

the dots

a podcast about connecting.

Victor Rivas Transcript

Announcer: [00:00:04] Welcome to the dots. A podcast about connecting. The dots is a series of conversations with artists, community leaders, entrepreneurs, and change makers who talk about how they connect the dots and bring things together for their communities, companies, and themselves for a better life. And now your host Digital Strategist, speaker, and entrepreneur Kathleen Buczko.

Kathleen: [00:00:32] Football player, author, speaker, and activist, Victor has shined a light on family and domestic violence. And as a survivor he is a shining light for us all. Victor, Welcome to the dots.

Victor: [00:00:44] Thanks for having me.

Kathleen: [00:00:46] Victor tell me a little bit about your journey.

Victor: [00:00:49] Well, I guess we just start from the beginning, I was born in Cuba but we immigrated to this country when I was two years old, so before Fidel Castro and we we went from Cuba to Chicago and I lived there for seven years. And from as early as I can remember there was domestic violence in our house and child abuse. And at the level of torture and when I say that I'm not exaggerating I can tell you that as a child I was beaten. I was tied up. I was locked in closets. I was hammered. I was burned. Just to name a few the things that my father did. And then of course even more devastating for me was to witness the violence being done against my mother especially, by my other siblings and even our pets did not escape my father's abuse. And but you have to remember that this was well over 40 years ago where there were no hotlines my mom could call, there were no shelters for her to turn to. And so we were pretty much left to fend for ourselves. So I lived in Chicago for seven years and then we moved to Los Angeles where my father began a career in the aerospace industry. And it just got progressively worse. But yet, to the outside world he appeared absolutely normal. He was friendly, he was handsome, charming, great command of English from his schooling in Cuba. And so you would never know that that this man inside and behind closed doors was a completely different person.

Kathleen: [00:02:33] How did you survive that?

Victor: [00:02:36] Well, I mean I think that we, you know, we all kind of became armies onto ourselves and you know there was, there were, six siblings. One, one brother did not survive. He was born developmentally disabled to such a degree that he was immediately institutionalized because of the abuse my mom suffered at, you know, during pregnancy but the five surviving siblings you know we all kind of we work together sometimes but mainly you know we we try to you know just protect ourselves individually and then I took it upon myself. I wasn't the oldest I was the second oldest but I was very confrontational with my father even though I was terrified and very terrified of him. I would put myself in his path if only to distract him from beating other members of my family especially my mother. And that's why I I really want to emphasize to those listening that about the devastating impact that witnessing violence has on children even if they're not being physically abused themselves having to witness the violence can be as traumatic. And so we we did what we could the police came to our house many times and they basically would not arrest my father. And so after that you know them arriving at our house for the third or fourth time

and not doing anything. At 12 years old I walked in my city's police station in Los Angeles and I took off my clothes in front of them so they could see my body because he made sure that nothing showed at school so it was all underneath my clothing and they were horrified at what they saw. But the and I begged them I said please go to my house and arrest him and get him out of there for good and what the police could do was they had me sign a formal complaint that would put me in a police car to drive me back to the house to talk to my dad. And I said if if I do that and you don't arrest them and you leave he's going to kill me. And they said there was nothing more they could do that it was a private family matter and that's the title of my memoir: A Private Family Matter and that that was the moment that I knew that we were really in trouble because law enforcement wasn't going to do anything about it. You know the good news is that that's obviously that's changed. You know with with the you know educating and the training of law enforcement and health care providers and even even the public now understands the issue of domestic violence. Unfortunately the prevalence of domestic violence, family violence is as prevalent today as it was in my childhood.

Kathleen: [00:05:28] Yeah it's changed but it certainly hasn't gone away.

Victor: [00:05:32] Right.

Kathleen: [00:05:34] And what I find so dark in your story is that as such a young, young man you shared yourself so openly and and again everything we're taught to trust wasn't there to support you and.

Victor: [00:05:52] Right and.

Kathleen: [00:05:53] Go ahead.

Victor: [00:05:54] No no, go. I was, I was just listening.

Kathleen: [00:05:56] Yeah. No I think that in not only everything we're taught to trust but in today's day and age as you have young men today coming into a situation where yes it's talked about. But at what point are we giving them the skill sets to be that individual in the community who raises their hand and says this is wrong. And what I find so powerful in telling your story is that even though you went on and became this amazing football player, that you're motivating young men to be an active voice in the community. Can you tell me a bit about that?

