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Community News

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## 'Last Punch' Depicts Domestic Violence in Black and White

By **Kennedy Zak** October 23, 2023

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*Hannah Kozak's photographic exhibit "He Threw the Last Punch Too Hard" depicts the devastating effects of domestic violence. - Photo courtesy Hannah Kozak*

Hannah Kozak was 9 years old when witnessing her mother's physical abuse at the hands of her second husband became the weekend norm.

"Their home was a war zone," Kozak told the News-Press.

This went on for five years until the man, for whom her mother had left their family, "threw the last punch too hard" in 1974, causing her to suffer a severe subarachnoid hemorrhage, which resulted in permanent brain damage and paralysis on her right side.

"When you have an injury of this magnitude, it changes your whole life. You can't walk on your own. You can't even get out of bed in the morning until somebody comes to change you," Kozak said, regarding her mother's living conditions. "Imagine that you can't reach for your favorite book. You can't go for a walk. You can't reach down and pet your cat. Everything that we all take for granted, that's all taken away from you."

Visiting her mother after the injury brought with it a breadth of emotions: resentment toward her mother for leaving their family in the first place; pity and sadness when observing her condition; and guilt if she didn't visit enough.

"From [ages] 14 to 20, it was anguish watching her trying to recover from this devastating blow to her brain," Kozak said. "It was too difficult to visit her. I either was guilty if I didn't go, or depressed if I did."

In the years to follow, Kozak did her best to distance herself from her mother to protect against the pain she felt. She visited her irregularly, about once every few months.

Kozak described her childhood self as "afraid of everything." In an attempt to overcome this sense of fear, Kozak decided she wanted to become a stunt woman at the age of 10. She did not know exactly what being a stunt woman entailed, but she knew it was about facing fears.

She followed through with this career path and, in 2004, Kozak completed a stunt job that required her to jump out of a helicopter onto the Citibank building in downtown Los Angeles, resulting in her breaking both feet. With this injury she was forced to sit still, which led to a "spiritual epiphany," and prompted her to rebuild and repair her relationship with her mother. She enrolled in a master's degree program in spiritual psychology and began visiting her mother regularly.

Kozak became dedicated to visiting her mother, who had been institutionalized since 1980, and worked to get her moved into a senior living facility at Los Angeles Jewish Health.

"We fell in love with each other," Kozak said. "She still had a lot of light and she was the most gracious person I've ever met in my life. She could have been bitter and angry and mean and judgmental. And yet, she was so kind."

Upon reconnecting with her mother, Kozak, who had been interested in photography since she was 12, decided to tell her mother's story through photography with her project, "He Threw the Last Punch Too Hard," which Kozak published as a book in August 2020.

A decadelong work, this project, which depicts the aftermath of domestic violence, is also "a love story between mother and daughter. ... It's a story about forgiveness, compassion, family, trauma, hope, light, love," Kozak said.

An exhibit of Kozak's work has been on display for the month of October — Domestic Violence Awareness Month — and will be available through Dec. 10 at ReflectSpace Gallery, located within Glendale Central Library. The plan to display this exhibit has been in the making since November 2022.

"The first time I walked in this room before the exhibition opened, I saw this 8 feet by 8 feet [photograph of my mother], my eyes welled up with tears," Kozak said, adding that the moment was "bittersweet" because her mother died six months ago without getting the chance to see it.

"She's here, though. She's here in every molecule of air in the gallery," Kozak said.

Though her mother did not get to see the exhibit, Kozak was able to show and read her the book she wrote. Despite the lasting physical impact of her injuries, Kozak said her mother understood everything and was happy Kozak was sharing her story.

Throughout "He Threw the Last Punch Too Hard," Kozak created her photos in black and white which "takes everything down to the very essence and is less distracting than color," she said.

"[The goal of the exhibit is] to give someone the strength to leave an abusive relationship, to let them see that there are repercussions to staying in an abusive relationship," Kozak said. "Hopefully my photos let them see that in black and white. No pun intended."

"It's important to have spaces like this with this type of art, because I think it gives other people courage to tell their stories," she added.

If you or someone you know is experiencing domestic violence, call 1 (888) 999-7511, a 24/7 hotline that offers confidential support, crisis assistance, community referrals and information about other programs and services throughout Los Angeles County.

To purchase "He Threw the Last Punch Too Hard," visit [hannahkozak.com/bookstore](http://hannahkozak.com/bookstore).

*After Hannah Kozak broke her feet during her time as a stunt woman, she entered into a period of reflection which enabled her to rebuild her relationship with her mother. – Photo by Kennedy Zak / Glendale News-Press*

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