Her Lord Her

Abused, addicted to drugs, and contemplating suicide, Yasmin Davidds-Garrido transformed herself into a motivational speaker and author dedicated to preventing Latinas from repeating her mistakes

IT IS A REMARKABLE STORY of transformation. As a child, Yasmin Davidds-Garrido lived in terror of her violent, tyrannical father. Today she lives in a peaceful, castle-like home atop a scenic hill. At 22 she was a stone-cold speed addict on the edge of death; now 31, she has been sober nine years, is a published author and a respected speaker, and leads a life more fabulous and inspired than she had ever dreamed possible.

When she shares her story with audiences around the country, Yasmin takes them on a harrowing journey through the cruelty she suffered during an abusive childhood to a drug addiction that once left her hoping to die on the side of a highway. Hers is the tale of a broken little girl who, against the odds, fixed herself and became a healthy, strong woman—strong enough to help other Latinas just like herself. "I took tragedy and turned it around," Yasmin says. "I literally had to re-create myself."

BY LORI TERESA YEARWOOD PHOTOGRAPH BY NORMA ZUNIGA

'The truth is, we must redefine respeto to mean respect only those who respect you. We must stand up for ourselves; it's up to us to choose how we will or will not be treated'



La familia

On the surface, Yasmin's family lived an idyllic life in the suburbs of Los Angeles. Her dad was an Ecuadorean immigrant who came to the United States with an elementary school education and made himself into a millionaire by sheer force of will. Her mom, a Mexican immigrant, stayed home to take care of the house and kids and her husband's business. Yasmin and her two sisters attended private schools and took music and ballet lessons. They learned from an early age to do well in their studies and to love, respect, and honor sus padres.

But they also learned to keep secrets and to hide behind perilous silence. For legal reasons, Yasmin doesn't mention her father by name, but she remembers the horror and fear he inspired in her and her mother and sisters.

Although he could sometimes be sweet, loving, and paternal, almost anything could set off a fit of violent rage. He drank often,

and when he drank, he hit. He openly had extramarital affairs, and when Mom dared ask why he hadn't come home, he'd become furious and strike or threaten her. He'd banish the girls to their room for days at a time, allowing them out only to go to school, and beat them if their grades dipped below A's. On weekends he'd pull them out of bed to make them load boxes of electronic equipment onto trucks for one of his many businesses. When Yasmin was 5, her father, who was about 70 pounds overweight, became obsessed with her baby fat. He started weighing her weekly, counting every pound she put on. "She was always scared," says Irma Davidds, Yasmin's mother, sobbing. "If she gained

even half a pound, he would hit her." Recalls Yasmin: "He was the ruler of his castle. And rulers were not to be questioned."

When Yasmin entered high school in 1985, her parents separated, and her father moved out. Finally she saw a chance for peace. And although he continued to dominate Yasmin, her mom, and her sisters with his money (his alimony paid the rent and covered the family's expenses), the women tried to move on with their lives. Yasmin, always a good student, moved away in 1989 to attend San Diego State University, where she began studying business administration.

The peace, however, didn't last. Two years into college, Yasmin's father became incensed over a boy her sister Judy was dating and withdrew his financial support from the family. "In one fell swoop," Yasmin remembers, "we were threatened with the loss of our house, our cars, and our dignity." Her mother suffered a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized. Yasmin transferred to the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles and moved back home.

To help support her mother and sisters, Yasmin took on two jobs (one as an office clerk, another as a weekend flea market vendor). She also juggled a full class load at school. Her schedule was exhausting, and soon she became overwhelmed. On some

mornings she'd lie in bed, unable to get up. On others, it would take her an hour and a half to get out of the shower. In 1992, a doctor diagnosed her with posttraumatic-stress syndrome, an anxiety disorder brought on by traumatic experiences. Something was about to give.

Numbing the hurt

By July 1992, when she was 21, Yasmin desperately needed help coping with her endless days. She needed something to soothe her nerves and make her forget her struggles and her past. She'd seen her friends snort a powder that was guaranteed to give instant energy. Speed, she learned, was cheap and easy to buy. For \$20 she got her hands on a week's supply—about one-fourth of a gram—and "suddenly I was on top of the world," she recalls. In just a few weeks, Yasmin was hooked, snorting a line of speed about twice a day.

The highs helped her get through a hectic life, but eventually the drugs wore off, and the lows dragged her lower than she had ever been. It was a dangerous cycle that consumed her for the better part of a year. "The more I did," she says, "the more depressed I got. And the more depressed I got, the more drugs I needed."

She finally broke down on a dewy June morning in 1994. She was driving to the new internship she'd landed at a Fortune 500 company. But she had snorted her last line at 4 a.m., and now, wending her way along a busy Los Angeles freeway, Yasmin became paranoid. "I knew I couldn't go in high and try to put on a show," she recalls. "I knew they'd see right through me."

Crying hysterically, she pulled off the road. She wanted to kill herself but found her way to a pay phone instead. She went through the yellow pages, calling therapists, suicide hotlines, and rehab centers. She finally got a hold of a therapist with whom she'd met just once. Together it took them eight hours to find a center that would admit Yasmin—but only after she agreed to give it \$500 up front and pay off the rest of the \$5,000 fee when she got out. "That day was my breaking point, my rock bottom," Yasmin recalls. "And that was a good thing. Because if I hadn't hit rock bottom, I would have continued on a negative path."

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A defining moment

Indeed, it was a breakthrough. All her life, Yasmin had struggled to keep things from falling apart. She had worked so hard to keep up appearances, appease her father, care for her mother, all the while pretending everything was fine. That day, Yasmin realized she could no longer keep up the façade. It was time to get help.

