



## **HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN SMALL URBAN & RURAL COMMUNITIES**

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## **Human Trafficking in Small Urban & Rural Communities:**

### **Survivors' Experiences with 'The Life.'**

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Survivors' Experiences with 'The Life.'**

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Human trafficking is a form of slavery that rose to the attention of the international community in the mid 1990's. Human trafficking has taken on many forms as a global issue, such as the "perfect crime" (Talbot & Rodgers, 2011) where the profits are high and the risk of being detected are low (Gallagher, 2005); a crime where punishment has been limited. Human trafficking is perpetrated by international criminal organizations, local gangs, and small "mom & pop" organizations who buy and sell women like cattle; and the *everyday street pimp* with the innate ability to quickly manipulate young women into what feels like a *romantic relationship*. From there the women are lured into drugs, prostitution and total captivity. Often, these young women are coerced into believing they are willing participants and in a loving relationship.

There are many theories speculating why human trafficking has now come to the surface as a global issue that has manifested in every country in the world. Some suggest that it is the result of "globalization, international organized crime, population dislocation, migration, political instability, and economic upheaval" (Weiner & Hala, 2008, p. 2). The current literature suggests that religious and feminists groups often have theoretical differences, but on this issue they agree that human trafficking is a "special evil" (ibid, 2008, p.18). In our small community of providers, some believe that the current manifestation of human trafficking and the number of victims is underpinned by the moral decay of the foundation upon which societies are established, and is a sign of the times, a biblical indication of the end of the age and a sign that the return of Christ is near.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss preliminary findings of a research study designed specifically to examine human trafficking from the perspective of the survivor. The study took place in South Dakota, which is a large state, with a small population given its size, about 850,000 people. It is a state that is largely comprised of small rural towns, vast areas of farm and ranch land, and two small urban communities. The state is known for its pheasant hunting season and the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally. These events are known for large gatherings of men, and often women are trafficked in for prostitution services. Additionally, the oil boom in western North Dakota has increased the movement of trafficked women from South Dakota making it both a source and a transit state.

The purpose of the interviews with survivors of human trafficking was to listen to the stories of how they were lured into the world of human trafficking, how they survived, and how they exited what is known as "*the life*." We also wanted to find out how they overcame the difficulties associated with their experiences, how they survived, the chance encounters while in captivity that were missed opportunities for professionals such as police or health care professionals to intervene and offer assistance or rescue them. Finally, we wanted to find out how they are doing now and what has become of their lives.

Obtaining IRB approval to interview survivors was not without its own difficulties. The IRB committee was concerned with the health and safety of the survivors, the potential for psychological trauma associated with recalling the traumatic stories of love, betrayal, rape, violence, captivity, and recovery. As a result, safe guards were built into the gathering of data to protect the survivors.

The IRB committee was also concerned that the survivors would reveal details of criminal activity, implicating themselves and placing themselves at risk of prosecution. The

committee members were concerned with the researchers' ethical responsibilities to report criminal activity, or be subjected to subpoena in a criminal case. To protect the survivors an application was made to the National Institute of Health (NIH) for a Certificate of Confidentiality, which was granted.

This is qualitative case study research. An interview schedule was designed for consistency in the collection of data and ultimately was used only to clarify details during what became very thorough interviews of four women who are survivors of human trafficking.

The study was framed around a collaborative relationship with a local ministry where pro bono counseling is provided for survivors of human trafficking. The survivors in the study volunteered to tell their stories in this research study, hoping that their experiences would help professionals understand better how trafficking takes place, the impact, and the development of services to help other victims, and education for prevention. The interviews began with one open-ended qualitative question asking the survivors to tell us about their experiences as a trafficked woman.

There was the possibility that the retelling of her story would re-traumatize the survivor. To address this concern, the counselor sat in and participated in the interview. The plan was that if the interview became too stressful, it would be stopped. The counselor would then be able to debrief with the survivor. If the survivor was able to continue at a later date, another appointment would be scheduled. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. To date, the study consists of four survivors who participated in the interview process.

The study has provided four rich interviews that will illicit considerable analysis as we code and examine the details of the lives of these women. For this presentation we have decided

to present a brief summary of the stories of two women interviewed whom we will refer to as Tina and Laura. The identities of other persons mentioned have also been changed.

### ***TINA***

Tina grew up in a single parent home and never knew her biological father. She does not know if he knew that she even existed. She had a step-father for about 5 years. He never abused her, but she was afraid of him. He was violent and abusive toward her mother. Once divorced, Tina and her mother lived with her maternal grandparents. She describes her life from that point as happy. She attended private Catholic schools, was an athlete, and had friends. At age 16 she met her trafficker. He spent two years grooming her, waiting until she was 18. During those two years, she was rebellious. She and her friends got into drinking alcohol and using marijuana. She had inpatient treatment twice, and gave birth to two children.

