?” or whatever, I would just be like, “I cannot tell you. It is so painful. I cannot say anything.” That's all I would do. I'd be very cryptic because the less people know, as you can see, the less people know, the more they're supportive and will jump to these better conclusions than if you're freaking out and being all, “You got to help

me. You got to help me." They're going to go with the person who's being very cryptic and not really saying anything.

That's not abusive to be like that. It's just basically saying, "I have my own boundaries. This is not your business. Whether or not I separate or file for divorce is nobody's business but mine and maybe a few very close friends that have shown me over the course of many years that I can trust them and they have my back. And that's it. The rest of you can just sit and wonder what's going on. You can judge me, you can think whatever horrible things you want, but this is what I'm doing."

SHELLY: Yeah, they won't understand. No matter how much time, how many words you pour out trying to explain it, they won't understand unless they have lived it. Even the people who have lived it, they have their own issues. They might be jealous that you think you can get out and they don't feel like they can get out.

NATALIE: Yes — oh my gosh. I'm so glad you said that.

SHELLY: Yeah, I've seen that too. There's that meme where it's trying to explain — is it covert abuse or narcissistic abuse? — to someone. And it's the big chalkboard with all the formulas on it, and it's like, yes, I could talk about this for years and if you haven't experienced it, you just wouldn't believe that someone would do that, would be like that.

So I think when we were talking about how did I realize, it started with reading that book. I confronted him and all that. He started sending me emails. He started sitting at the kitchen table and typing out these eight-page-long things of this and that and basically why it was all my fault and not his. And I eventually just started deleting his emails because they were just words.

NATALIE Word salad.

SHELLY: Yes, and that's what he always did was just drown me with these words, and they don't even make sense. And so there was that. He started seeing a counselor and one of my requirements for us ever getting to marriage counseling again was him having years of abuser treatment and me talking to the counselor to make sure he was being honest about what was happening.

And so he started seeing this counselor, and he was not honest about what the problem was at all. He showed up to our first date day after his seeing his counselor, and he had this list he wanted to talk to me about, and I don't remember what the first

thing he said was, but I was like, "Well, but that isn't the problem," and he stopped talking then. He didn't say another word to me for the rest of lunch. And in the past, I would have been terribly wounded and I would have tried to manage his feelings and all the things. And I just enjoyed my lunch.

NATALIE: I love it. You were detaching. That's so amazing.

SHELLY: Yeah. And so I did meet with his counselor first and talked to him, and he's a very sweet man. He really is a humble Christian man. And in our town, there's a counseling center that is Christian. They're not those biblical counselors you hear about — they're actually licensed counselors who also happen to be Christians. And so a lot of people from our church and stuff go there, and that's where my counselor was too, and she talked about leaving him and getting a divorce the first time that I saw her, so I was like, "Oh, okay."

But she had experience with that these guys, they don't change. Of the hundreds of women she had counseled, she knew two guys who had actually done the work and changed, and it was only after they got divorced. So one was divorced for five years and one for three, and they had gone through the whole "come to Jesus: moment, and it was like a crisis of faith, and then they did the hard work of becoming a safe person, and then they started dating again, and then they got remarried after years.

NATALIE: Wow.

SHELLY: But she said 99% of them will not change. So that had happened in December. In February, we had another confrontation where he brought me something for Valentine's Day, and he had, previous to that, accused me of never saying "thank you" when he brought me gifts. And I was like, "That's really strange because that's not me. I'm not an ungrateful person." And a lot of times he would like come home from working overnight and we wouldn't be up yet, so he would leave it for me to find. So I wondered, "Is he thinking about those times, or is it just this person he's created in his head?"

Because that's the thing about a person like this, is you're only as good as your last interaction with them. Even after eleven years of marriage, we don't have anything built because you're not a real person, so he doesn't build this understanding of you. So if he wants to see you as evil, then you're evil, no matter what you've done for the last ten years. And so that's suddenly now I'm evil all the time, whereas before I had only been evil every now and then when he chose.

So in April, we both started seeing counselors, and his had no clue what was actually going on. In May, since it was the end of the pandemic, my sister, her husband, and their son came and stayed with us for a while. They had moved several states away for her job. And I kind of warned her, "Things aren't the greatest here. I don't know if you want to stay here," but their son is medically fragile. He has needs for counter space and a bathroom attached to their bedroom for their cares that they do for him. And so our house was just really the only relative they had that was set up in a good way to take care of him. And they hadn't been home during the whole pandemic, so a long time. So they stayed for three weeks because she was a professor, so she was off for the summer.

