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# The Telegraph

'You cannot be in a relationship with someone who makes you afraid, but I didn't know how to leave Don McLean'

By Charlotte Lytton 30 October 2019



Patrishia and Don McLean in 2004 CREDIT: John Kronides/Globe Photos/ZUMA

Last week the body of 29-year-old Melissa Sousa, a mother of twin eight-year-old girls, was discovered in the basement of her Maine home wrapped in tarpaulin with two bullet wounds in her stomach.

I heard the story following an email from Patrisha McLean with a note to say ‘in case you missed this’ - it is easy, after all, to miss stories like Melissa’s when half of all murders and assaults in the northeastern state are connected to domestic violence.

Patrisha, 60, is adamant that these stories - like her own abusive relationship with [American Pie singer Don](#) - are no longer overlooked. It is for that reason that she has created [Finding Our Voices](#), an exhibition featuring women who, for too long, were silenced. Much of her marriage was lived in fear of her ex-husband’s angry outbursts; it was only an episode in 2016 that resulted in a 911 call and his arrest on suspicion of domestic violence that brought their 29 years together to an end.

“You cannot be in a relationship with someone who makes you afraid,” Patrisha says now. But she knows too how difficult it is to free yourself from that grip once it has taken hold: had that altercation nearly four years ago not happened, “I just know I would still be with him today,” she mulls, “because I was so pulled under. I just... I couldn't leave.”

That 911 call resulted in six misdemeanour charges, of which Don McLean [pleaded guilty](#) to four as part of a deal that saw one dismissed a year on. The three remaining charges - domestic violence threats, criminal mischief and criminal restraint - amounted to fines of \$3,000.

McLean has consistently denied the allegations from his ex-wife, saying: “I never assaulted anyone in my life, especially my wife, who was treated like a queen.” In a recent *New York Times* article, he said the problems in their relationship began when he “stopped loving” Patrisha, calling her a “scorned woman.”



Don McLean following his arrest in 2016 CREDIT: Knox County Jail via AP

She is understandably horrified by the label. “I’m the one who left him, he didn't leave me... these are lies that he's putting out there and it's defaming me.” The restraining order she has against him means “he

can't talk to me, but he can abuse me through the media. And that's what he's doing.”

Things are made all the more trying by the fact they both still live in Camden, in Maine, where they raised their two children, and which has a population of under 5,000: their paths still cross. On one encounter at the post office, she felt his eyes “boring” into her: “it’s about intimidation,” she describes of his behaviour. “It’s very uncomfortable.”

“In Maine, everybody knows everybody,” according to Dorathy Martel, leader of Next Steps, a domestic abuse charity. And if you live in small town, she says, “you’re going to think twice about whether it’s safe to reach out for help. There is a sense that you can’t be invisible here.”

Finding Our Voices, then, which runs at the Holocaust & Human Rights Center (HHRC) until 12 December, feels all the braver.

“He said he would kill me and take our little girl if I didn’t stay with him” remembers Christine, one of the 20 women featured - among them a nurse, architect, prison guard and TV news anchor - who finally left her abusive husband at the age of 55. Bekah, meanwhile, was told by her other half that she was “ugly”, and “crazy,” that no one would ever love her. She couldn’t go anywhere alone or with friends, was threatened and physically attacked “in places people couldn’t see bruises.”



CREDIT: Finding Our Voices

For Patrisha, the pattern of abuse she experienced was that of a “baby bully” - oscillating between “threatening me, and then he'd be crying and begging;” on occasions she tried to leave, “he would barrage me with 150 messages a day.”

There are standout moments of manipulation - the prenuptial agreement McLean presented her with

while she lay in her hospital bed having just given birth; a typed letter she says she was forced to sign in 1994, saying that premenstrual issues were to blame for the fights they had - and more insidious, low level ones, like fearing his outbursts if the dinner she had made him wasn't hot enough, or when he threw a box of her cherished memories in the bin.

**Their relationship had started out like a “fairy tale” - a local reporter earning \$11,000 a year suddenly swept up in the whirlwind of romance of a man who was “charming and very funny and fun,” but ultimately his tempers eroded what was good between them. “He had taken away my identity,” Patrisha tells me. “I had nothing.”**

The stakes of the exhibition have been raised still by the fact it has been built on allegations its chief perpetrator has denied. McLean's lawyers have sent letters to the director of the HHRC urging that it be shut down, and threatened local media outlets with legal action for covering it. Yet last week said that his career “has been helped by this. I am more famous, and I have more work than I have ever had.”

If his career really was profiting from her claims, Patrisha suggests, “he would be happy about my project, right?”

“He's obviously riled,” she adds. “And that is very scary.” She has decided, though, “I'm not going to be controlled by fear anymore.”

It was only in the days after [McLean's arrest](#) that she called a domestic abuse helpline and realised what she'd gone through featured many of the hallmarks of partner violence; now, Patrisha wants people to be educated as early as possible to spot the warning signs.

“We need to get rid of the shame,” she says of the abuse that costs so many women their lives in Maine, and elsewhere - domestic violence killings were last month reported to have reached a five-year high in the UK. “Because women don't talk about it, people have no idea how much of this there is.” It is made all the worse, she knows, by the “added layer of shame [when] it's someone that you chose to spend your life with... someone you love, who supposedly loves you.”

And then there's always the question, Patrisha says: “why did you stay?”

She hopes that the exhibition will make it clear that for victims, there is no simple answer. But it will be, at the very least, a chance to have their voices heard.