She was in foster care during both pregnancies. The first baby was given up for adoption. She was pregnant and in foster care on her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday when her trafficker, George, tracked her down and knocked on her door. Later, while she and her baby were living with her aunt, George again came to her door and they began a romantic relationship. He moved in.

When he and her aunt got into a fight, George was told to leave. He took Tina and the baby with him. Once isolated from family, George began to pressure Tina to prostitute herself so they would have money to live on. He told her *“you were giving it away for free, why don't you make some money off of it?”* It was after her first night of street solicited prostitution that he introduced her to cocaine and physical violence. Later he brought home some dope and wanted to try shooting it into her veins. He had never shot dope before. After shooting her up with dope, he tried it on himself. They both became even more addicted, and the cost of their habit

increased significantly. Tina describes herself as “a good Catholic girl” who did not even know that prostitution existed before George put her on the streets.

George had a bible and quoted scriptures to her. He did not talk about salvation, but quoted scriptures on how women were supposed to behave, and that men were the head of the family. And he would force her onto the streets to earn money for their growing addiction. Violence became a daily occurrence and she was afraid of him. He threatened to hurt her mother if she tried to leave or didn't cooperate. Her mother was really all that she had. And he threatened to hurt her aunt, with whom she had previously lived and had always been very close.

His control was pervasive. She was not supposed to have any friends. She was not supposed to talk with anyone or interact with any of the other girls on the streets. Many of the girls who were prostituted by pimps committed suicide to escape “the life.”

*Escaping.* Although Tina wanted to leave George, she was afraid. The relationship ended in an unexpected way. Another local pimp, Bart, was attempting to steel Tina away from George. George fought back and vandalized Bart's property. To retaliate, Bart and two other local pimps showed up at Tina's apartment. Tina said they were all high on drugs. They broke down her door. George ran out the back door with two of the three men in pursuit. Bart had a gun. One of the other men had a knife. Tina heard three gunshots then saw the men run to their car and leave. She ran to the back of the house to find that George had been shot and was bleeding from the mouth. She called the police. George was hospitalized and died later that night. She identified the men who broke into the apartment. Two of the men were sentenced to life in prison. The third man was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Even though Tina escaped when her trafficker was murdered, she had difficulty leaving the life. It was most difficult dealing with the addiction to drugs. She craved drugs, and no matter

what she did, or how sober she got, she craved the drugs. That craving always led her back to drugs and an unhealthy lifestyle.

*Medical Personnel, Police & Social Service Agencies as First Responders.* One of the questions we wanted to ask was if the survivor had received any medical care during captivity, and if any professional ever suspected or questioned them about their freedom to choose or if they were being forced into prostitution.

Tina interfaced with the medical and social service community several times while in captivity. Early in the relationship she became pregnant. George was in jail for domestic violence, when she gave birth. The baby was born white. She knew George would think the baby was a “trick” baby, so she gave him up for adoption. No one, doctors, nurses or social workers, talked to her about her living situation or relationship. No one questioned that she was alone at the hospital. With no one to pick her up from the hospital upon release, Tina walked home, alone and “numb” from the trauma of giving away her baby. When the social worker picked up the baby she did not offer her a ride home or question her about transportation, or offer any assistance.

About a year later, she was giving birth again. By this time, she and George were highly addicted to cocaine. Through a program for pregnant cocaine addicts she saw a nurse who helped her through her pregnancy. The nurse never asked her if she was being abused and never knew that she was forced to prostitute through beatings, threats, and intimidation.

When she was in labor, the doctor who came into the room to examine her saw the track marks on her arms and said, “*my God, you’re nothing but a junkie.*” She said she started crying. The doctor never asked if she was being abused, and did not have any idea that she had been coerced into an addiction and forced into prostitution.

Tina kept her daughter, who was accepted by George as his child. When the baby was three months old she went into drug and alcohol counseling. The counselor never suspected that she was not free to leave her relationship, and that she was not freely choosing to prostitute. She said, “he never asked.”

Tina said that in the early years when she was a prostitute the police used to be on the streets and talk to the prostitutes. She said one police officer asked her why she let George beat her up and treat her that way. But it was just a comment in passing. Tina said that “he was not really asking to know.” He never suspected that she was forced into prostitution.

*Thoughts.* Tina is now 50 years old. She was trafficked in the 1980’s. She has spent many years quietly working through her life, blaming herself, pondering how a “*good Catholic girl*” could have gotten herself into such a horrific situation. Until now, there were no words to explain what had happened. She heard about human trafficking and wondered if that is what had happened to her. Now a college student, she attended a conference and heard a presentation made by the first author. It was then that she realized that she had actually been trafficked, long before society had a term for what she experienced.