And while they stayed with us — they'd sort of used our house as a home base and went and saw people and stuff — three whole weeks, there were no incidents, and we did a lot of the things that usually set him off. We watched movies and people talked during the movies. He did not have a tantrum. There were background things going on or people spoiled what was going to happen in the movie, and all these things were very important to him. And three weeks we went with no tantrums, no nothing. And it really brought home the fact to me that he knows what he's doing. He knows it's wrong and he is totally in control of it.

He had always said — we talked about his anger hundreds of times over the ten years — and he would always say, "Oh, I have this dad scowl. I have this dad scowl. It just makes me look angry when I'm not," or, "I have a dad voice, and so I sound scary," or whatever. And funny how none of that came out the whole three weeks that they were there, and it had never been that long before going without a thing. So I just realized, "He's lying. He's lying about all of it. He knows he is using his anger to scare us to control us, just like I thought, and it's not me."

So that was in May, and it was in June that I finally moved out. From December to June, this time he was supposed to be getting help and blah, blah, blah, he was just totally focused on me. He was writing and journaling all these things, everything I did and said or didn't do, didn't say that he thought I should. And finally, I was just like, "Okay, I'm going to move out for a few months because you can't seem to stop focusing on me and what I'm doing. And you need to focus on you and what you're doing."

None of my friends were supportive of us separating because we weren't in-house separated. We were still in the same bed, as they called it. And just the way our house is set up, I just couldn't see a way for us to do it in our house that wouldn't... Because one thing he had always done to punish me when I wasn't behaving was he would suck the kids towards him. He would Hoover the kids into him. So if I wanted to spend any time

with the kids, I had to spend time with him. I couldn't have the kids without him. So he would be like, "We're going to watch a movie. We're going to buy these snacks." He is a total Disney dad all the time. And so he would just do that and it would be like, "Okay, I can choose... If I try to distance myself from him, he sucks the kids to him so that I have no choice." So that was another reason I just wanted to move out.

And I just didn't feel safe. He mentioned doing what they call "nesting" where the parents take turns staying at the house with the kids, and I was like, "No, I want at least one locked door between us." I did not feel safe around him knowing how much he had been lying for so long about so many things. Obviously, there's all this other stuff that came up and things that he had lied about and like, "What is true? What of anything of our life is true?" There's just a lot of these mental and emotional crises as you're going through this.

NATALIE: Tell us what... Because I know you had a small child between you two, correct?

SHELLY: Well, he was nine by this time.

NATALIE: Okay, so what happened with him once you moved out?

SHELLY: When I moved out, I assumed it would be temporary. I still was assuming that he would get help and we would stay married and everything would work out eventually. And so I just went with the week on/week off schedule so he would have our son when he wasn't working and I would have him during his work week, so it was week on/week off.

In hindsight, I maybe would have done that a little differently. It's so hard. Deciding all that kind of stuff is so hard. So I just assumed he was coming with me half the time, and so he had a bedroom. I moved into an apartment, and I know it can be dangerous to leave the house, but I didn't see him doing any of that. He's very atypical, I should say, of a guy whose wife is leaving him for being abusive when it comes to that sort of stuff. I didn't foresee there being any trouble with that. And there wasn't.

So we did week on/week off, and of course, my daughters came with me. And when I did move out, I took everything I would want just in case. If things didn't get any better, I didn't want to have to go back while he was there and pack up the rest of my stuff or separate the rest of the stuff. Coming in as two adults who had already had separate adult lives, it made separating things probably easier than it is for a lot of women. But I went through our storage room and I took my Christmas ornaments and everything so that I would not have to go back if things didn't get any better. And they didn't.

NATALIE: Okay, so during this time, I think you joined Flying Free.

SHELLY: I joined Flying Free in April of 2021, which is right about the time I had read "The Verbally Abusive Relationship" and I had started seeing a counselor. The first counselor I saw was just by Zoom because it was in the pandemic, and I didn't really like that. I just didn't feel like I could talk freely in the house. I was always so afraid of him, and so I really wanted to see someone in person, and then the next month is when I got in with the counselor in person. But that's another thing that made me realize it was time to get out.

It was Easter weekend and it was his work week, so he was at work that weekend, and the weekends that he worked the girls were with their dad, so it was just me and our son. And I'm driving through the neighborhood and all the other houses have all these cars in front where these families are getting together for the holiday, and not at our house. Our house was like a black pit of nothingness because he had pushed his older kids away. Once he had me as his supply, he didn't really need them anymore, and so the oldest one moved away, and then the younger one, he had an apartment in our town, but he never... Not even for holidays, he never would come over, not at all.

NATALIE: This is the one that talked to your friend before you got married?

SHELLY: Yes. He is very aware of what his dad is really like. There was never a big blow-up or anything where he's like, "I'm not going to talk to you anymore." He just wouldn't come over. He would just be like, "Yeah, things are going great."

