

*“Right in the middle of our state is this horrendous evil that we associate with Las Vegas or Bangkok. It’s here.”*

ANNMARIE BOULAY, WOMEN’S MINISTRIES DIRECTOR AT WINTONBURY CHURCH IN BLOOMFIELD

# Exposing the underground

## Faith groups work to battle sex trafficking

BY TRACEY O’SHAUGHNESSY  
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

Annamarie Boulay is a broad-shouldered, olive-skinned woman with tresses of ebony hair that fall past her shoulders. A member of Wintonbury Church in Bloomfield for nearly 15 years, the Longmeadow, Mass., native had been on the church’s ministry staff for 11 years when she said she heard a message from God to bring the life of Christ to the streets.

Boulay knew what that meant and she was not pleased. Since at least 2000, Wintonbury Pastor Andre Riendeau, like an increasing number of religious leaders, had been preaching about the menace of sex trafficking — not overseas, but in the shadows of the church on the Berlin Turnpike. “Right in the middle of our state is this horrendous evil that we associate with Las Vegas or Bangkok. It’s here.”

But doing something about sex trafficking was not a message Boulay wanted to hear. “I was not pleased,” said Boulay. “It’s evil. It’s hard to see. It’s ugly. I kept begging God not to pick me. I was like, ‘You have the wrong girl.’”

Instead, Boulay became one of the most visible activists in the growing number of faith-based organizations that have assembled to try to prevent sex trafficking and heal its victims.

**BEGINNING IN OCTOBER 2012**, Boulay and a small group of women assembled in her white Lexus from the northern tip of the Berlin Turnpike in Wethersfield, through Newington, Berlin and south 14 miles to Meriden. Once a week, from 10 a.m. to noon, Boulay parked in one of the nearly 40 motels on Route 15 and prayed. And took notes. Boulay compiled a report that included the number of motels/hotels on the strip, addresses, ownership and whether they offered hourly rates.

Of the 36 motels she surveyed, 27 rent rooms hourly. Among the members of the prayer group was Theresa Leonard, 44, a survivor whose mother began selling her at 9 to support a heroin habit.

Boulay later returned to every motel and hotel on the turnpike and asked each to post two posters. One was from the Polaris Project, a global nonprofit that tries to combat and prevent human



CHRISTOPHER MASSA REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

**Annamarie Boulay, women’s ministries director at Wintonbury Church, at the church in Bloomfield March 8. Boulay leads The Underground, an organization of churches that work together, helping victims of sex and human trafficking in Connecticut.**

*“The church was never meant to be a Sunday morning country club. The church was meant to be a redemptive influence in a fallen and broken world.”*

PASTOR ANDRE RIENDEAU

trafficking. The other listed the hotline for victims in trouble. Boulay and her group, The Underground, later shared the report with her church and state legislators.

Boulay saw scores of cars, all parked in the back of the motel, while the storefront remained largely empty. “Johns come at lunch hour and they can do their business and it’s hidden,” she said.

**BOULAY SUBSEQUENTLY HAS CONNECTED** with Love146 in New Haven. The fundraising efforts of The Underground have helped finance the purchase of backpacks that Love146 gives to survivors of sex trafficking. Boulay and her group have presented their mission to

more than 250 churches which have contributed funds. Since its inception, The Underground boasts 500 church volunteers, representing more than 100 churches in the state.

For a former legislative analyst like Jillian Gilchrest, the involvement of faith-groups initially made her hesitant. But The Underground has provided her and other policymakers with valuable information, said Gilchrest, senior policy analyst of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women.

“The faith-based community is heavily involved in this movement,” she said. “As a feminist, this is the first issue that there’s overlap. We usually disagree on reproductive choice so it’s been refreshing and nice that we come together on this issue. They have played a very valuable role.”

That marks a shift in perspective for many Christian churches. “The church was never meant to be a Sunday morning country club,” said Pastor Andre Riendeau, 53. “The church was meant to be a redemptive influence in a fallen and broken world.”

The group is planning to create another ministry to target illicit massage parlors and escort services in the state.

Visit [rep-am.com](http://rep-am.com) to watch videos featuring representatives from the Waterbury state’s attorney’s office speaking about how victims are lured into the life.

# SURVIVING: Agent for change

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would say, ‘It’s time to go back to work,’” Leonard said. “And I knew what that meant. It was time for me to sell my body. (She’d say) ‘If you really love Mommy, you’ll do this.’”

Leonard loved her mother. When she was 20 and nearly wrestled her way out of “the life,” she sought out her mother in a roach-infested apartment, just to let her have it. Tell her what a rotten mother she was.

