

# HUMAN TRAFFICKING ON YOUR CAMPUS

NOW ANYONE CAN BE A TARGET, EVEN  
THE PERSON YOU LEAST EXPECT.

**BY ELISABETH MEINECKE**

*\*Note: Some stories are told as composites of real-life accounts to protect the victims.*

She was a beautiful, talented young woman who had played the violin at Carnegie Hall. For college, she attended a private university on a large academic scholarship. She studied and didn't sleep around. She was raised in a faith-based home.

Yet she became a victim of human trafficking, targeted on her college campus. Even now, she remains caught in the dark, twisted world of those who manipulate others in the lucrative business of sex slavery. Her initial trafficker is in jail, but a group of his buddies keeps her ensnared. Her family and trained professionals are trying desperately to draw her back out.

For those on the outside, such a transformation seems impossible. How does a young woman with everything going for her end up here? But for the perpetrators, unfortunately, the case makes all too much sense. Mind games are part of their business. Seduction and manipulation are two of their sharpest tools.

And where they first wield them can be scarily close to home—your child's campus, or places where your high schooler hangs out.

## **THE SHADOW WORLD IN YOUR BACKYARD**

Talk to those who work with human trafficking victims, and you'll realize it's not a crime that preys only on society's marginalized. In the United States, human trafficking is at the point where no socioeconomic class, demographic or community is safe.

Dottie Laster, who's helped human trafficking victims and assembled a team for this purpose under the umbrella of Laster Global Inc., defines human trafficking as "anyone held in service of another through force, fraud or coercion, and that coercion can be psychological coercion, which is what we most often see ... for the purposes of commercial sex or forced labor." The Polaris Project says human trafficking "is considered to be one of the fastest growing criminal industries in the world."

"I live in a little town of 48,000 people," Laster says. "I have so many cases here that I accidentally bumped into, I can't even count them."

Laster says she noticed about a year ago she was working with more U.S. citizen victims than immigrant victims. She's also currently working on several high school and college cases.

The average entry age into the sex trade in the United States? Twelve, according to Kathy Wilson, a spokesperson at New Day for Children. New Day is a nonprofit



that provides a home for victims of sex trafficking who are 10-18 years old, helping them heal and eventually reunite with family members, if that's an option. All of the children New Day has worked with so far have been U.S. citizens, with the youngest being 11 years old.

Families can spend thousands of dollars hiring investigators and lawyers when a loved one is in a human trafficking situation. In the violinist's case, a private investigator Laster had previously trained on human trafficking indicators was hired by the family. When the investigator noticed those indicators in the violinist's case, the individual reached out to Laster, who is now consulting on the case.

Such assistance provides clarity for families who may know something bad is going on but can only see their daughter acting in a way foreign to her normal self.

"These families are doing great. They're doing everything they're supposed to do. But nobody understands what it is until we get involved," Laster says. "It really makes the case go better when you can finally identify what's going on."

The ways by which these victims become entrapped in the industry are legion, ranging from snatch-and-grab (Wilson knows of one victim in her area who simply stepped outside of an Old Navy, her friends inside, to talk on her cell phone, and sex traffickers happened to be cruising by) to a method often referred to as "Romeo."

### STOMACH-TURNING SEDUCTION

It can all begin like a Taylor Swift song. It may appear to the girl as a chance meeting with a guy. The guy feigns interest.

But while the girl thinks it's the start of a wonderful new relationship, he is stockpiling information, learning her hopes, her dreams, who she's mad at, her weakness, her insecurities. Perhaps she didn't date a lot in high school, and now she has a man, sometimes older, listening to her with flattering attention. Or there may be a "middle man" doing the initial scouting of the girl, after which Romeo appears to sweep the unknowing victim off her feet. All the while, she thinks she's found her fairy tale.

This psychological journey a victim undergoes as she is being "groomed" for sex slavery is key to understanding how

such perpetrators end up ensnaring, and retaining, victims. The girl sees a relationship. The guy knows that relationship will function as chains to keep her captive.