Victor: [00:06:38] Well I mean I think that that that my journey you know the the the you know the part of the story where it takes a turn for the you know is you know you know for the better basically is you know we've all heard the Africans saying that it takes a village to raise a child. And if you think that it sounds a little quaint or unrealistic or maybe it's overused, well I am that child who was rescued and raised by his village. So my father kidnapped my my two my two brothers and my sister and me from Los Angeles California and took us all the way to Miami Florida and he basically left my mom outside of town in a motel. She didn't drive and she was pregnant which we didn't know was my baby sister Carmen and and we ended up in Miami. And my mother was no longer living with us. And so things went from worst to horrendous and basically and in a moment where I was finally bigger than he was physically a 15 and a half to protect one of my younger siblings I challenged him physically and I discovered he was a coward. He didn't fight back. And I got to better and that at that moment by that night I ran away from home and I was living on the streets in Miami and a high school classmate of mine spotted me and he took me home with him and his father was a lawyer. I was able to take my father to court and I got a restraining order which was really unheard of back in the 70s for a child to take a parent to court. But I got my freedom. And but I had nowhere to go. And so my high school took me in and they gave me seven homes to live in through out my two and a half years of high school and I went from being a a violent

member of a street gang in my sophomore year to President on my school, scholarship athlete. I went on to play get a full ride scholarship to play football at Florida State University, where I made the dean's list and was team captain. And it's really about the investment of the community. And so my journey that you know brought me into becoming an activist on this issue was one of the things that you didn't mention is that I've been an actor for 30 years and I have a well known well known bad guy so I play a lot of villains.

Kathleen: [00:09:05] You do.

Victor: [00:09:07] Yeah.

Kathleen: [00:09:07] And I find that fascinating because that's not my experience of you Victor.

Victor: [00:09:12] Right. But it's interesting that sometimes when I'm being interviewed by you know a you know media or something about a character I've done and they say wow that guy was really scary. Where did you find him? And I said I live with him you know. So, he was my father.

Kathleen: [00:09:27] Yeah. Wow.

Victor: [00:09:28] But so basically I was 39 years old when I became a, when I became a father for the first time with my son Eli I only have one child. But my book ends with the birth of my son Eli because it was in the moment that they put him in my arms at the hospital and I cut his cord. It was in that moment that I knew that I could never hurt my son the way my father hurt me. And that was when the cycle of violence was truly broken. I'd never hit a woman in my life. I was very evolved as a man. All of those things but I didn't know if that monster lived inside of me because you know that's the way I was bred. So if my story tells you anything is that you can unlearn the behavior. And you know you know violence is usually learned in our homes and in our relationships and then it comes out to our school campuses, to our streets, and into our world. But again if my story will you know say anything is that you can you can break that cycle of violence. And I felt that I had to kind of pay it forward to all of those people who invested in me at 15 years old. I was 6'2 over 200 pounds and I was all I knew it was violence and they took a chance and they invested. And I'm one of many stories of kids like me where somebody actually reached out and tried to make a difference in somebody's life. And so you know I felt it was kind of my way of you know basically paying it back and paying it forward to use my story and to be a man in the movement. Especially at a time when I first started speaking about 16 years ago, I was one of a handful of men nationally speaking on the issue of domestic violence because it's always misconceived as strictly a woman's issue.

Kathleen: [00:11:15] Yeah.

Victor: [00:11:15] And it needs to be all of our issues because it will impact all of us at some point.

AD: [00:11:19] Speaking of people who get it done, this broadcast is brought to you by Chapelure Media. Digital media, analytics, strategy, marketing, creative products, training they do all of that. Visit Chapelure Media dotcom to find out more.

Kathleen: [00:11:34] You know I think that that's the most powerful thing that that we forget. Domestic violence is a terrible thing and it is not just a woman's issue though it is an issue of a family. It is an issue of a community and as you say seeing violence being exposed to violence the community is damaged for that. And you were brought however into healing by the community. So tell me a little bit about what you would tell someone who is being faced with this challenge with being in a violent situation whether at home or in the community. And how did they find that and step out.

