



FRIENDS

Women at the shelter come from all different backgrounds with one thing in common: They've all been abused.

Salma Hayek:

FACE TO FACE WITH DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Salma Hayek has been crusading against domestic violence ever since a good friend married a man who beat her mercilessly. We sent her inside a shelter for battered women for a day, where she listened, learned, and lifted the spirits of the women she met

Domestic violence is something Salma Hayek cares about deeply. “Sometimes you find a cause, and sometimes the cause finds you,” the actress confides. “My good friend suffered from domestic violence, and it took me years to figure out that this man was beating her. *Years.* I did everything I could to help her, but she went back to him. It killed me.” Today, Hayek will shed her A-list actress and Avon-spokesperson status and become her childhood friend. Only this time, Hayek will play out the *other* scenario, the one in which the friend gets out. Today, Hayek will spend a day at a shelter for battered women.

Dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, Hayek arrives at Interval House, a California-based shelter, and meets Sharon Wie and Carol Anne Williams, the shelter’s director of programs and executive director (respectively). In the 25 years that Interval’s doors have been open, more than 14,500 women and children have sought help here.

From the start, Hayek has a thousand questions about the women, their children, husbands, and boyfriends. Over the course of the day, she will find some answers, offer others, and listen to the stories that the women are willing to share—stories of sadness and regret, but also of hope, strength, and empowerment. To put it simply, a woman who finds her way to a shelter like Interval is looking for two things:



FROM THE HEART

Hayek takes time to sign autographs for anyone who asks.

an end and a beginning. The reality is that she finds both within herself.

GETTING STARTED

Hayek is led into the main room, and Wie begins to orient her. “Families often come here with nothing. Sometimes they come in the middle of the night, in their pajamas. So the very first thing we do for a woman who arrives is make her feel welcome,” Wie says. Like all new residents, Hayek is told she’ll be assigned an advocate, or “buddy,” to help her learn about life at Interval and navigate the myriad services the shelter offers.

“I think most people think that the shelter will look like a rundown home,” Wie confides.

“I’ve seen them like that, too,” Hayek says.

But Interval is lovely: clean, bright, adorned with art. Ironically, the picture on the wall behind Hayek is one of Frida Kahlo, the Mexican artist who overcame incredible adversity and whom Hayek portrayed in the 2002 film *Frida*, for which she was nominated for an Oscar. Hayek glances at Janine Limas, who was once a battered woman. “Before I came here, I didn’t know places like this existed,” Limas says. “But from the day I walked through that door, I knew everything was going to be OK.”

Upstairs, Hayek peers into the “quiet room,” where residents go to read, meditate, or spend time alone. Wie introduces Hayek to a petite woman reading a book. “Hello Pauline, how are you?” Hayek asks as she sits down beside her and wonders how she came to the shelter. “I’m from China, and my husband was very cruel, very abusive,” Pauline says. “I came here at 1 o’clock in the morning. I needed so much. Now, I have counseling. I have a lawyer to help me understand my rights. I have a case manager to help me set goals.”

Hayek is visibly touched; envisioning the horror that was inflicted on someone so delicate is searing. “It’s a problem of victimization,” Hayek says. “The man who is victimizing the woman feels guilty, and the guiltier he gets, the more violent he gets. But we can’t just label these men as monsters, because if you divide it into ‘the monster’ and ‘the poor little girl,’ then you’re not taking full responsibility. You’re not a victim of this man solely, you’re a victim of yourself.” The group talks about the word ‘victim’ and offers other words that may seem positive. Like ‘survivor.’ But Hayek pushes on. “So you go, ‘Poor me, look what a tragedy, look what I’m surviving.’ I think it’s important that we take responsibility for the relationship we have with ourselves,” she says. “You have to confront the world and become independent and strong on your own.”

Limas now opens a door to a >>



ROOM FOR ALL

The sleeping quarters are tight at times, but they’re clean, bright, and safe.



THE GOOD DOCTOR

For some women, this is the first time they've received medical treatment.

» typical sleeping room, and Hayek looks inside. “You’ll see we have two beds and a trundle underneath,” Limas says. Hayek smiles. The sheets are cheery and the space immaculate, but the statistics are harsh: Sometimes, Wie reports, women come with as many as seven or eight children—but the shelter has several adjoining rooms to keep a family together.

The group winds its way through the building until it reaches the children’s center. Colorful and vibrant, the center also provides children’s activities in which kids can talk about their emotions. Two little girls in matching dresses approach, and Hayek lifts one onto her lap. Williams introduces a woman named Silvia. “We like to say that Silvia is the only person in the United States who has grown up her entire life in a battered-women’s shelter,” Williams says.

