Being A Victim Of Revenge Porn Forced Me To Change My Name

Two years ago, my life was pretty spectacular. The days of my ex-boyfriend Ryan posting nude photos of me on the Internet that I had shared during our 3-year long-distance relationship seemed to be behind me. In November of 2011, I was slowly making my way to cloud nine.

I was dating someone new and finally learning to trust and fall in love again. It was wedding season and my boyfriend and I had a full schedule of nuptials to attend. One of these was at none other than the Versace mansion.

We attended, ravaged all of the mini-burgers that we could get our hands on, danced in the rain to some spectacular beats and snapped some photos to document our happy moments. The next day, I decided to go public with my new relationship by posting a picture of us from the night before on Facebook.

I never imagined the kind of fury that this would ignite.
The picture that I posted from the wedding with my boyfriend cropped out (I get enough harassment for the both of us).

*Going Viral — And Not the Way You’d Like To*
On Monday, November 7, 2011, I woke up, did some work on my dissertation, and then took a break to grab lunch at a nearby restaurant. While enjoying my meal, I checked my email and came across a message from an address I didn’t recognize.

Had I known that opening this email would send my life spiraling into a living hell, I probably would have gotten something stronger than a beer with lunch to help lighten the blow.

“I don’t know you — and I have nothing to do with this. Someone is trying to make life difficult for you. They posted ‘compromising’ pictures of you at http://www.doxed.me. They are clearly labeled as being you. Look in the gallery section or search for your name.”

My stomach dropped, my mouth went dry, and I was having trouble swallowing the bite that I had just taken. I clicked on the link and didn’t have to search for my name; my gallery was the third one on the homepage of this site. Then the threatening emails started rolling in.

“Good Morning Holli — Get in touch concerning your picture. There’s also a nice video. Have Paulette and Andrea seen them?”

At my statistical consulting job, Paulette was my boss and Andrea was my co-worker. An hour later, I received a follow-up email. “It’s 8:15 where you are. You have until 8:37 to reply. Then I start the distribution.”

Three days later, my pictures were on over 200 websites and I had received a flurry of emails from strangers: some trying to be courteous and tip me off about the material, and others letting me know how much they were enjoying my pictures, sending me lewd photographs of themselves to prove it.

“WOWWWWWWWWW!” exclaimed a “Chet S.” “Could’n’t even get through all your hot ass pics babydoll…Blew a load on the mirror self pics… Absolutely incredible …Thanks!”

A day after that, an explicit video of me started circulating the Internet. I got called into the dean’s office and questioned by human resources.

I went to two police stations and the FBI in Miami. They all turned me away saying that what my ex-boyfriend was doing wasn’t illegal according to criminal statutes. “This seems to be a scuffle between you and him; it’s civil; you should find yourself a lawyer.”

It had already cost me $2,000 to have an attorney send Ryan a letter in 2009, I couldn’t imagine how much it would cost to bring him into civil court. As a fifth-year graduate student living on student loans, my resources were limited.

I tried to do damage control on my own. I schooled myself on the Google algorithm, created positive material under my name that would push the negative search results down, filed hundreds of DMCA takedown notices, and started to get to know some of the porn site
webmasters so well that one in Russia found a lawyer for me in Miami and offered to buy me dinner the next time he was in the area. After working around the clock for a month straight, writing my dissertation during the day and cleaning up my search results at night, I finally got all of the negative material down. Thank. The. Lord.

Within two weeks, it was all back up on 300 more websites. I threw in the towel. I created new email accounts, took down all of my social media profiles, and put a post-it over my webcam. I changed jobs and had a couple very uncomfortable conversations with my professors involving tears and, for one of them, falling out of a chair and twisting my ankle.

I paid $500 to legally change my name. MY NAME.

This was agonizing. I was quite fond of my name. Sure, it was never a name fit for a celebrity or anything; it was way too long. But not many people out there can say that they have a kick-ass, uniquely spelled first name, and an exotic Hawaiian middle name that means “Beautiful Flower.”

Gone.

My professional reputation? Tainted. My parents’ perception of me as their angelic baby girl? Blown to smithereens and then reassembled in the likeness of a leper.

I sobbed daily.

I broke down the most when I was in the shower because I didn’t want my live-in boyfriend to think that I was a total wuss. I slept, but my dreams were haunted by my ex threatening or harming me in some way. So then, I didn’t sleep. I spent many nights sitting on the couch in my apartment looking outside at the lights and world in front of me, contemplating other ways out of this. The thought of suicide terrified me, but what scared me more was that it actually crossed my mind.
Sitting on the stairs in front of a courthouse in Miami.

My brother told me I should try posting about my situation on the subreddit AMA (Ask Me Anything). My mom told me that I needed to stay on top of my search results and keep trying to get my case picked up. If they weren’t picking my case up, then the laws needed to change.
I thought about starting a blog to be brutally honest with strangers on the Internet about what was happening to me and how it was affecting my life. People out there would surely be sympathetic once I told them how much trauma and destruction this had caused.