A college campus provides ample access for perpetrators and recruitment of victims. There is never just one way victims are approached, Laster notes. One perpetrator was on campus with the excuse that he was checking out courses. Another trafficker actually had a booth set up (real intentions disguised) at a college event, according to the *San Antonio Current*. A third guy had restaurants, and he'd select victims from girls working there.

The next step for the perpetrators is to bring about some sort of trauma. Trauma bonding attaches the victim more closely with the perpetrator, because it helps the victim establish a connection with the person that caused him or her the most pain. The trauma can be something such as a gang rape or taking a girl to a strip club for the first time. And while the victim is recovering from the trauma, the perpetrator will be nice to her and rewrite history, extracting himself from the role as villain.

"If you understand trauma, this makes sense. If you don't, you think that that's crazy," Laster says. "Our brains don't file things correctly when we're in trauma. And so they [the perpetrators] rewrite history."

From there, isolation can occur. The victim ends up blaming the pain she's experiencing on those who actually love her. Laster says that at that point, the victim is almost in an altered state, unable to hear the pleadings or warnings of people trying to actually help her. And thus she progresses through four stages: recruiting, grooming, trauma and isolation, after which "she's putty in your hands," Laster says.

"She'll do what you want," Laster continues. "And that's the end game."

When the victim is to the point where she's deaf to those who can help her, Laster says the best thing is to focus on taking care of the bad guys, so that their control over the victim weakens.

There are some girls, Wilson says, who self-traffick—they see it as a glamorous lifestyle and a way to make money, unaware they're actually victims.

Wilson also talks about the

"boyfriend" approach, noting victims can be approached at places where kids congregate, like a mall. The perpetrator may chat the girl up and exchange numbers. And she says in this new "relationship," there will likely be a mixture of tenderness and violence.

The process for luring high school students is similar to that of college students; there can be a "Romeo pimp," likely older, and the high schoolers are drawn in by doing adult things they wouldn't normally do, or of which their parents would not approve. Boys can also be sucked in by "older" activities such as driving or drugs; girls are attracted to status, affection and gifts.

Laster suggests perpetrators don't pull off these successful mind gymnastics because they're brilliant; instead, they're practiced.

The psychological component of this industry is powerful—so powerful, in fact, that it can lure a victim back into a sex trafficking situation even after she's initially fled the perpetrator.

### FROM NIGHTMARE TO NEW LIFE

Such was the case of Rebekah Charleston, the youngest of six kids. At the beginning of high school, she fell in with the wrong crowd and eventually started skipping school. She dabbled in drugs, moved out of her parents' house at 16 and found herself in a girls' home, from which she eventually ran away. At 17, she was a nomad, moving in with people she'd just met.

She ended up living with drug dealers, and, when the business slowed, another girl who lived with them told Charleston the two of them needed to start pulling their weight. She took Charleston to a strip club, where, despite her age, Charleston was hired and allowed to drink.

A few weeks in, she met an individual at the club.

"He, of course, didn't tell me who he was. ... They don't tell you what their plans are for you. It was just another person I was going to move in with, and live with," Charleston recalls.

The second night into her stay, however, he told her to get into a car with the ambiguous message that the other girls would "show her what to do," Charleston says. She innocently did so, and was taken out to a track, where sex is sold, in a dicey area of town. Reeling, but not knowing where else to go, she did what she was told.





About two months in, she was ready to kill herself.

She met another guy. Smooth-talking, 20 years older than she was, he let Charleston move in with him. He had a 5,000 square-foot home. He had multiple cars. He talked about businesses.

But he was also a sex trafficker.

For a month or two, he "groomed" Charleston, likely waiting till she turned 18, brainwashing her before trafficking her. He eventually isolated Charleston from everyone she knew, telling her from the beginning he was the only one who loved her. He told her she was a street urchin. He would beat her, and she would also witness other girls in the house being beaten. Fear kept Charleston from protecting herself from the physical violence, since resistance would only bring on more beating, though the perpetrator was careful never to break a bone so that she could still work.

## **"THE PSYCHOLOGICAL COMPONENT OF THIS INDUSTRY IS POWERFUL—SO POWERFUL, IN FACT, THAT IT CAN LURE A VICTIM BACK INTO A SEX TRAFFICKING SITUATION EVEN AFTER SHE'S INITIALLY FLED THE PERPETRATOR."**

Yet the psychological coercion this man imposed was so strong that for 10 years, Charleston stayed with him, believing all the lies he told, but also living in fear. In fact, he told her he would kill her if she left.

