

For Three Years I Fought My Sexual Assault Case, And Now I've Won

By Jasmin Ayala for FierceByMitu.com



My name is Jasmin Ayala and I am a first-generation UCLA graduate and a Latina sexual assault survivor. For the past three years I have been silently fighting my sexual assault case in the complex criminal justice system against my attacker. Today, three years, one month and four days later, I have won my sexual assault case. Today I have been deemed victorious in the eyes of the law, but as I've come to learn in the wake of #MeToo and the countless brave voices before me, is that my story and my win are not mine alone.

Three years ago when I was 21, I was raped while in my first year at UCLA. At 21, I had just entered a new social landscape far away from home, and as a first-gen college student—it was a space I had never occupied. While other students were balancing their

studies and a bustling social calendar, I faced a far different reality: navigating college as a sexual assault survivor. The cultural implications of my intersectional identity (Latino, female, first-generation, survivor) meant that I had to coexist between two foreign spaces that I had never been part of—university and the legal system.

Once I reported my sexual assault, that launched the beginning of a three year saga that would include a lengthy and emotionally draining criminal investigation. In addition to juggling school, work, family and a social life, I had to also confront the trauma that I had suppressed for so long which would arise during the investigation. It was here where I learned firsthand just how excruciatingly long and exhaustive the criminal justice process moves. Before my case ever made it to trial, I had to undergo a preliminary hearing, which would determine whether my case qualified to make it to an actual jury-based trial. For the first time since the rape, I had to face my attacker in court and testify my story on the stand while his defense aggressively cross-examined me. Everything that I had ever conceived about myself was called into question. My story, my morals and my character were all reduced to lies. I felt pain and humiliation and for the first time in my life I was manipulated to believe that it was somehow my fault—that I had *asked* for this.

Before this moment, I had always perceived my strength as an essential component of my identity, but this experience broke me in a way I didn't believe was possible. I felt my world come crashing down once I lost my sense of self. In that moment I contemplated dropping the case; and I couldn't help but wonder if this man was capable of making me believe I had caused this, how could I dare face the cold judgment of the real world? The emotional unpacking of my trauma in the courtroom is a drastic example of the type of scenarios that deter victims from ever reporting—nonetheless speaking up. In the face of fear and pain, I nearly considered dropping my case and questioned the very core of my being—my identity. I am forever grateful that I didn't give up and that for that I thank the dedicated team of detectives, my public defender, and family who stood by my side for three years reminding me of the many reasons why I was fighting this battle in the first place.

As I've come to learn, trauma is not something that just suddenly goes away with a guilty verdict, and like many survivors, it is something that I will carry with me for the rest of my life. My sexual assault case win is a double-edged sword of justice. On one hand, it's an earth-shattering victory worthy of celebrating and on the other hand, it's a painfully isolating experience. You want to scream it from the rooftops that you've put a bad person in jail, but you also have to compose yourself so as not to make others uncomfortable. There is shame, stigma, fear, and cultural factors at play that shape a survivor's experience and at its very core, it's an intersectional experience. My survivor experience was no doubt shaped by my traditional Latino upbringing that taught me ideals about being "fuerte" and fighting my battles. But if there's anything I've learned over the years, it's that this was never *just* my fight and I was never truly alone in fighting it.

It took three years to see any tangible outcome and most people don't realize that I was silently fighting this battle in the first place. In this process I was taught a great deal of patience and learned that acceptance does not come in all forms. I had to accept the possibility that I might come out of this with a loss. I understood that most cases don't result in a conviction or even make it to trial, but regardless of this possibility I needed to move forward, if not for me, for others who didn't have the opportunity to fight. As uncomfortable as it was to endure this battle, it has always been at the forefront of my being to share my story in the hopes that it will make it easier for the next person to speak theirs. And while progress did not happen overnight, I can only hope that I had to endure 1000 days so the next survivor will have to endure far less.



Back when this happened to me, #MeToo did not exist in the manner that it does today. There were no monumental movements and sexual assault was not a highly-publicized spectacle as it is today. I am living testament that sexual assault happens and it is real. I'm also a living testament that there is hope for justice and for healing. Despite the circumstances, I built my life around the trauma and checked off milestones such as being the first in my family to graduate from UCLA, forming relationships, and making strides in my writing career. This is a new emotional beginning for myself that

remains undefined, but I can't help but feel optimistic with the growing collective of voices sharing their truth. The progress we have made is slow, but we are reaching a turning point where our stories are being heard and our voices will not go unnoticed. To those who lost: Anita Hill, Kesha, Christine Ford and so many more... I stand with you.

My win could not have been possible without the support of mi familia, my friends, community, and the many courageous survivors who came before me. Thank you, this is not my victory, it's *ours*.