

"GROWING STRONG"

Press Kit Info

Logline

A physically and emotionally abused girl escapes home in an attempt to find refuge at her free-spirited grandmother's horse farm.

Story Synopsis

Growing Strong is a story about a 15-year-old-girl named Lily who is emotionally and physically abused by her father – Wes. After yet another heated argument with Wes, Lily manages to escape her family home in Chicago and finds refuge at her grandmother's horse farm in Midway, Kentucky. Upon the arrival to the farm, Lily finds herself in a rather peculiar environment: her grandmother, Rosemarie, is a spiritual woman who meditates, eats a vegetarian diet, and reads metaphysical books. Despite the seemingly peaceful atmosphere, Lily is haunted not only by the constant threat of Wes coming after her, but also by the psychological effects of the abuse that manifest themselves in flashbacks and nightmares. Unable to deal with the anxiety, Lily turns to alcohol and drugs to repress and numb her emotions. Sam, a local boy whom Lily meets on the farm, becomes an accomplice as Lily plots her next move. The only thing that stands in a way of Lily's self-destruction is Rosemarie whose wisdom and strength are forces much stronger than the pain and fear inflicted by Wes.

Director's Statement

I wrote and later directed/produced "Growing Strong" while pursuing an MFA in Cinema at DePaul University in Chicago. The entire process, from writing the logline to finalizing the director's cut took about a year and a half of extremely hard work, many sacrifices, even broken bones. Despite the difficulties of making a student film, we managed to put together an amazing team of women and men, find incredible actors, and zero in on spectacular locations for where to film the story. When I reflect back on the entire production process, I can summarize it by saying that "Growing Strong" is a film that was 'meant to be.' Somehow, somehow, I felt guided to the right people, the right places, the right resources.

In the story, physically and emotionally abused girl finds refuge at her grandmother's horse farm and begins to heal from abuse inflicted on her by her father. As such, one of the most important tasks during pre-production, aside from casting, was to find an old farmhouse suitable for the story. As serendipity would have it, a friend called a friend and, during our second scouting trip to Kentucky, we secured Caledonia Farm where we shot the majority of scenes. While filming, a local newspaper journalist named Paul Gibson came to interview me, and later stated in an article: "Ironically, Caledonia Farm LLC was previously owned and operated as the Bethlehem Farm and dedicated to helping women in racing rehab their lives from alcohol, drug, and physical abuse (...)."

I felt called to make "Growing Strong" because I had lived through the experience of physical and emotional abuse as a child, and its many not so colorful consequences. PTSD

including addictions and anxieties tormented me for many years. Yet, I didn't realize that there was a connection between my self-destructive behaviors as an adolescent and young adult, and the abuse I endured during childhood. I just remember feeling a lot of pain and really not knowing where it was coming from. It took years of therapy and healing to finally connect the dots. My hope is that by watching "Growing Strong" audiences will take away an understanding that physical and emotional abuse psychologically wounds the child, and also that an inward spiritual journey is a viable path for healing.

Anecdotal Account

One of the miracles of "Growing Strong" was finding the Caledonia Farm. In the story, physically and emotionally abused girl finds refuge at her grandmother's horse farm. As serendipity would have it, a friend called a friend and found Daphne Marvin who, just several months prior, purchased a historic farmhouse with her family. This happened at the same time my production team and I were driving around Kentucky frantically looking for a suitable farmhouse just weeks before production. Within an hour of getting the address, we found ourselves driving down a long, tree-lined driveway surrounded by horse pastures while holding our breaths, hoping for this house to be 'it.'

I remained cautious until I stepped my foot inside. That's when I knew this house was going to be the heart of our story. Antique furniture passed down from generations, timeworn clocks, and sepia toned photographs displayed throughout infused the house with spirit. I felt peaceful among its presence. The Marvin's agreed, rather quickly, to us filming at the property after I told Daphne we would film a 30 minute movie. Except for, they thought we were going to be filming for 30 minutes. A month later, when we pulled up to their house at 4:30am with a two-ton grip truck followed by several cars filled with cast and crew, the Marvin's realized we were going to be there for longer than 30 minutes. Despite the initial 'miscommunication,' we forged life long friendships and I consider the Marvin's my extended family.

Biography

Rita Ciolek (Writer, Director, Producer) immigrated to the United States from Poland in 1995. She spent the first few years in Chicago working towards a bachelor degree, and in 2001, she graduated in the top 25 students in the senior class from the DePaul University's College of Commerce while at the same time obtaining a CPA certification. Upon graduation, Rita joined an accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers where she worked for nearly a decade and where she gained valuable business skills in strategy, leadership, and teamwork. Eventually, her adventurous spirit and passion for storytelling led her to pursue a Master of Fine Arts in Cinema degree from the School of Cinematic Arts at DePaul University (2015). Wanting to combine her business skills with her newly awakened creative side, Rita founded Kazia Productions, LLC a media production company that aims to create human interest and social impact stories. Rita's notable works include *Jax*, which was nominated for Best Editing and which won a Best Documentary award at the 2014 DePaul University Premiere Film Festival. For her MFA thesis work, Rita wrote, directed and produced *Growing Strong*.