"I thought he made me better, but really, the bondage only got deeper," she said.

He forced Charleston to travel around the country. And the luxuries he'd distract the girls with only reinforced to the victims that what was happening must be OK, since things were so successful financially. At one point, Charleston had three Mercedes. There was a 5-acre ranch. There were Arabian horses.

Yet Charleston says the fear of physical abuse would make her ill every day. A trip to San Francisco, though she was being trafficked, gave her distance enough from the perpetrator that she saw her chance to leave. She stayed away for a

few months, but was eventually lured back. He never beat her physically after that, but the brainwashing continued.

What finally severed the tie was a year in federal prison for Charleston, all for the perpetrator's sake. None of the girls, because they were all frightened by his power, would testify against the perpetrator on the charge that he had a prostitution ring. So instead, they were charged with conspiracy to commit tax evasion and went to prison. When Charleston got out, it was the perpetrator's turn to go in, and she knew she had 18 months to begin building a new life while he was behind bars.

### **HOPE**

The recovery process for human trafficking victims is a marathon, not a sprint, but there are rays of hope along the way. The day Laster speaks with *Townhall*, she knew of a victim who was

meeting with family members for the first time in a long while.

Laster also has past victims advise her on how to speak to other victims. She says that process actually helps the past victims heal as they realize their experience is helping others.

Charleston says this concept of healing through volunteering has been true in her experience as well. The recovery process was not easy at first; in fact, after she left for good, she reverted back to her 17-year-old self. It's hard to recover instantly from 10 years of being manipulated, especially when one isn't equipped to realize he or she was actually a victim, not a volunteer.

Charleston moved again and found a church, which helped, and a group called We Are Cherished, a healing ministry for those who used to be in the sex industry. Charleston also had a child, which she says helped motivate her to organize her

life. She is now a full-time college student with a 4.0 GPA and plans to go into the medical profession. She also completed her first speaking engagement, which she did in conjunction with Laster.

Charleston still deals with the aftereffects of the trauma she experienced but feels that she can live life fully and happily now and be thankful for where she's at. She views herself not as a survivor, but as an "overcomer."

New Day for Children is another example of the work being done to give trafficked victims a jumpstart on a new life. The organization, which has been around for three-and-a-half years, began after several people brought up the problem of human trafficking to the leadership at First Covenant Church in Oakland, Calif. Initially, the church considered building a shelter overseas, but conversations with law enforcement and social services made the group realize shelters were a critical need in the United States.

At the time New Day launched, Wilson says they knew of less than 50 beds in the U.S. dedicated to residential sheltering of human trafficking victims. To put that number in context, the Justice Department in December 2011 estimated up to 300,000 children were "at risk for sexual exploitation each year in the United States."

