

Camille Studebaker

JCM411

10/22/18

Headline: From 'Hell' and back

*The source in this article asked not to be identified by her full name for safety reasons.*

Tara needed to sustain her addiction. She was homeless. She didn't have anyone to go to for help.

Not long before, she used drugs, but then quit when she became pregnant with her son. But then, three years after his birth in 2011, she relapsed. Her father died, and then she relocated from Omaha, Nebraska, back to the South.

She lacked a strong support system, and traffickers preyed on her vulnerability. Next thing Tara knew, she was in Montgomery, Alabama, in a world she described as "Hell," where she was robbed, abused, raped, and forced into the world of human trafficking. Her story illustrates how easily victims can become trapped in an industry that is at work all over the state of Alabama, and one that has become a pressing concern among law enforcement officials and human rights organizations throughout the Southeast.

"It's like a moth to a flame," she said. "They're drawn to people like me who don't have a network of support, and so – easy targets."

Tara said the fact that she was using drugs when she met the people who ended up trafficking her made her more susceptible to the lifestyle she was forced into.

It started out where they told her "You don't have to be *one of those* girls, you don't have to do that." But then they told her "Here's this much of drugs, go sell that." They were actually just setting her up to be robbed. Then, once she was robbed, she was in debt to them. So, she had to do other things to work it off, which is how her time in human trafficking all began.

"I had lost my child, my health, everything," she said.

Tara is not alone as a human trafficking victim in the state. There were 31 cases prosecuted as human trafficking in Alabama in 2017. Tuscaloosa Police Department Lt. Darren Beams said Interstate 20 and Interstate 59, which stretch from near the Mexico border through Atlanta, are thoroughfares for human trafficking in Alabama.

The state's interstate system brings the trafficking business to Alabama from neighboring states such as Tennessee, Louisiana, Georgia and Florida. The Birmingham area shows the largest number for human trafficking, but the crime is a problem statewide, Beams said.

"But all of the major cities are connected with interstate systems, and it flourishes from Huntsville down to Mobile," he said. "We are all connected to a statewide circuit."

Camille Studebaker

JCM411

10/22/18

According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, 68 human trafficking cases in Alabama were reported in 2017, and 184 calls made to the hotline referenced Alabama.

Efforts are being made in Alabama to reduce statewide human trafficking. Beams said law enforcement is working to establish a statewide protocol for all agencies to use and encourage more collaboration between local, state and federal law enforcement to help women stuck in trafficking like Tara was.

Christian Lim, the project administrator for the Alabama statewide human trafficking protocol, said traffickers exploit the vulnerabilities of a person. He said anybody that has a vulnerability can be a victim of human trafficking.

“For a lot of sex trafficking, it could be poverty, or it could just be something as basic as somebody lacking the relationships that they really need in a home or something like that,” he said.

According to the Polaris Project, a nonprofit organization that gathered statistics from the National Human Trafficking Hotline and BeFree Textline, 2,762 of the 10,615 analyzed were minors in 2017. The top recruitment tactic for sex trafficking in 2017 was intimate partner or marriage proposition.

Lim is part of a research team that conducted a series of 20 focus groups throughout the state, which interviewed 114 professionals who may have worked with human trafficking victims or potential victims. The team was able to identify 617 potential victims of human trafficking that they had worked with in 2017. Out of the 617, he said about 354 were probably minors.

Kat Kirkpatrick, marketing supervisor for the Well House, said pimps will hang around schools or shopping malls where their potential victims are. If the trafficker is female, she might befriend the potential victim at school and then say “Hey, you know I’ve got this guy.”

She said if the trafficker is male, he might become her boyfriend or take her out and buy her nice things and treat her really well because traffickers focus on people who are searching for and craving love because of a past trauma.

“They seek out these women who are potentially fragile in that way and they exploit it,” she said.

Kirkpatrick said it is not usually like the movie “Taken” where the victim is stolen off the street.

“It’s a lot of coercion and manipulating of trust, lies and kind of deceitfulness,” she said.

Although Tara’s vulnerabilities were exploited like many women, after about a year in human trafficking, she found a way out of the life she was stuck in.

Camille Studebaker

JCM411

10/22/18

After a couple stints in jail, she got a phone number for the Well House in her Facebook messenger from her son's grandmother. She got out of jail, called the number and they picked her up the next day. She began her time at the Well House in October 2015 and was there for two years.

"It was probably the best thing that I could've ever done," she said.

The Well House is a residential facility in Birmingham that houses adult women who are victims of sex trafficking, providing them a safe place to go and work on recovery.

Once women get on property, Kirkpatrick said they first go to a short-term house called the "immediate shelter," where the goal is to get the women healthy. There is a doctor who comes once a week, and the women get good sleep and donated clothes because they often come with nothing.

Tara said never having to wonder what she is going to eat or where she is going to stay has led her to start to think about her future and what steps to take in order to reach goals she hadn't ever really had before.

The women also have a caseworker, trauma counselor and a general counselor who have individual sessions and group therapy with the victims.

"We try to get them back to square one, they've seen a lot of trauma, and they are in rough shape when we get them, and so it's just all about recovery and restoring them to where they need to be," Kirkpatrick said.

Tara has been out of the Well House for a year now, and she is in school with full custody of her son. She was diagnosed with Hepatitis C when she first got to the Well House, but she got medication for it and is healthy. She will be three years sober this month.