NATALIE: Smart kid.

SHELLY: He went no-contact without really making a big deal about it. And I just saw our house as like this black pit. And as the kids get older, he's going to push them all away, and I'm going to end up here alone with him in this black pit. And no, I did not want that. I was just waking up to everything else and I just joined Flying Free, and the forum was so helpful to me because suddenly there are all these people who understand what I'm talking about. I'd been talking to myself blue in the face with my friends, and they just didn't get it. And here are all these women who get it. Not only that, there was someone who talked about her husband comparing himself to... Is it Hosea that has to marry the prostitute in the Bible?

NATALIE: Mmmhmm.

SHELLY: And I was like, "Oh my gosh, my husband does that too." Marrying a divorced

woman to him was like Hosea having to marry a prostitute.

NATALIE: And he's the hero, right? And you're the used goods.

SHELLY: And then another woman said her husband did that too. So there were three of us who had that same, weird, specific... And it was just another assurance that it isn't me. And all this struggling I've been doing all these years to try and make things better has just been banging my head against the wall because it isn't me.

NATALIE: Yeah. So how did the programs more specifically help you as you walked through your divorce process?

SHELLY: Right. Well, for those that don't know the Flying Free program, there's the forum where you can talk to other women who are in lots of different places along the journey, and some of them are staying, and that's always a choice too. You don't have to join the program if you're leaving your husband. You can join the program and just find better ways to stay safe with your husband. So the forum, and then the classes. I had been through a divorce before, but the divorce class was still really helpful for me and just identifying abuse. I think so many people think they know what abuse is, and they do not. It's not the incidents. It's not the black eyes or the holes in the wall. The physical violence is just one of the tools that abusers use. The abuse is the entitlement that someone feels to control someone else.

And I never would have called what I was going through "abuse." Never, never, because he did physically threaten me a couple of times, but he never actually hit me. And so just learning through the classes what abuse actually is, what it really looks like in real life, and just why it's so hard for other people to understand.

One of their ways of controlling you is keeping you off balance and confused. They are purposely trying to confuse you because it keeps you under their control. And they just feed off that chaos for some reason. I don't understand it, but that was really helpful. And also getting access to other resources, like that video from Bob Hamp about abuse that's in one of the first classes. It's an hour long, but it was such a good, helpful explanation of the dynamics behind abuse, what it really is, what it really looks like. And I shared that with some friends, and I don't know how helpful it was to them.

But for me, that was so helpful to access learning about other resources — I think it's so helpful for anyone who's in this situation. You feel so alone and you try to talk to "normal" people, and they all give this terrible advice of like, "You should go see a counselor." But then when you read about people who actually understand abuse, they

say, "Don't go to a counselor with an abuser. It only will make it worse." And boy, is that true.

NATALIE: Yeah. Okay, so then you got your divorce. How long did it take from the time you filed until you finished?

SHELLY: A month and a half.

NATALIE: What? Okay, that is unheard of.

SHELLY: I said that he was atypical, and he really was. I think he puts on that mask of the perfect Christian man, and the perfect Christian man would never try to screw his wife in divorce. He would give her a great divorce. And so that's what he did. Just getting the lawyers... Having any other person around to witness what was going on made him totally mask up and be perfect. And so having two lawyers involved, he had to be perfect.

And I had learned from my past divorce that no matter what you do, people will criticize you and they'll say things that aren't true. And so this time I was going to get what my fair share was. I was not going to try to... All the things I did before, giving him everything just so I could get away. I'm not doing that this time. I had asked several times over the eleven years we were married to put — I was a stay-at-home mom for seven or eight years — put retirement in my name. And he would always say, "We don't need to do that. We have enough in my name for both of us. It's no problem." And so I was going to take my fair share. I gave up all these years of my prime earning years to be a stay-at-home mom and to support him and our family. And I loved it. That's not anything bad, but I think I took what was, I felt, my fair share. And I'm sure a lot of people wouldn't agree with that.

NATALIE: Well, I think there are people in the forum, even, that have expressed, who are going through divorce and are like, "Well, I feel so guilty if I take what's my fair share."

SHELLY: Keep your fair share. Be as fair to yourself as you are trying to be to him.

NATALIE: Exactly.

SHELLY: No one is going to treat you that way. You have to treat you that way.

NATALIE: Right, right. I always tell people, think about what you would want for your

daughter. If your daughter was in a relationship like this, would you want her to get her fair share, or would you tell her, "You should feel really guilty for wanting to get your fair share. I think you should give more to your abuser and you should do with less"? We would never say that to our child, but we say that to ourselves because we just view ourselves as not worthy of having what we worked for.

