

Community Highlights: Meet Diana Lopez of The Medusa Project



Today we'd like to introduce you to Diana Lopez.

Hi Diana, thanks for sharing your story with us. To start, maybe you can tell our readers some of your backstory.

I grew up with a generation of parents that were known as the “silent generation.” They did not know how to deal with emotions other than to “suck it up” and keep it in. Like so many parents, their goals were to keep a roof over our heads, food on the table, clothes on our backs, and prepare us for the world by teaching us how to survive. Honestly, everyone grows up with their own trauma that shapes the way they raise kids and respond to life.

My brother and I grew up as latch-key kids.

As Generation X-ers, we grew up fast, shouldering a lot of responsibilities and often times left to deal

with life on our own. Emotions were never a priority. Feelings are kept buried down deep inside. The trauma I experienced growing up left me with anxiety, depression, and anger management issues, but we all come from something, right?

As a teen, it got harder and harder to regulate those feelings. I searched for ways to just forget about how lonely I often felt. As you can imagine, I found different ways to numb myself.

Fast forward to when I became an adult, I was completely lost, and I did whatever I could to not feel. I started to make even more horrible decisions. I landed myself in some pretty terrible situations, which I take full responsibility for those decisions that I made. I hurt a lot of people, my family, my friends, and most importantly myself.

As I look back now, I think about all those times I almost risked everything, including my life, and I couldn't help to think.... Why didn't anyone notice? There wasn't anyone there to say, "Hey! It looks like you are not doing life right! Do you need help?" There is a big part of me that thinks that what if there was someone? Would I have accepted their offer? In the end, it was up to me. I had to want it. I had to say, "help me!" But remember, I grew up where asking for help was not a thing because that would mean that I had admitted to a whole lot of things that I felt shame about.

I finally was able to pull myself up from rock bottom and worked my way up in the legal community until I got a job as a paralegal working at an international law firm. Working at this firm gave me the privilege to work on pro bono cases. Doing pro bono work gave me a way to give back. I've worked on a lot of asylum cases until I was asked to do a vacatur case. Vacatur is a way for human trafficking survivors to get their arrests and convictions vacated so that they can apply for good jobs, rental properties, and government assistance, etc. When you have a criminal record, all of these things are next to impossible to get.

Helping human trafficking survivors has become my passion. I started out volunteering at a woman's shelter in San Francisco and that is where I met some of the most amazing individuals who in turn introduced me to another group of amazing women from the San Francisco Collaborative Against Human Trafficking, where I work as an advocate for human trafficking survivors. It was here that I came up with the idea for my non-profit, The Medusa Project.

Can you talk to us a bit about the challenges and lessons you've learned along the way. Looking back would you say it's been easy or smooth in retrospect?

I started my healing journey about five years ago and no it has NOT been a smooth road. It was actually very terrifying. There were plenty of times that I've wanted to quit and give up, but the thought of going back to the way I was, was not an option. There were times when dealing with the pain from my demons gave me so much anxiety I was barely able to move. But I must admit the more I stuck with the healing process, the more I felt the beauty of releasing and the beauty of letting go of old versions of myself. Reliving these old stories was just another way to sabotage myself, in a way I was self-harming. Once I learned how to release and give myself grace, I didn't want to stop. I am still working on my triggers and letting go of the past. Forgiving myself and others have been such a journey. People that know me are pretty surprised at the fact that I no longer hold grudges among other things.

One of the ways I have learned to heal has been through boxing. Boxing has been such a great outlet for me. It has been an outlet for me to get my anxiety out and stay grounded. Boxing has taken me to a place of belonging, a sense of community, and probably a healthier way to re-direct my anger.

Meeting Joe Olivarez of US Karate and Boxing was a little intimidating at first, but the more I got to know him I could see how much he cares for his students. He isn't just a coach, he is someone that I can turn to when I am having a rough week or just needing to get out of my own head.

As you know, we're big fans of The Medusa Project, Inc. For our readers who might not be as familiar what can you tell them about the brand?

The Medusa Project, Inc. was created with a trauma-informed approach. I want my non-profit to be that "person" for those that are struggling with trauma and believe that they are alone, especially for kids that are homeless, in foster care, or aging out of foster care.

We are going to start by creating a website where anyone of any age, gender identity, and race can go and learn and understand the dangers of human trafficking and domestic violence, but also a place where we can have topics relating to mental health, self-love, self-care, and resources for support.

The idea for the website was developed when I first started my journey as a trafficking and domestic violence victim/survivor advocate. My initial research in these areas took me to various websites that weren't geared toward the very population that traffickers are targeting. I couldn't stop thinking, what good is this doing if kids are not going to read this and understand it. Why don't we have something designed for our youth? So, instead of complaining about it, I am going to do something about it.

Our mission:

The Medusa Project, Inc. is a forward-thinking non-profit committed to ending human trafficking and violent crimes affecting kids/teens/young adults through information, education, advocacy, and connection.

A lot of people ask me, "why Medusa?" Well, what most don't know is that Medusa is one of the most infamous "monsters" in Greek mythology. Spiritually, Medusa represents the strength of feminine rage against evil, similar to the modern-day evil eye. The story of Medusa is one involving sexual assault, survival, re-birth, and empowerment within.

I am not only excited about launching this website, but also, I am excited about making a difference and the long list of other projects we will be spearheading in the future. There will be more on that to come.

What would you say have been one of the most important lessons you've learned?

I've learned that I cannot listen to or give in to fear. Fear is like a plague that has infected this world and the main reason why people are acting the way that they do. Fear can kill a dream even before you get started. Facing challenges head-on and not being afraid to ask for help or even just pause to take a break and show myself some love has become very necessary. I have also learned to work through the negative head talk. That has been one of my biggest challenges, but giving myself grace and knowing that I am who I am and I can make a difference.

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