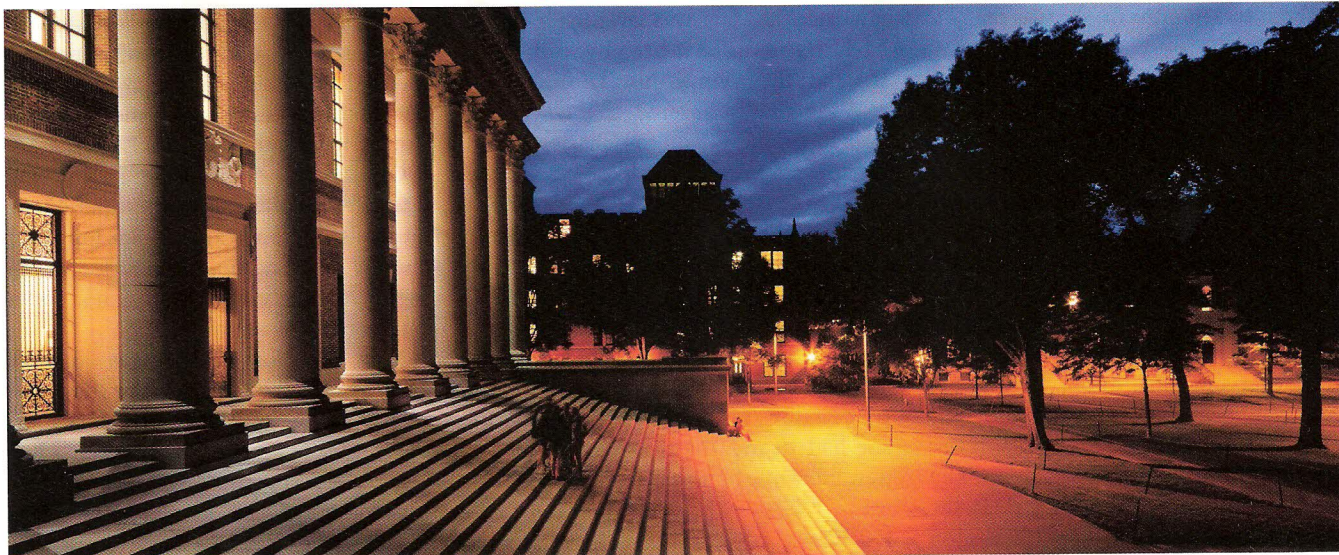
Building up programs such as New Day in this country, however, is difficult, because it revolves around taking care of minors. And it's also expensive.

"We could do a whole program in Thailand for the cost of one girl here in this country," Wilson says.

Donation and grant-based, New Day accepts girls from all over the United States. They've had girls from Texas, Arizona, Georgia, Pennsylvania and the casinos in Las Vegas. In a safe, undisclosed location in Northern California, girls at the New Day location have a chance to rebuild themselves after the physical violence they've likely experienced and being sold as many as 20 times a day.

New Day is a licensed boarding school and operates on a homeschool-type curriculum year-round, since girls join New Day at different grade levels and varying points during the year. In addition to the schooling, they receive therapy and a medical evaluation. And





they also meet adults with whom they can form trusting relationships. The New Day staff is full-time, with most staffers living on the premises.

The program also helps girls master daily life skills. New Day has a professional chef, but the girls take turns helping prepare the meal alongside the chef and thus learn to cook. The girls serve each other at meals and do the cleanup. They are taught basic household skills such as cleaning, and they do their own laundry.

But there's also time to just enjoy their childhood. New Day has taken the girls to Disneyland, and they also get to go water skiing and inner tubing. They'll be treated to a pizza night or a bowling excursion.

"Our goal is to have girls to be healed up—to give them their childhoods back, is what we try to do," Wilson says.

Overall, New Day has worked with 33 girls so far. The program has nine girls currently, with a goal of 25. Since they are donation-based, however, New Day tries to ensure a few years' funding is in place for each girl as she's taken in, so that the entire program doesn't collapse.

### A FRIGHTENING DEMAND

An unsettling question is why the profile for human trafficking victims seems to be diversifying, not shrinking. Laster's theory is demand for commercial sex has grown so much that predators are no longer going after perceived "easy" targets; they're going after *any* target.

She also thinks the supply does not seem to be equal to the demand.

Commercial sex, Laster points out, is marketed primarily to a male audience. If there's such a lack of audience for women in purchasing commercial sex, then the amount of women willing to voluntarily engage in such activities is likely not equal to the demand.

So what's fueling this gut-wrenching appetite? The kind of hunger where, as Wilson describes, trafficked girls are brought everywhere from fields—yes, fields—to big conventions or gatherings such as the Super Bowl?

The "gasoline" on this particular fire, Wilson states, is pornography, which technology makes more accessible as society removes the shame.

"The whole stigma about porn is gone," Wilson says, adding the current average age for boys to start watching pornography is 8. It's a numbing of conscience only increased by TV shows with pervasive sexual themes such as "The Client List," "Mistresses" or even the Victoria's Secret fashion show that's now aired on television.

Wilson also alludes to a psychological mind game buyers of victims can play to numb their consciences—excuses such as, "Well, she's a consenting adult. At least she's getting paid for it." What they don't realize, Wilson says, is that most of these girls don't see a penny of the money they make. Wilson also points out the buyers might not know how young the girls are, though Wilson is quick to add that doesn't excuse the purchasers, even if it helps them "rationalize" their actions.