One of the saddest findings is the many years Tina blamed herself. She thought that she had somehow voluntarily entered into *the life*. And she has spent many years trying to understand herself and how she let it happen.

*When asked what helped her most through this journey.* Tina’s response to this question was her relationship with God. She said that one time, when she and George were living in a hotel room she was looking through the TV channels and stopped to listen to TD Jakes, a TV Evangelist. She does not know why she stopped on that channel, but she did. She believes that the Holy Spirit came to her that night. She remembers physically, emotionally, and spiritually

feeling Him. TD Jakes was preaching at a prison. When he gave the alter call “all these men ran to the alter and gave their lives to Jesus!” She had never seen anything like that before.

Reflecting, she felt that it was actually her first experience with God.

She says that she always believed in God and she sought the hand of God throughout her ordeal. She said that many times, after being beaten up, she would find herself sitting on the steps of the church. She said she always knew that He was there for her, but that she did not have a personal relationship with Him. After George’s death, and her move to a different community, she attended a Pentecostal church and was saved. She said that God took the desire to do drugs away from her.

### ***LAURA***

Laura was 25 years old when she left her husband, and the father of her two children. As a divorced parent she was struggling with finances and trying to make ends meet with little money and a lot of responsibility. One of her friends took a picture of her from her house and gave it to two pimps. At the time, she did not know that this friend was working for her trafficker. The two pimps used the picture to find and identify her. They had a contest between them to see *who* could traffick her first.

Mike, her trafficker, established a relationship with her, helped her move into a better home, helped her get a car, and helped her with money. He lavished her and her children with gifts. She thought he was an executive who worked for a music company. Once she was beyond her means, he demanded payment and threatened her if she did not return his money. His friend played the role of the *good guy* by talking to her and convincing her that she could easily get the money to pay him back by prostituting herself. She had been drinking and decided to do it. After that, she was beaten into compliance and forced to prostitute whenever he sold her services.

*Leaving.* She tried leaving a couple of times. He always found her. Beatings were common. She had bruises all the time. Laura has no family other than her two children and a brother. Mike knew that she did not want her brother to know her situation, that she was a prostitute. She was afraid of losing her relationship with him. He was really all the extended family she had. So Mike threatened to tell her brother if she left.

He threatened to hurt her children. He threatened to tell everyone what she was doing. He said, *“I’ll tell everybody that you’re a whore. Nobody will ever love you except for me, you’re just a whore. That’s all you are, that’s all you’ll ever be. At least I’ll take care of you.”*

*First Responders.* Laura said that she went to the emergency room once. She had been beaten so badly by a truck that her nose was broken and her eye was swollen shut. She said that she told them that she was lying on her couch and her daughter threw a toy that hit her in the face. No one questioned her story on how she had been injured.

*How did she escape?* She went to jail and was appointed a public defender. Homeland security talked to her and established a trusting relationship. She was in jail for three months, which was enough time for her to begin to feel safe, to feel happy, to get off drugs, and to not want that lifestyle again.

Her trafficker hired an attorney to represent her. He came to the jail. The first thing he said to her was *“Daddy says to tell you that he loves you.”* She got up and left the room and stuck with the public defender.

She said that she had reached a point where she knew that she just could not live that way. She went from being scared to death of him to feeling that she would rather be dead than to live in that lifestyle again. When her trafficker tried to contact her after she got out of jail she

told him that if he did not leave her alone she would make sure that he spent the rest of his life in prison. She never heard from him again.

There were times when she learned he was in town. She would contact homeland security, who were already aware of his presence and told her that they were watching him, and they were watching her house. They told her she was safe. And she believed them.

*Recovering.* Her trafficker is in jail with a life sentence. But the residual impact of the experience continues to have an impact on her life and the lives of her children. She still experiences episodes of PTSD. Working with other people is often difficult because she has issues of trust. She is jumpy if someone comes up behind her and touches her, and at times she almost “loses it (composure)”.

Because Mike was so good to her daughter, she had to talk to her about what had happened, and tell her that Mike was not a good person. Because her children had witnessed the severe beatings, they are afraid of him and other black men.

*What made the difference.* She feels counseling from the ministry has made a difference in her life. She is now a Christian and reads her Bible. When she is scared, she lays in bed with her Bible and her other books and reads. It makes her feel safe.