“I came here when I was 5 with my mom, because of the problems we’d been having,” says Silvia. Hayek gives her a warm embrace, and Williams can’t hide her pride. “Silvia is going to nursing school now, and her mother is the director of our Latina program.”

The children swarm Hayek before she leaves, handing her personal notes

and drawings to take with her. “I’m going to put these all on my refrigerator!” she promises.

TEENS IN RESIDENCE

The tour continues, to a room at the end of a long hallway. It’s here that the shelter’s Second Generation teen/youth program operates, where the 12 to 20 something-aged residents come for group meetings, to run their own hotline (for teens who want to call in), and to write and stage skits about living with abuse. (The skits are performed at local com-

munty centers, police stations, and schools.) Hayek is intrigued by the energy of the group. “Do you have a guy who volunteers to be the abuser in a skit?” Hayek asks. The girls nod “yes” in unison. “From his point of view?” she continues. Rachel, a 16-year-old who came to the shelter with her mother and sister and is now a former resident, explains that it’s really hard for the guys to act that stuff out, even though the group members are highly supportive of one another. Hayek is noticeably impressed, and it’s not long before she’s talking story structure, direction, and dialogue. When she asks to see a videotape of skits, the kids happily oblige. “You know,” Hayek says afterward, “you can be a thousand different women. It’s your choice which one you want to be. It’s about freedom and sovereignty. You celebrate who you are. You say, ‘This is my king-

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A CAKE BREAK

Hayek is still talking through ideas for additional skits with Wie and Williams as she enters the kitchen. Almost »



TIME OUT

A shared hug, and a moment to laugh, with two of the shelter's children.

» midsentence, Hayek stops suddenly. “Where?” she asks as she swivels her head around, searching for the source of a lemony scent. Flo, Interval’s beloved housemother, opens the oven and smiles.

“Aha!” exclaims the actress. Flo pulls out a springy yellow cake. “That’s what I was looking for!” Hayek says. “I know I’m supposed to wait until it cools, but...”

Once Hayek is served a slice of the dessert and a glass of cold milk, she falls into an animated discussion with executive director Williams, who says that in a house with such cultural diversity, language barriers must be broken down. “In just one room, we may use multiple translators to cover all the different backgrounds. It’s a rich environment, and it’s amazing how well they communicate,” Wie adds. Sometimes, Williams says laughing, something as simple as deciding what TV station to watch, or what type of music to listen to, is tricky.

But all of the channel changing aside, Williams says the big message is lost on no one. “Ultimately,” she says, “the women here understand that they’re not alone, that domestic violence isn’t just *their* problem; it’s everyone’s problem.”

IN IT TOGETHER

Hayek sits among the other women assembling for a group meeting. Williams tells Hayek to start by marking her hometown on a map of the world on the wall. Hayek hops up and pushes a tack into Coatzacoalcas, Mexico. “It’s very crowded where I’m from,” she says, referring to the number of thumbtacks. The support group is integral to recovery, Williams says, and these meetings are where residents meet, in small groups and under the supervision of a therapist, to listen and talk about the problems they’re all facing. No subject is off-limits, and the time together is often very difficult.

“Here’s what I’m wondering,” Hayek says. “You’re here to talk about your life with domestic violence so that you can overcome it, but at the same time, you want to completely disassociate from that life because it’s so painful. How does that work?” A Jordanian woman named Inshirah, who used to be a resident and now

works at the shelter, thinks for a moment. “Well, I came from Jordan 23 years ago with my husband,” she says. “I thought of America as this free country. But my husband—in his mind, things were the same as before. He was an alcoholic. He was controlling me. So my children and I, we left. After 16 years of living with him.” It is a familiar story. “You think about the past,” Inshirah says. “But then you work to change the experience into a positive. Now, I’m helping other women in the Arabic community who are in the same situation that I was in.”

Hayek likes what she hears. “What you’re doing is inspiring women to take their power back,” she says. “It’s a choice.”

WHAT THE DOCTOR SEES

Fueled by the emotion of the women’s stories, Hayek heads off to meet Dr. Felix Aguilar. She is almost hyperattentive. “If someone arrives with injuries that require immediate help, we get her to a hospital,” says Wie. “But otherwise, this could be the first medical visit for an incoming resident.” Dr. Aguilar’s typical exam includes a basic physical examination, with a screening for communicable diseases, and all health-insurance needs are addressed.