SHELLY: Yeah. And I think we're trying to avoid the people saying the gold digger stuff, especially since he was forty-five and I was thirty-six when we got married. And so I'm sure there was a lot of that. You don't stay with someone for eleven years and plan to grow old with them... Anyone who says anything like that, it's not true, and I know that deep down in my heart, so I don't care what anyone else says, but I did care before, and it didn't matter. It didn't matter that I took all the debt, gave him all the assets. He still told everyone that I screwed him and blah, blah, blah. And so I was like, "This time I'm just going to do what's best for me — what's fair for me."

NATALIE: What's just and right. A fair settlement.

SHELLY: Whoever wants to say whatever, good for them.

NATALIE: That's amazing. So this brings up a good point as far as the fact that your husband, his flavor of abuse was, if you profiled him, he's the guy who's going to show up and do what makes him look really good to everybody else. And so when you know that, when you really know the flavor of your husband, you can actually use that and strategize with that when you're coming up with a settlement agreement or you're figuring out custody or whatever.

I actually updated the divorce course since you've been in Flying Free, I completely renovated it, and one of the classes now in there is basically profiling your abuser so that you can figure out based on the past and what you've observed of him over the course of however many years, how is he most likely to show up in a separation or in a divorce, and then how can you strategize based on the most likely scenarios that you might come across? So knowing that about him really played out in your favor. And I think it's amazing that you were able to get divorced in a month and a half.

Okay, so now you've been in Flying Higher for a year. Flying Higher, I don't really talk about that as much because it's mostly something we do on the back end for people who have gone through Flying Free, they get divorced, and then there's a whole other ball of wax of problems that comes into play as far as rebuilding your life, rebuilding your relationships, maybe getting out and dating.

And so I started Flying Higher about three years ago to kind of provide a landing place when they go down the chute and into divorce. So I don't talk about it as much on the podcast, but why don't you, for anyone who is maybe divorced or thinking about getting divorced, why don't you tell your experience with Flying Higher? Or maybe you didn't do it very much. I don't know.

SHELLY: I haven't really dived into the courses in Flying Higher the way I did with Flying Free. In that beginning stage, you're just kind of like, "Hit me in the face with the fire hose of all this stuff. I need to learn." And so I always mean to, but it gets to the bottom of the list of things to do. So I still plan to do that, but I have tried... I haven't succeeded fully to participate in the book studies. I've done parts. The pace is just... I just haven't been reading the way I used to. I used to read a lot. But there's the book studies. Excellent books, really.

And something I'm really interested in is just having better relationships going forward, never getting into this kind of relationship again. Not even like dating, but friends or... And especially just being a better parent to my children, too. So important to me. I want to model what a healthy adult should look like and healthy adult relationships. And so I think that that is really helping — not only the book studies and the meetings — and I'm sure the classes would help when I finally get to them...

NATALIE: I was going to say, the classes all address all of those things that you are looking forward to.

SHELLY: I'll get there, I'll get there.

NATALIE: I think you'd love them.

SHELLY: The forum, the other Flying Higher ladies, just hearing their experiences and just having someone who understands to even just vent to. I don't even need any reply from you. Just let me vent about this thing that I can't share with people who just don't understand.

NATALIE: Yeah. Okay, so let's leave the listeners with maybe your best piece of advice or pieces of advice if they are thinking about getting out, which is a terrifying thought for a lot of them.

SHELLY: I went through several things. It's hard to pick just one. I think I've shared the "be fair to yourself" already. So I would say don't expect help from your friends and family the way you think you can, because no one will understand. So don't be

surprised when they're not as supportive as you would like or as you need. You can find support in other places. It's going to be hard, but you can do hard things.

NATALIE: Good.

SHELLY: John 16:33 has always been one of my favorite Bible verses. "In this world you will have trouble." Jesus promises us trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." Another thing is, leaving, it can feel like burning your whole life to the ground, basically. But even if you lose your friends and family, there are eight billion people on this planet. You will find new people. You'll find new relationships. You will build that back up. It's hard. It is walking through fire. But it's worth it to have the freedom on the other side just to be yourself. God created you to be who you are, to be yourself. And if you have to hide that, that's not what God wants from you. He made you to express who you are to the world.

NATALIE: Yeah, I love that. That's great. Well, I really appreciate your being willing to visit with me and share your story with us, Shelly. And I think that's it. We're just going to wrap it up right there.

SHELLY: Okay, thank you so much.

NATALIE: Yeah, thank you.

Hey, beautiful butterfly. Thank you so much for listening. If you liked this episode, be sure to subscribe, and then consider leaving a rating and review so others can find us. To connect with me and get a free chapter of my book, head over to flyingfreenow.com, and until next time, fly free.