And the sex-trafficking trade is sickeningly lucrative for the traffickers.

Even gangs, according to Wilson, are becoming involved because of the amount of money to be made.

### WHAT PARENTS CAN WATCH OUT FOR, AND HOW FAMILIES CAN QUESTION SCHOOLS

Sending a child off to college, or having a kid enter high school, is a big enough adjustment for parents before even considering a school's human trafficking awareness. It's becoming clear, however, that it needs to be part of the conversation.

According to Laster, one woman who was sex trafficked for over 20 years named an extensive list of universities targeted by sex traffickers long before Laster was aware it was a problem.

"We're late to the party," Laster says of campus targeting.

Laster says she's reached out to some college campuses where she's had known cases of human trafficking, but the schools often seem in the dark as to what's going on and, even more unsettling, unwilling to respond. In addition to immoral, it's also bad business on the schools' part, because friends of the victim are usually so frightened they end up moving or switching schools.

"I think all parents should ask, when they send their kids to college, 'Has our college addressed this? Are they watching for this? Has there been something done?'" Laster says.

There are also clues parents can watch for to decipher when their child is being lured into a human trafficking situation. Laster says parents should be sensitive



to changes in communication with their child, aware of extracurricular activities and new people in their child's life. She also suggests parents not be afraid to slightly annoy kids by simply checking into changes in behavior.

Usually in a human trafficking situation, Laster says, grades are the first thing to go.

"Do not take a slip in grades lightly. Go find out why," Laster recommends. "Drive down there. Talk to their suitemate, talk to their roommate."

Laster spoke of one case where a mother caught something in a communication, drove to her daughter's campus and talked to the roommate. It turned out her daughter was already off campus and not attending school.

Another preventative measure parents can take is talking to their child about what the sex trafficking grooming tactics are, and how to watch for them. Laster acknowledges high schoolers will be rebellious, but she notes reasonable rules are put in place to protect kids when parents aren't there, a fact the parents should communicate to the kids.

Laster says she often gives sex trafficking victims 10 percent of the credit, though not the blame, because they've usually broken a rule they knew they shouldn't. Laster talks about one 14-year-old girl who chose to sneak out of her room at 3 a.m. and ended up being taken across the country and forced into labor. It took her parents three months to find her. And while the victim shouldn't be blamed, she gave the perpetrators an opening by choosing to sneak out of her house.

A third helpful tool for parents is establishing relationships with the child's friends.

"The friends can see what's going on with the kids better than the kid even knows," Laster explains.

Potential victims, meanwhile, can evaluate new relationships by asking whether someone's interest in them makes sense and whether it's helping them reach their goals. Laster says she tells students that someone who is isolating them from their friends, family and dreams might make them feel good, but such a person does not have a victim's best interest in heart.

For her part, Charleston recommends parents stay involved in a child's life, even if that child doesn't want them to. At some point, she says, her parents just sort of quit and let her move out—and they were left with no clue of what she was doing. She also stresses the red flag of an older man taking an interest in a younger girl.

For families, the many pitfalls by which girls can become enslaved in the modern world may seem overwhelming. Yet hope for a safer society remains through work such as New Day's and Laster's, and stories such as Charleston's. •

*If you are interested in hosting Dottie Laster for a speaking engagement, need consultation in a human trafficking situation, or are interested in combating human trafficking or protecting victims, please contact Laster Global Consulting and visit [www.lasterglobal.com](http://www.lasterglobal.com). If you would like to have Charleston speak at an event, please contact We Are Cherished. For those interested in donating to or becoming involved with New Day, please visit the organization's website at <http://www.newdayforchildren.com/>.*

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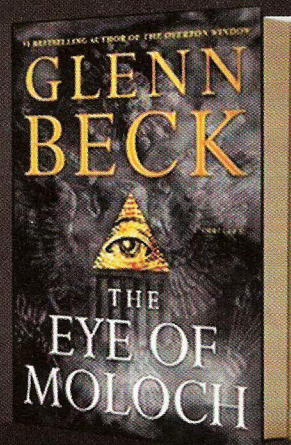
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