**The birth of a dream and a campaign**

Then one day, it all came together: my inner voice, the statements and ideas from those around me, and my pain and anger about how much I was having to give up because of what Ryan was doing to me. After simmering for a while, these elements developed into ideas and emotions that were the antithesis of what you would expect from such a devastating experience. I felt motivated, hopeful, inspired, and more alive than ever.

I decided that the ultimate solution to this problem would be to have a criminal law on the books so that police would pick up victims’ cases. So, I started a website. I put a petition on it to gather signatures in favor of a law and a survey to collect data showing what kind of harm this causes and how widespread it is.

Then I asked myself what kinds of services I would have liked to have while going through this: legal representation, an affordable takedown service, psychological services, and others; it sure would have been nice to speak to other women that were going through what I was going through. I incorporated a few more pages: a “Professionals” page, a “Support” page, and a “Resources” page. I’d expand on these as time went on.

**Building an Army**

After reading scholarly and popular media articles on related issues such as sexting, cyber harassment, and bullying, I eventually came across the term “revenge porn.” I registered the domain EndRevengePorn.com. I read articles about the “revenge porn king” Hunter Moore and Dr. Charlotte Laws, the mother of a victim leading the charge to take him down. I emailed her, and told her my story and aspirations of changing the law. She was with me.
Next, I needed to come up with a legislative proposal. I pulled legal articles from all around the world. I read about the “Right to be Forgotten” that they have in Europe. I spent days on end vigorously reading all of the material I had compiled. Too ignited by an unquenchable thirst for knowledge of anything and everything that was related to this issue, I barely slept. But I was getting my higher degree in psychology, not law. I needed a legal expert on this.

I came across an article, “Unwilling Avatars: Idealism and Discrimination in Cyberspace” written by Dr. Mary Anne Franks. The article touched on revenge porn and the challenges of implementing laws against it. Dr. Franks had counterarguments to those challenges, and they were damn good. I had to meet this woman and ask her to help me craft a law. I found out that she was a law professor at the University of Miami; her office was 15 minutes away from where I lived. For the first time in my life, I believed in fate.

I met with Mary Anne and, although a bit resistant through email at first, she was fully on board after our meeting. Later on she told me that she had met with victims before, but never any as pissed and determined as I was.

Note to self: Appreciate and embrace your anger, make friends with it; it’s what fuels your fight.
Mary Anne put me in touch with Danielle Citron, a law professor at the University of Maryland and an expert on privacy law. Danielle was brilliant, and there was a tender, motherly nature about her. Not only was she there genuinely sympathizing with me as I took her through every painful detail of my story, but she offered up facts that swiftly dismantled every line that law enforcement had fed me. “You’re amazing, Holly. Of course I’ll help you!”

Danielle put me in touch with Colette Vogele and Erica Johnstone, the co-founders of Without My Consent, a non-profit that helps victims of online harassment. I spoke to Colette on the phone and it was clear that our goals in helping victims were aligned.

Finally, I brought everyone together. “Mary Anne and Charlotte, meet the co-founders of Without My Consent.”

Since that day in September 2012, we have all been in almost daily contact with one another. Our emails have consisted of sharing articles, ideas, arguments, questions, and legislative language with each other. After a year, we finally came up with an anti-revenge porn legislative proposal to hand out to legislators (authored by Mary Anne). We’re sharing it throughout the nation and across the world.

I finished my PhD and then incorporated all of my work into a non-profit called the Cyber Civil Rights Initiative (CCRI). End Revenge Porn is our first campaign, but I’m not stopping there. After reading up on all of the different forms of online harassment that occur today, you better believe I’ll be working to help the victims of every single one of them.
A photo of me the day that I graduated with my PhD. It’s a Hawaiian tradition to pile leis on the graduate.

So far we have successfully helped California pass a law against revenge porn, though it got watered down at the last minute and fails to cover “selfies” due to, in my opinion, some victim-blaming on the part of legislative committees. Now, we have Mary Anne and Danielle working directly with legislators to help draft their bills and prep for First Amendment and “victim-blaming” arguments so that a California debacle doesn’t happen again.

California will be reintroducing its bill in January 2014 and Mary Anne is already working with them to strengthen it. New York, Maryland, and Wisconsin legislators just announced their bills; and Florida, Texas, and Federal legislators will soon be following suit.

It’s hard to believe all that we’ve accomplished in a little over a year’s time. Each of us has a full-time job outside of this, but that hasn’t stopped us from throwing our energy, brains, and hearts into a cause that we’re determined to lead and an epidemic we’re compelled to end. We will end revenge porn, and then, we will put an end to some other disgusting trends that have popped up in cyberspace. I know this because for the first time in my life, I feel like I’m where I belong.

I was never meant to be just an Industrial/Organizational Psychologist or just a statistician any more than I was meant to be just a victim.

I was meant to be an activist.

This article originally appeared on xoJane.