

Un-Trafficked: How Underage Prostitutes are Given Hope

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WRITER'S COMMENT: *When the assignment was given to write a feature article for Prof. Masiel's UWP Journalism class, I knew I wanted to approach a topic that I was legitimately passionate about. Though I have never had any intentions of pursuing journalism, the act of researching and synthesizing an important issue for the public gave me a true appreciation for the journalistic process. There seems to have been an explosion of awareness campaigns for various social justice causes in recent years, and sex trafficking is certainly one of them. Instead of simply citing statistics and describing the problem, I wanted to humanize the story by telling it in a way that could be about anyone's daughter, sister, or friend. In writing this piece, I was intrigued by the dichotomies that naturally revealed themselves in this story. The dualities imbedded in the narrative are, in my opinion, what drive it: victims versus criminals, children versus adults, agency versus circumstance. The fact that these dramas are playing out almost literally in our backyard brings it even closer to home.*

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: *From outset, it seemed there was nothing easy about Susanna Boone's idea to profile "Courage To Be You," an organization committed to lifting the veil over the trafficking of underage prostitutes. The subject matter is something few of us want to stare at too closely, and the research posed practical and legal difficulties that would have challenged the most seasoned investigative journalist. Yet it was obvious from her very first and very rough draft, that Susanna understood something important. She wrote an opening that went straight to the emotional core of the story: the quest of Jenny Williamson, a woman devoted to helping girls (and boys) caught in the web spun by human traffickers working in (and through) the Sacramento area. But making the rest of the story live up to that opening was no simple task. For legal reasons owing to their age, she was not allowed access to the victims. For practical reasons related to deadline pressures, she was limited to second-hand accounts. Yet the story Susanna Boone created resonates with authenticity, power, and structural control. It is, in short, a triumph of storytelling.*

—David Masiel, University Writing Program

She knew they were not who they said they were. They were not three sisters, all over the age of eighteen. The man they were traveling with to Reno was not their uncle. She approached them in a Starbucks just off of I-80 when the man left to use the restroom, after ordering the girls not to leave.

Her suspicions turned into something close to certainty after just a few minutes of conversation with them. Contradictory stories and darting eyes made it apparent that there was something they were not telling her. Something, she was certain, their older male companion would not want her to know.

The destination, the young girls, the older male; she had seen this before. Many times.

Reluctantly, the girls agreed to let her put them up in a hotel for the night. She was lucky, she knew, to get them away before the man returned from the Starbucks restroom. The real challenge now was to talk to the girls separately, but she knew this would be difficult. In her experience, the truth was much more likely to come out if she could talk to the girls individually. Away from the group pressure to maintain the facade, each would be much more willing to admit that they were not who they said they were, that the man was not their uncle but a boyfriend or even pimp. That they wanted out.

Jenny Williamson wants to help them get out. Williamson is the founder of Courage To Be You, a local non-profit organization based in Rocklin. Her organization works with underage victims of sex trafficking right here in northern California. Not only do they actively work to remove girls from the sex trade, they offer underage victims new beginnings: places to call home and people to call families.

Sex trafficking is a growing, well-documented problem in the United States. According to one Department of Justice report, cases of sex trafficking have increased ten-fold in the United States over the last two years. In the Sacramento area alone, the FBI has recovered over 200 children in the past several years who were being sold as prostitutes. Williamson's foundation works to educate the community about sex trafficking and provide victims with shelter and recovery programs.

To promote awareness, Courage To Be You hosts speaking engagements across the state and holding frequent volunteer training

seminars. It is at one such seminar that Williamson tells the story of the three girls at Starbucks whom she suspected were being trafficked.

As Williamson continues speaking to the group of volunteers, her passion is clear. More and more stories of exploitation are told. Children, whose wills have been broken and whose dreams have been crushed, are made to believe that they are nothing more than bodies to be used. That they deserve this. Williamson explains exactly what her Courage Houses, the names given to the group homes her organization is opening, plan to do.

The goal of these homes is to “provide a safe, loving environment, with a comprehensive, holistic approach in mental health, psychosocial and educational services, in a group home setting for minors aged eleven to seventeen who are victims of commercial sexual exploitation,” according to the Courage House mission statement. They provide not only shelter, but families and places of healing for victims of the sex trade.

Sacramento has ranked as high as number two in sex trafficking spots in the United States. The greater Sacramento area is a hub for sex trafficking because it is a passing-through space between the Bay Area and Reno. It also is home of the interchange between Interstates 80 and 5 and Highways 50 and 99. “As in any market, ‘location, location, location’ rings true,” Courage House volunteer Moises De La Torre says.

The very fact of increased law enforcement efforts also leads to more confirmed cases of trafficking. The process becomes somewhat circular: authorities notice a growing problem and ramp up efforts to intervene, thus “creating” more instances of confirmed trafficking. De La Torre likens it to having more doctors screening patients for cancer, then having higher cancer rates appear.