But, seeing her mother in that swirl, stoned, with another child — a 9-year-old boy — she felt something between revulsion and pity. “She just looked so broken,” Leonard said. “I couldn’t get it out.”

“I knew I had to take care of Mommy,” said Leonard of childhood, who had sex with four to five men nightly to support her mother’s habit. “I always thought she was making good money for me ‘cause she wouldn’t sell me cheap, right. But at the end of the night...” Her voice trailed off. “My soul was sold for drugs.”

When Leonard was 13, staying at The Children’s Center in Hamden, a behavioral and psychiatric center, her mother gave up her parental rights.

Leonard grew into adulthood illiterate, impoverished, alcoholic, and ultimately addicted to heroin and cocaine. She spent years dulling the horror of flashbacks with drugs, a habit she financed with the only skill she had: prostitution.

After her last release from prison on a conspiracy to commit larceny in 2008, Leonard said she experienced a conversion. “My heart called out for change,” she said. “There was a silent calling in my heart that I just can’t keep living this way.”

First in a sober house, Coram-Deo in New Britain, and then to Wellspring Church in Berlin where she sought a forgiveness vast enough to encompass her sense of self-disgust and hopelessness, Leonard has crawled her way to sobriety and out of the life. “I couldn’t

have done it without Jesus,” she said. “I had to believe that no matter what I did, there was a God big enough to forgive me.”

For the past year and a half, Leonard has been a member of the Wintonbury Church in Bloomfield. For two years, she has volunteered with The Underground, a faith-based organization based out of the church that raises awareness of sex trafficking.

Her road from sex trafficking victim to agent for change has been riddled with drug convictions, failed marriages, the renunciation of parental rights of her son, now 26, and the suicide of her first husband.

Her mother died in 2004. Leonard said she tries to help other victims she serves as a case manager at Coram-Deo. “My sister said, ‘You could make just as much (money) on disability (for mental health).’ But I don’t want the money. I want the self-respect. There’s dignity in a day’s pay and there is dignity in a day’s work.”

# Young victims are emotionally bonded

Advocates: Fear, brainwashing

BY CHRISTOPHER MASSA  
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

Within 24 hours, 75 percent of juvenile run-aways are approached by pimps looking to use their bodies as a way to make a lucrative profit, victim advocates say.

Jeanne Fusco, executive director at Susan B. Anthony Project, said increasingly, the team at the Torrington shelter works not only with adult domestic violence and rape victims but also children who have been sold for sex.

“Victims are brainwashed,” Fusco said. “You’re told no one is going to believe you, but we believe you,” she said counselors tell victims.

Victims often do not realize that someone they know — a boyfriend, a parent, a relative, a friend — is setting them up to be trafficked, said Anne Malisk, sexual assault child advocate at Susan B. Anthony. Once entrapped, victims often turn to drugs to desensitize themselves, she said.

Sex trafficking victims sometimes cannot escape, and others don’t want to cooperate.

“We have had kids that have been locked away and not able to get out and escape,” said Tammy Snead, who heads the

### TO LEARN MORE

» **Love146** of New Haven is dedicated to helping victims of sex and human trafficking: [love146.org](http://love146.org)

» **Susan B. Anthony Project** in Torrington aids victims of domestic violence, rape and sex trafficking: [sbaproject.org](http://sbaproject.org)

Department of Children and Families sex trafficking initiatives. “We have had kids who could physically leave but are emotionally bonded.”

Take the 14-year-old girl from Litchfield County with whom Erin Williamson, Connecticut survivor support coordinator for Love146, worked recently. She was from a small town with few resources and was victimized by someone she knew.

“Her biggest fear was, I don’t want to go to law enforcement because I don’t think anything is going to happen to him,” Williamson said. In a town where “everyone knows everyone,” pointing a finger has its own consequences. “Even if law enforcement does something about him, there’s still going to be an impact on her life,” Williamson said. “Everyone in school is going to know. Everyone in town will know.”



MICHAEL KABELKA  
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

There was plenty of snow in Goshen on Sunday to build this snowman.

# SNOW: Power out in several area towns

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ing as high winds started bringing down limbs laden with snow.

A wind advisory was issued for western Connecticut and western Massachusetts, with forecasters predicting wind gusts could hit 50 mph through this afternoon with the potential for downed trees and more power outages.

Eversource Energy reported 56 customers without power in Norfolk and 112 without power in Colebrook as of 8:30 p.m. Other towns in the Northwest Corner had scattered outages.

The Weather Service said other towns in northwestern Connecticut could get up to 7 inches of snow by today.

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