Dr. Aguilar is often awestruck. “I saw a woman recently whose boyfriend had broken her jaw, and she’d never gotten help,” he says. “It didn’t set right. She thought she could live with it like that, but eventually we convinced her to go to the hospital and have it broken again and reset.” »



KEEPSAKES

Hayek loves the hand-drawn notes that the children made her.

FINDING PEACE

Hayek is passionate, imploring the women to take back their power from the men who abused them.



➤ Hayek winces but talks about how, once a woman starts getting her life in order at the shelter, she imagines that the woman's health improves dramatically. "Domestic violence has to do with self-love and self-hatred," she asserts. "The self-hatred destroys the body, and the self-love reconstructs it."

THE FIGHT FOR RIGHTS

Hayek sits on the floor of the legal and counseling services department, across from Senior Clinical Director Mary Walton. It is here that issues of child custody, divorce, and immigration are discussed. "How do you deal with people who are illegal?" Hayek asks.

"We've done immigration work since we opened our doors," Wie says. "We're known for working with women who don't have their status."

Hayek asks for ideas when it comes to documenting abuse, even before a woman leaves a relationship. Walton suggests keeping a journal so that abusive events can be documented; taking pictures of injuries is also helpful. She also notes that some women don't realize how dangerous their situation is.

Walton talks about a case in which such documentation would have been helpful. "A professor with money, a nice house, and two daughters started calling the hotline," she says. "She said she wasn't injured, but that her husband was doing some strange things, and she just wanted to talk to someone about it," Watson says. "So

the woman starts talking about how he'd put the whole family in the car and drive to the edge of a cliff, and tell them that they were all going to die together. And it was this constant terror that was just traumatizing them."

Hayek's eyes narrow. "Passive-aggressive," she says. "That's the one you really have to look out for. It's a mental game. They take it to the limit, and they keep it there until you're broken psychologically. I've been around, and I've been in relationships with psychological abuse."

But the story doesn't end there. "You know, the professor had it in her head that she was wealthy; she didn't think she belonged in a shelter," Williams says. "We picked up the newspaper one Sunday morning, and she and the children had been killed. He smothered them to death."

Hayek's anger is obvious. "I think that the smartest women are the most intimidating to men," she says. "Beautiful women and smart women, they're the hardest to control. Because a woman like that is a threat, so she's the one you have to break."

IN THE END

Before Hayek departs, she takes a moment to reflect on what has gone on. "On one hand, I'm thinking, How do we create *more* shelters?" she says. "But at the same time, I'm thinking into the future, when we don't even need shelters anymore, because we've rid society of domestic violence. And I think, What do we do with the empty shelters? How do we use them in a new way?" Hayek smiles and says her good-byes, with hugs and thank-yous all around. She heads for the door, passing that picture of Frida Kahlo again. For a moment, it doesn't seem as if she's just looking at her fellow countrywoman admiringly. Kahlo appears to be looking right back. ♦

Salma Hayek can next be seen in After the Sunset, in theaters November 12. She is Avon Products Inc.'s Global Spokesperson.

10 WAYS TO GET OUT—AND STAY OUT—OF A BAD RELATIONSHIP

If you are being abused, or if you know someone who is being abused, you must find help. Here's what everyone needs to know to get out of an abusive relationship.

Don't isolate yourself. Staying in touch with neighbors, friends, and relatives helps create a safety net for when you do want to enact a plan.

Educate yourself. Learn the warning signs of abuse so that you can assess your situation. (Go to www.ndvh.org.)

Keep important records and other items on hand. Keep money, birth certificates, and important addresses and phone numbers in an easily accessible place.

Get help. Call the police, call a shelter, or call a friend who can assist you if you need it.

In an emergency, take immediate action. If you find yourself under threat, go to a friend's house if it's safe, a police precinct, or escape to a public place where you and your children will be difficult to find.

Be vigilant. When planning an escape, cover your tracks. Make calls from pay phones so you can't be traced. Tell friends and coworkers that you've left your abuser, and tell neighbors to call police if they see your abuser.

Keep a diary. Writing things down, recording them, or even photographing or videotaping them will be helpful if your partner is still threatening you after you leave.

Get a restraining order. "It sets up a history," Interval House Executive Director Carol Anne Williams says of the legal benefits. In other words, it will give you leverage in court.

Think about the future. Leaving is never easy, but there will come a moment when you'll be ready to take the plunge. Visualize your new life.

Be good to yourself. Meditate, exercise, eat well—taking care of yourself is part of the mission.

*Interval House Headquarters, Los Angeles and Orange Counties: (562) 594-9492
National Domestic Violence Hotline: (800) 799-SAFE*