In the quiet, homelike surroundings of the rehab center, Yasmin felt safe for the first time. She fell into a deep sleep that lasted almost 12 hours. Still, it was an intense 30-day program that included

eight hours of daily group therapy and countless 12-step meetings.

The counselors at the center told Yasmin to take notice of when she became hungry, angry, lonely, or tired. It was the most basic of lessons: For the first time in her life, Yasmin was learning how to take care of herself. "I had always put my mother and sisters first," she recalls. "But no one was taking care of me, and I was out of control." It was a big awakening for a woman conditioned to believe that her own needs didn't count.

After a month of counseling and group therapy, Yasmin felt transformed and empowered. She went home, told her mother and sisters how much she loved them—but that she was moving out. She explained to them that what she needed most was to focus on herself. The family was confused and angry. After all that had happened, how could she want to leave? It hurt, but Yasmin hugged her mom and sisters and tearfully walked away. She moved onto the USC campus, resumed classes, and finally received her degree in business. By the fall of 1993, she was back on track.

A second chance

Two years after graduating from USC, intrigued by the circuitous and dangerous path her own life had taken, Yasmin returned to San Diego to pursue a master's degree in women's studies. She soon realized how few books had been written about Hispanic women and their struggles. She embarked on her own effort to write one and get it published.

Six months ago, Yasmin's book hit the store shelves. *Empowering Latinas: Breaking Boundaries, Freeing Lives* (Penmarin, \$14.95) is based on her story as well as on interviews with many other Hispanic women from across the country. It offers empowering ideas to help women make better lives for themselves. But it also calls into question some long-held cultural convictions. For example, many Latinas are taught a deep, unconditional respect for elders. "The truth is," Yasmin says, "we must redefine *respeto* to mean 'respect only those who respect you.'"

"We must stand up for ourselves," she writes. "It's up to us to choose how we will or will not be treated."

It is a message Yasmin carries into every part of her life, sometimes in unexpected ways. When she married her husband, Norberto Garrido, in 1996, she took his name but asked him to take hers as well. And so when Garrido began the following season with the NFL's Carolina Panthers as an offensive lineman, both names went on his jersey. "I said yes without hesitating," Norberto says, "because it was important to Yasmin."

Today Yasmin spends much of her time traveling the country, sharing her story. And when she's not working, she's relaxing in that castle-like house on the scenic hill, where there's no question who rules. "I have a little pillow in my bedroom," she jokes. "And the stitching reads, 'Queen Yasmin."

Miami-based writer Lori Teresa Yearwood is working on a book about powerful women.

Adiós al pasado

En 1985, cuando Yasmin estaba terminando la secun-

ESTA ES LA HISTORIA de una transformación dramática. De niña, Yasmin Davidds-Garrido vivía aterrorizada por la violencia tiránica de su padre. Hoy vive en un apacible hogar en una bella colina. A los 22 años de edad estuvo al borde de la muerte por su adicción a las anfetaminas. Ahora lleva ocho años sin probar droga alguna, es una reconocida autora y lleva una vida fabulosa.

Aparentemente la familia Davidds vivía una vida idílica en los suburbios de Los Ángeles. Su padre era un inmigrante ecuatoriano que se hizo millonario. Su madre mexicana era ama de casa. Yasmin y sus dos hermanas estudiaban en una escuela privada. Aunque su padre a veces podía ser dulce y amable, cualquier cosa lo encolerizaba y abusaba físicamente de su familia. A menudo encerraba a las niñas en sus cuartos por días enteros y las golpeaba si sus calificaciones escolares no eran buenas. "Era el rey de su palacio. Y a los reyes jamás se les cuestiona nada", recuerda Yasmin.

daria, sus padres se divorciaron y su padre se fue de la casa, pero siguió manteniendo la familia. Yasmin se fue a San Diego a estudiar administración de empresas y a tratar de retomar su vida en paz. Pero la paz no sería muy duradera ya que a los dos años, y de un día para otro, su padre cortó su apoyo económico a la familia. Yasmin se vio forzada a regresar a su hogar y a trabajar para ayudar a su mamá y a sus hermanas. Tenía dos empleos y además continuaba con sus estudios, cosa que pronto la llevó al agotamiento. Desesperada, terminó recurriendo a las anfetaminas para obtener energía y fuerza instantánea. Pero pronto cayó en el círculo vicioso de la drogadicción, yendo de la euforia a la depresión.

Finalmente llegó a su punto más bajo en junio de 1994 camino a un nuevo empleo. Había ingerido drogas unas horas atrás y de pronto se dio cuenta de que su estado iba a delatar su adicción. Salió de la carretera llorando histéricamente. Buscó ayuda

e ingresó en un centro de rehabilitación.

Por primera vez en su vida, Yasmin comenzó a aprender a cuidarse. "Siempre había puesto a mi madre y a mis hermanas primero", dice. "Pero nadie me cuidaba a mí". Egresó del centro recuperada y con un nuevo sentido de sí misma y le informó a su madre y hermanas que tenía que enfocarse en sus planes. Se mudó al recinto universitario y empezó sus clases de nuevo hasta obtener un grado en comercio. Además comenzó a interesarse en estudios sobre la mujer y obtuvo también un grado en ese campo. Fue en esa época que decidió escribir un libro sobre la mujer hispana y sus luchas, Empowering Latinas: Breaking Boundaries, Freeing Lives, que salió al mercado hace seis meses y está basado en sus entrevistas con mujeres de todo el país. En 1996 se casó con el futbolista profesional Norberto Garrido. Hoy pasa gran parte de su tiempo viajando y compartiendo su historia con otras mujeres. Cuando no trabaja, descansa en su castillito en la colina, donde no hay duda quien manda.