Victor: [00:12:20] Well I would say first you know this is what I tell people when sometimes they'll tell me they have a friend or a family member that's in the throes of you know family violence you whether it's domestic violence, whether there's child abuse, you know whatever whatever form it takes. And what I, what I say to them is that what you really want to know is find out what the resources are in your community first because if you're going to make that that you know they're very courageous step to break your own silence, you really want to know that there's someplace you go to that has the resources for you. And now in today's world there are a lot of communities do have a shelter or you know places you can turn to. But I would say that it', it's you know this particular issue of domestic violence it's the most under reported crime in America and it's often called a quiet crime because it thrives in an atmosphere, an atmosphere of shame denial and silence. And that's the problem is that you know there's a lot of shame involved with this issue, individually and and you think that it's your fault. Part of it is your fault that you know somehow you're you know you're causing it or you you are a piece of that puzzle. And so you know we don't seek help. And like I say there's a lot of shame involved. And so we it takes a lot of courage to step forward and I would just say that that there are going to be people out there that will listen to you and believe you and will try to help you. And that's whether you're you're you know you're you're a woman you know leaving an abusive situation, whether you're a child that you know needs to confide in somebody and I can tell you that many of my angel like to call those advocates in my in my story angels because they kind of showed up at the right time and many of them are were my educators, they were my teachers that that you know spotted something going on. Even though you know you could see it on the outside because like I say he would. He made you know he'd took great care not to show it but they picked up on it, you know my energy obviously and they were the ones that reached out to me and sometimes you know even a little oh you know a little help can go a long way and I'd always like to talk about my my eighth grade teacher, Mrs. Rice, out here in Los Angeles, as a matter of fact and what she did for me when I turned 13 and I started growing like a weed and I started to fill out because I'm a big guy. My father decided that I was fat and that I needed to be put on a diet. So I had to eat only one meal a day that he would watch me eat if he thought I was good that day and it was at 1:00 a.m. in the morning when he got home from the swing shift from work. So I would be woken up, interrogated and then maybe fed and I eventually collapse in her class because I was losing so much weight that you know I had no energy. And what Mrs. Rice did was she personally and secretly bought me a meal ticket that allow me to eat the school cafeteria for the rest of the year. And at that time that you know that meal ticket was all of maybe \$2 for the whole week.

Kathleen: [00:15:46] Yeah.

Victor: [00:15:46] But she say she literally and figuratively fed me and my self-esteem and kept me alive. And that's just a small gesture that someone can do to to let somebody know they matter and that it seems like a small gesture but it can it can mean everything. And so you know I encourage those people that wonder if they can make a difference, it doesn't take a lot to do it. You know you don't have to have deep pockets you can do just just helping somebody out can really make, ahem, excuse me, it can really make a difference in someone's life. Support is incredibly important.

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host just the support you need.

Kathleen: [00:17:15] That's an amazing analogy for lack of a better term for all of us out here that it doesn't, you don't have to have these amazing resources. The simple act of kindness of recognizing where you were and what you could benefit from made a difference. It kept you alive.

Victor: [00:17:37] Right. Right. Absolutely and that's and that's, and they're you know they were continually those those gestures being made somewhere you know allow me to move into these into these different homes in high school. And believe me I was you know quite terrifying at that at that age because I was big and angry and, but underneath there was actually you know when you started to peel the layers off me I was actually a really good kid. I was intelligent which I didn't discover until I got to college and started making the dean's list because I was told I was stupid my whole life. And then suddenly that started to blossom which allowed me to articulate. You know I had a voice that I could articulate my pain with and my joy and my love and all of the things that because I didn't have that skill set either. And so it's you know it's a little rebuilding at a time. And but you know you can reclaim your life at any moment in your and your life. And and I say that to the also to the men that might be listening that that you know find themselves to you know possibly be abusive and not necessarily even physically, they may not understand that the verbal abuse can be as damaging as someone who is physically harmed. And I, I, I tell them that that if my father had woken up any morning including the morning that I had to fight him physically and he would have said I'm so sorry for what I've done to you and the family. There's something desperately wrong with me. I need help. I would have taken my father anywhere he wanted to go because the only thing that a son wants or child wants is the love and respect of their parents and the protection of their parents. And, but my father didn't make that choice but, so for that for the men that might be listening you know you can actually get educated and get a skill set that maybe you don't have so that you can deal with crisis in a different way because we're all going to deal with anxiety and crisis whether financial or family or whatever it might be. And and we just have to be able to resolve those those issues with with nonviolence and non abusive behavior.

Kathleen: [00:19:50] The thing that I find so terrifying about this point in time because is as you know being an immigrant to this country, domestic violence is so under-reported as a crime in general. And then when we overlay this fear of deportation and the fear of not knowing where your children will end up that challenges everything that we believe about telling someone and getting that silence broken and letting someone you know know about your situation. Victor from the reference point of your journey and your advocacy, what would you tell listeners of the dots about getting help?

