



Kelly Roberts (front) and her husband, Todd, pictured at the Human Options headquarters in Irvine

# Transforming TRAUMA

Newport Beach resident Kelly Roberts escaped a life of domestic abuse for one dedicated to helping others.

BY ASHLEY RYAN

Originally a Midwest girl, Kelly Roberts came to California in her youth. “I spent a lot of time at the beach, especially here in Newport, growing up,” she says. “It was my favorite place.”

After a few years working as a cosmetologist, she decided to go to college, then worked in the hotel industry before transitioning to event planning. But much of what she had planned for her life was put on hold when she fell into an abusive relationship. Though not her first, the experience stripped her of her confidence and self-worth.

Able to eventually flee to safety by staying with a friend—who is now her husband, Todd—Roberts channels her trauma into good, volunteering with Human Options, a nonprofit that aids victims of domestic violence. Aside from her work for the group’s around-the-clock hotline, she and her husband have launched Christmas for a Cause, a donation-based campaign around the holidays. So far, funds have gone to projects like a new playground at the Human Options emergency shelter as well as the renovation of a two-bedroom unit for a family in need, accomplished in partnership with her church, Bayside Orange County. This winter’s fundraising efforts will go toward further renovations, until all 16 of the units at the second-step shelter are upgraded.

“Our lives have come full circle,” Roberts notes. “We moved down to Newport Beach and now my kids get to enjoy this place that I never imagined I would end up. So it’s a really good ending—not that it’s quite ended yet.”

Here, discover more about what Roberts endured, how she turned it into good through her work with Human Options and her advice for those struggling to step out of their own abusive relationships.

**NEWPORT BEACH MAGAZINE:** What are some early signs of abuse that people can look out for in their own relationships?

**KELLY ROBERTS:** An abuser and victim, they don’t really have a stereotype or a ZIP code or a demographic. My first abuser was a punk rocker teenager with not a penny to his name and my last abuser was a professional, suit-wearing man. But the signs are virtually the same. When it starts out, it’s just a relationship going super fast, super intense—a ton of compliments, grand gestures and presents. ... After you’re feeling secure and pretty good about yourself, that’s when the isolation starts. The distancing you from your family, your friends, activities and things you love to do. ... And then ... the lies start coming. Lies and deceit and things you know in your heart are not right. ... And that’s when the other abuses would start to come in. Not just physically, but financial and even spiritual. ... It’s really just taking away the self.

THIS PAGE: ASHLEY RYAN; OPPOSITE PAGE: JOHN HYRKAS



The donation-based Christmas for a Cause block party takes place in December each year.

**NBM:** How did you work up the courage to leave your last abusive relationship?

**KR:** I went back to my abuser many, many, many times. I hate to say that. ... But, really, it was love that made me have the courage to finally leave. But it wasn’t love for myself. ... I ended up getting pregnant during one of my times away from my abuser, and I honestly was contemplating going back but for the fact that I had this life inside of me that I already loved and I knew I could not subject somebody that I loved to this kind of life.

**NBM:** What tips do you have for others trying to leave unsafe relationships?

**KR:** I always say, if there’s smoke, there’s fire. If you feel off about something, you don’t have to pursue that relationship. You deserve to be treated with kindness, fairness and dignity. If

you’re not getting that, I would say it’s time to look at leaving. But what I would recommend [is] for people ... to make a phone call to a domestic violence agency [like] Human Options. ... Your abuser will tell you [that] you have no options—that you’re alone in this—but that is not true. In this day and age, there are resources to help you.

**NBM:** Where do you turn for healing, support and assistance after you leave?

**KR:** Find a group of safe people. Mine was my church, my husband and my mother-in-law, who literally just took me in and loved me. ... When I finally got into domestic violence-specific groups and therapy—actually through a PEP class, which is Personal Empowerment Program—... [I was able to heal]. ... I didn’t feel alone. I felt affirmed.

**NBM:** How did you find Human Options?

**KR:** I knew I really wanted to serve in this area ... and I went through the training and then COVID hit and everything shut down. ... I ended up volunteering at a food bank and, as ladies do, we were sitting around talking as we were sorting and telling our stories. So this beautiful lady—her name is Gigi—is hearing my story, her jaw just drops and she’s like, “I’m connected to this domestic violence agency. I’ve got to bring you over there.” ... So she brings my husband and I to the shelter, we walk in the door and immediately this little girl runs off the playground and runs right at me. She wraps her arms around my legs and looks up at me and she’s like, “Hi, what’s your name?” And I was just like, this is where I want to be.

**NBM:** What services does Human Options offer?

**KR:** So many—I wish I would have known about them when I was going through my trauma. ... They have an emergency shelter, a safe haven, but then they have second- and third-step programs [to help teach independence while assisting with job searches and providing other services]. ... And then they also have family resource centers for those who [already] have a place to flee to. They have legal advocates, ... they have counseling and therapy in groups. ... They have these Personal Empowerment Classes that can really educate people and get them stronger so that they’re able to leave. ... They have specific therapy that’s for children that are coming out of this trauma [as well]. And then, if that’s not enough, they have community education ... and the 24-hour hotline.

**NBM:** What’s your favorite thing about being involved with Human Options?

**KR:** The success stories. ... And that I can use what happened to me. What was meant to really destroy me, I can now use for good so I love that.

**NBM:** How has your life changed since leaving your abuser?

**KR:** Where I once had no self-esteem, now I know that I am loved. ... Where I once was alone, now I’m surrounded by a community. ... And to watch my family, my husband—he wasn’t in that relationship, but honestly he’s been affected by it. But now he’s seeing the healing, so he’s excited about it. ... He’s actually spending more time at Human Options than I am; he’s my hero. Where I once was totally not supported by a man, now I’m completely supported by my husband, which is really, really cool.

**NBM:** What is one of the biggest lessons you’ve learned through this journey?

**KR:** I have so much power and I have the ability to get stronger and stronger and stronger, the deeper that I go into serving. ... I’m grateful [to be on] this side of it because I have an experience and skill set that I wouldn’t be able to have had I not gone through this. I have the ability to relate to people, be empathetic toward them and really help. ... You thought that you took all my power away, but actually, I took it back and I have more now. **NBM**

If you’re struggling with domestic abuse, call the Human Options 24-hour hotline at 877-854-3594. To make a general donation or purchase tickets to the organization’s Fall Luncheon on Oct. 6, visit [humanoptions.org](http://humanoptions.org). Stop by the Christmas for a Cause block party at East Balboa Boulevard and Miramar Drive on Dec. 7 or, to donate to the shelter renovation, visit [humanoptions.org/christmasforacause](http://humanoptions.org/christmasforacause).



Renovations at Human Options’ housing units