### **Commonalities**

The stories told by Tina and Laura have some commonalities. Although the ordeals they experienced occurred in different generations the recruitment techniques were similar. Both women thought they were in a mutually loving relationship. They were blinded by the manipulation and hopeful dream of having someone with whom to experience the joys of life. Neither had the family or life experiences that would have helped them discern danger. Both women had grown up in a home with no contact with a biological father. The men who were in

and out of their childhood were poor role models as fathers and as husbands to their mothers. Those relationships did not prepare them to seek a healthy relationship with a life-time partner.

Tina was a single mother, Laura was divorced with two children. They were poor, struggling financially, and lonely. They welcomed the attention of a man who seemingly cared about them. Laura's trafficker lavished her with financial help, gifts, kindness, and caring about her children. During the grooming process he made her life better.

Tina's trafficker overwhelmed her with love and the offer of an ongoing relationship. For both Tina and Laura, it was love and an ongoing loving relationship that drew them into the evil net of human trafficking. Each woman chose a relationship with her trafficker, posing as a lover, over the reality of their disappointing lives.

Following the hopeful dream of a relationship was the last free choice for Tina and Laura. From that point on, actions only had the superficial appearance of choice. Each woman was increasingly consumed by the devious personality of the trafficker, and blindly entered into a life of slavery for him. Once she entered into "the life," life became a living hell.

Tina escaped when her boyfriend was murdered. His death freed her from bondage, but left her grieving for many years over the loss of his love, and confusion about the reality of the relationship. She had escaped her trafficker when he was murdered but continued to struggle for many years with an addiction to drugs. Finally, she was arrested for drugs and spent time in jail and a half-way house. Jail was the ultimate rehabilitation for Tina. Incarceration and time in a half-way house gave Tina the "structure" she needed and the time to become sober. A subsequent encounter with God in a Pentecostal church healed her of the cravings that always pulled her back into drugs, and sometimes *the life*.

Laura escaped when she was arrested and could sleep without the fear of waking up to find her boyfriend on top of her and beating her. Homeland security agents were able to establish a relationship with her and convince her that they would protect her. Laura maintains that jail was her way out. But God is her comfort in the dark times, and in the times when the memories of the past come at her in waves of fear.

*The trafficker.* Even though the incidents of trafficking were in different generations, there were similarities in the methods of trafficking and enslavement. Both traffickers stalked the women: Tina's trafficker patiently stalked her and maintained a relationship with her for two years until she was 18 years old. Laura's trafficker stalked her after he was given a picture of her by one of his women. He and another pimp had a contest to see who could "get" her first. It was a game, and she was the prize.

*After "the life."* Both women are born-again Christians. Both have indicated that it is their relationship with Christ that has helped them overcome the difficult times.

Tina has been free from her trafficker for almost 30 years. Life has been a struggle. She says that it is the relationship with the Holy Spirit that makes the difference.

Laura has been free from her trafficker for five years. She struggles with episodes of sadness, depression, and fear. She says that she is comforted by her faith in God, reading the bible, and faith based counseling.

### **Small Communities, Resources and Prevention**

There have been significant changes in the handling of human trafficking since Tina was trafficked almost 30 years ago. Law enforcement is well aware that young women are at risk of human trafficking. They have made significant progress in learning to recognize victims and arrest traffickers. Tina was trafficked then forced into prostitution in the presence of law

enforcement officers. The officers saw the violence and attempted to intervene, but were unaware of the manifestation of this modern day form of slavery. To medical personnel she was considered just a prostitute and a drug addict. Five years ago Laura was arrested and spent three months in jail. Homeland security officers established a trusting relationship with her and convinced her that they would protect her; and they did.

*Resources.* Resources across the country are often stretched. Most law enforcement agencies are short staffed, underfunded, and must prioritize issues. In order to address the number of trafficking incidents that have taken place in South Dakota, law enforcement agencies have come together and are pooling their resources. They have pooled manpower, equipment, and any resource that can be used by multiple agencies to develop a united front against traffickers who cunningly continue to prey upon vulnerable women and children. As a result, they collaborate, pool resources, and make joint decisions on charges imposed against traffickers. They determine if charges should be at the local, state, or federal level. In addition to sharing resources and information, law enforcement agencies join forces to investigate and gather evidence. As a result, they have been able to take traffickers off the streets and impose lengthy sentences to assure a safer environment for residents of South Dakota and those who are trafficked in or through the state.

### **Conclusion**

Tina and Laura are survivors who have shown tremendous strength and courage. They have struggled to overcome the psychological traumas, addictions, and guilt that haunt survivors of human trafficking.

Tina has been free for many years. She raised her children and overcame the addiction to drugs. She is now a college student and is looking forward to a better future. Laura continues to

make progress and is surviving. She continues in counseling, is working, and has found a better life for herself.

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