The area has an excellent FBI task force dedicated to child sex trafficking, one of the few in the nation. Since its inception, it has reported recovering over 200 girls and at least 2 boys in the Sacramento region alone. The youngest child being sold for sex was only 11. According to the FBI, the average age of entry into prostitution for minors is 13.

The FBI task force works not only to recover children who have been trafficked but to ensure that those responsible receive maximum punishment for their crimes. Similarly, they work to catch predators before they harm children. Officials will pose online as underage sex workers in hopes that potential predators will reveal themselves before any real damage is done.

Many of these children come from adverse home situations. They are runaways or have abusive caretakers. As Williamson tells the volunteers she

trains, this is a typically seen scenario of recruitment into prostitution: an older male starts giving a girl gifts and offering her a place to stay. Often, the girl will see an attachment to him as the preferable alternative to whatever troubles she is facing at home or on the street. He becomes her boyfriend and gradually begins abusing her emotionally, physically, and sexually. This is one of the most common methods that pimps use to recruit prostitutes. Because of this power dynamic, not to mention the fact that these are often very young girls in the middle of mental and psychological development, many do not see themselves as victims of a heinous crime.

Even though our region has a dedicated task force, there is still nothing substantive to do with the children once they have been recovered. There are conflicting laws on the issue of juvenile prostitution, Williamson says. On one hand, prostitution is illegal in the state of California. When a girl is picked up from the street, she will likely be handcuffed, arrested, and sent to juvenile hall.

This is the best that law enforcement can do for the children, currently: charge them with prostitution so they are off the streets for a few days. Yet the law also states that any time a child is sold for sex, that child is a victim. The contradiction becomes apparent: the children are made to feel as though they are criminals (and are treated as such), while the law also categorizes them as victims.

When children have been charged with prostitution and put in juvenile detention, they are given options for “recovery,” but most are undesirable, such as the foster care system, which many have already been victims of. According to the local FBI task force, at least 90% of the girls they have picked up are already in the foster care system. These are children who have had their bodies sold repeatedly for sex and typically have severe psychological issues because of it. Because of this, they are usually resistant to any outside help. It may take multiple encounters with a victim to convince her that she needs help, Williamson says.

According to *Courage To Be You*, there are currently only ten homes for underage victims of the sex trade in the United States. Courage House, which officially opened in August of 2011, is licensed to house six girls. Plans are underway to eventually accommodate up to fifty.

Antonio De La Torre, a police officer in Las Vegas, recognizes the victimization of minors caught up in sex trafficking: “You have to recognize that juveniles involved in sex trafficking are true victims. So, they must be treated as such.”

Officer De La Torre would rather see a heavier emphasis on prevention than waiting until there is a need for intervention. “Prevention is such a big task when dealing with ANY crime, but the nature of sex trafficking is delicate. Prevention needs to be early on in a child’s life. Basic things like ‘Stranger Danger’ or reporting abuse.” According to him, equipping authorities and community members alike with a working knowledge about the susceptibility of runaways is key in preventing sex trafficking.

Courage To Be You also works to educate families about the potential for sex trafficking in their communities and partners with law enforcement to reach at risk children. During the volunteer training session, Williamson describes visiting families in their homes and discussing topics such as conflict resolution and child abuse prevention. Through these efforts, she hopes to reduce the likelihood of underage prostitution, similar to Officer De La Torre’s recommendation.

Williamson and her organization view the emotional support that her organization offers the victims as equally important to meeting their physical need. “In a philosophical sense, they give [the girls] a nurturing home and a family where they can develop as individuals and be cared for by people who are committed to serving them,” says Moises De La Torre.

The Courage House program is designed to be long term, with no defined minimum or maximum time limit. Though the state licensing requirements do not allow girls to stay in the home past the age of 18 and a half, Courage To Be You hopes to establish a second home, Courage House Too, that offers support for girls who age out of their program and for others who were victims of sex trafficking in their juvenile years. The program would transition them to healthy, independent lives.

The girls that Williamson found that evening in Starbucks exemplify the struggle that accompanies efforts to help underage victims of sex trafficking. Though they often don’t see themselves as victims, they are ensnared in a web of exploitation that is much larger than themselves.

After leaving the Starbucks with Williamson and agreeing to spend the night away from the man they were travelling with, the girls maintained contact with him throughout the evening. The silent struggle was obvious to Williamson, played out through text messages and knowing glances. The girls eventually admitted that they were not sisters and that only one of them was eighteen, but in the morning their male

companion, whom they now identified as the oldest girl's boyfriend, picked them up and carried them on to Reno. Legally, there was nothing Williamson could do to stop them as they got into the man's car and drove away.

Williamson wishes they would have let her help them, but is hopeful that, one day, they might call her. As she says, "You never know if you are the first or the fifteenth person to talk to her. Maybe someday somebody else will try to help her, and she will remember that you did, too, and realize that people do actually care."