Victor: [00:20:39] I would just say that that you know for those that might be listening that are in you know an immigrant situation one and they may not be documented is that you can still turn to the shelters and an to those you know those resources and know that you will be safe that that you're not going to get turned in. So that's one that two again I would just say that that you know you can really make a difference by just reaching out and trying to find the you know the resources in your area if your if your, you know you're concerned about what's happening to you or your you're you're getting red flags about about this issue. I think that you know you need to sort of find out you know where to turn to and who to open up to say that you can feel safe and you know it may be a friend initially it might be a family member but hopefully that family member can maybe walk you in you know to a program that where you can find you know what the resources are and so that you can start to make a safety plan if you need to make an exit one or two at least to maybe try to resolve what's going on you know within the family there, there may be a way to get you know get some some help. And and again I always tell people that if if you're going to sort of not confront a friend but but be there for a friend or family member and say you know I think something's going on. And and you know you can talk to me about it. That's that's really really

important. But but you can't open that can of worms without without knowing what the resources are in your area because you have that conversation you say OK well go talk to somebody if you want to help someone maybe you can find out what the resources are for for them and say look here's a pamphlet of this program that's you know a mile away from from where you live, you know if you need me to go with you I will, but you know this is a great program so I would say you know again try to find out what the resources are if you want to help someone.

Kathleen: [00:22:56] Victor, you've gone through all of this. You've been a survivor but what motivates you at this point?

Victor: [00:23:04] Well you know I think that what really motivates me is that is that you know you know whenever I think OK I've you know I've I've paid it forward and and I can move on and they'll be or you know I've read about something or I know that this issue is is is you know continues to be as prevalent in my childhood and then sometimes it's it's without getting too political, I also think that there's you know we're where a political climate where there's a lot of ugliness and there's and and there are people who we've given a lot of a lot of power to that that concern me because they know they might even have their own history of mistreatment of women which again if there's women involved I often say you know we all want to protect our children but I always say that you know if you want to protect children in most cases not all cases, because we know that there are women that do abuse their children. But if we want to protect women I mean children in most cases you better protect their mothers first. And so again I think that it's kind of just feeds into the whole family structure. And I really what I what I really try to do for everyone and using the power of a story is to connect the dots for everyone to make them really understand that this violence that we fear on our streets is is a learned behavior that's being learned in our homes and usually in our relationships. So if we really want to live in a more humane and peaceful world we need to start where it begins and that's and that's in our in our homes.

Kathleen: [00:24:49] Victor what's next for you?

Victor: [00:24:53] Well there's you know I mean there's always the next acting project that you know and you know and there's a couple of different things that I'm sort of up for but but you know I don't talk about it because you until you get them.

Kathleen: [00:25:08] You don't want to jinx it.

Victor: [00:25:09] But, I've also been working, I've also been working on a one man show that I thought you know how do you how do I connect both both of my worlds, my world of as an actor and and my world as an activist. And so I've written a, I've written with a partner, I've written a piece that we're still you know we're still you know toying with it and you know still it's not ready to be presented but it's it's a play called Mad Cuban and that was my nickname when I played football at Florida State my my college teammates called me the mad Cuban and that's because no one really knew my story then.

Kathleen: [00:25:55] Yeah.

Victor: [00:25:55] But they said you could see when I put a football helmet on that my whole personality would change because it was a healthy outlet for my rage for the things that I grew up with. And and so the play is really about the battle between the two mad Cubans meaning there was the mad Cuban that was my father who was literally mad you know who I think had a serious mental illness. And and then his son who he was basically creating into this this you know into this person that was probably going to follow in his footsteps. And so the you know the play well we'll examine that. But it will also celebrate the you know the discoveries of how one can reclaim their

life and triumph over cruelty. So you know I hope that I'll have that you know ready to go up maybe in the next six months or sooner. It just depends on how you know and I'm not you know when we feel real comfortable with it.

Kathleen: [00:27:01] Yeah well that's exciting. And I just am so happy that you found that village and they take they took care of you and they gave you the courage to believe not only in yourself but in the power of telling a good story. Victor, thank you so much for joining the dots.

Victor: [00:27:19] Absolutely my pleasure. And and I know that we can we can make a real dent on this issue if we all just come together.

Kathleen: [00:27:29] Thank you very much.

Kathleen: [00:27:30] This podcast is brought to you by Chapelure Media digital media, analytics, strategy, marketing, creative products, training. They do all that. With these services they always add a serious dose of measurement. Visit Chapelure Media dot com to find out more.

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