
Column: Pumping iron became my armor

March 15, 2021



When I was young, I was so pretty. Leggy, with long blonde hair. I hated guys whistling at me. There must have been something about that 115-pound girl that looked like an easy mark, so *passive*.

The summer I turned 20, I waitressed at a small, family-owned pizza place by the beach in San Diego, near my university. One morning at work the owner's son, a big strong guy, was the only other person there. He grabbed me, and threw me up on the stainless-steel counter where they assembled the pizzas.

I didn't scream, or hit him. I yelled "No!" and tried pushing him away, but it didn't do any good. Afterwards, I slid off the table, went in the bathroom, proceeded with work, and avoided him the rest of the day. I quit a couple of days later and never told anyone why. I felt embarrassed. I moved on.

The following summer, I turned 21 and took a cocktail waitress job at an upscale restaurant near the university, working 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. I made \$100–\$120 a night in tips — good money for 1980. One evening my boss asked me to help him carry wine glasses out of the storeroom.

Up in that little dark room, he suddenly turned and exposed himself. I backed away and he offered me cocaine, as if that would change my mind. I kept backing up, right out of the room. I was sure he would fire me, but he didn't. I never said anything about it.

The San Diego Chargers' training camp was just up the street and the players came in every afternoon. They were kind, fun and always respectful.

But at night, some other customers were not. As I took their order, some men tried to put their hands up my skirt. I'd immediately step back, but sometimes when I turned around to get their drinks, they'd slap me on the butt.

When I returned with their orders, I'd stand across the table so they couldn't reach me. Sometimes they'd "accidentally" drop my tip on the floor, so I'd have to bend over and pick it up, and they'd laugh. Who was I supposed to tell — my boss? This is how things were four decades ago.

A creepy older guy always hung around my station, where I picked up the drinks. He was relentless. One night he must have slipped something in my drink because I remember waking up at his place as he stood over me and said, "You weren't that good anyway." I was so embarrassed. I don't remember how I got home. I left the job.

I took a job at another restaurant and soon another man was hanging around me every night. One night at 2 a.m., I caught him following me home.

I quit the next day and took a job as a veterinary surgical assistant: \$3.35 an hour.

At age 25 I was teaching aerobics at night and noticed that one girl looked better than everyone else. She told me she lifted weights and I asked her to show me. From day one, I was strong — 25-pound dumbbell presses! I was hooked. I read up on it and started lifting two hours a day.

Within two months, I was getting muscles. I have never been harassed since. A year later I weighed 140 (still do) and used 60-pound dumbbells (still do). Women in the gym wanted to know how they could do it, too, and I helped them. I won a world championship. Athletes respected me. I married one of them.

I finally told a friend what happened to me when I was in my early 20s. I finally acknowledged what had happened after she said: "You were raped."

Of course, it explains why I grew muscles like armor, and why I loved having control and a strong body. Even today at 61, if I want to, I know I can back a man off just by body language.

I don't feel vulnerable anymore. I'm just glad that nowadays, it's getting easier for women to speak up about harassment and rape, particularly when it involves powerful men.

Women have learned so much since I was young, and many are tough and brave in ways I wish I'd been. And some men, certainly not all, are being held accountable. At last.

Crista Worthy is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, a nonprofit dedicated to lively conversation about the West. She writes about aviation, travel and wildlife from her home in Idaho.