

Two Oklahoma victims of sex trade finally heal years later

Friends, acquaintances, even relatives lure or force victims to toil in the human trafficking industry. Oklahomans once caught up in the industry speak out.

BY SONYA COLBERG scolberg@opubco.com  2
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As many as 1.2 million children worldwide are caught in the sex trade each year, according to a recent U.S. State Department report.

Oklahoma serves as a hub for the human trafficking industry because Interstates 35, 40 and 44 provide easy routes for trafficking to cities such as Las Vegas, Atlanta, St. Louis and Kansas City, Mo., said Mark Elam, director of the educational and rehabilitative group Oklahomans Against Trafficking Humans or OATH.

“This is called commercial trafficking of humans. That means they're marketed as a product and they're rented like a blockbuster movie rental to multiple abusers,” Elam said.

An estimated \$9 billion yearly is spent on the illegal trade of children and adults for both sex and labor.

Two Oklahomans who were once child sex-trafficking victims say they are recovering from their ordeal with the help of OATH.

The windows were boarded up in the room where 12-year-old sex slave Jeannetta Taylor McCrery said she slept on a bare mattress on the floor.

She could hear the other girls scream, and the scuffle of fights were common in the three-story house, she said.

Whenever she could shake off the effects of the drugs her captors apparently hid in her once-daily meals, she wondered how a churchgoer and straight-A student could slip out to attend a party, get drugged and abducted, to ultimately end up in a red light district.

“There were several girls. I've seen them beat half to death. I've seen them have guns pulled on them. They were young ... underage like me,” Taylor McCrery said.

Someone would unlock the door, and she'd see yet another stranger who would use her for sex.

Now 40, married and studying to become a therapist, Taylor McCrery has no idea how many times the scene was repeated in that house on N Cheyenne in Tulsa before police broke up the ring. The bust decades ago happened before sexual exploitation was understood, and she was arrested on a prostitution complaint at age 12. She said she

didn't even know what the word meant.

About the same time in Oklahoma City, a “john” reached over and stroked a runaway teenager's leg.

“We're going to go have some fun,” Samantha recalls him saying.

“With every fiber of my being, I knew. I could tell he was going to kill me,” said Samantha, who doesn't want her last name used.

“The fear. I just wanted to vomit because of the fear.”

As he steered the car around the corner, she saw police working a traffic accident. Samantha grabbed the door handle. Jumped to freedom. But thinking she couldn't trust anyone, instead of running to the police, she ran in the other direction straight into another sex trafficking scenario.

Oklahomans Against Trafficking Humans is working more than 200 similar trafficking cases in Oklahoma, a number Elam said is low because victims often avoid reporting incidents. “It's been taboo. It's been off the record. It's been unreported,” Elam said.

The organization helps through arranging emergency shelter for victims and providing referrals, as well as education for law officers and others and prevention through public school programs.

Though it's unclear how many trafficking victims are living in Oklahoma, about 15,000 to 18,000 people are trafficked nationwide, according to the State Department.

Signs to watch for

Victims often are children and women who may be lured, abducted or forced into servitude by friends, strangers or even relatives, Elam said.

More frequently, victims are from other countries. They usually lack proper identification or documentation, said Clay Simmonds, a Federal Bureau of Investigation special agent.

Victims usually have no personal items or family photos. They may seem fearful, depressed or submissive and always seem to be watching for whoever is controlling them, he said. They often show evidence of physical abuse such as bruises and cuts, Simmonds said.

Businesses involved in trafficking may open with little or no advertising, use blinds or shades and cater to male clientele. People may be coming and going at all hours, and the business may keep odd hours, such as 2 to 6 a.m. Simmonds said there's usually very little signage, and the business may use a photocopy of its business license instead of the original. They also tend to advertise in personal ads.

Surviving the abuse

Like Samantha and Taylor McCrery, most sexual trafficking survivors don't escape the control and shame and feel free to tell their story until they reach their 30s or 40s, Elam said.

It took many years of abuse before they escaped and turned their lives around. Taylor McCrery said she began stealing drugs for Mexican drug dealers and was caught and stabbed 36 times with an ice pick when she ran away.

“They told (her mother) they'd kill me, chop off my head and leave it on the porch,” she said.

At age 35, she walked into her first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. She said every day she thanks God and 89-year-old Norvell Wallace, her AA sponsor who reached out and grabbed her hand that day. She said the healing has continued through therapy and OATH.

Samantha is now a single mom who works 60 hours a week. She is in college with plans to become a therapist.

She now speaks at Oklahomans Against Trafficking Humans events and said she is coming to terms with her exploitation through the group's help. She's no longer the penniless, scared girl, running from abuser to abuser.

“It has no power over me anymore. The shame, humiliation, embarrassment. It's not there,” she said.

“I'm not ashamed. I'm a survivor.”



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