

"Surviving Trafficking"

The story of a DCF Employee and CT Survivor of Child Sex Trafficking



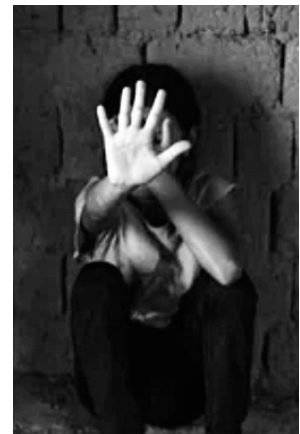
Mark grew up in a loving home with involved parents. He was active in his school, talented, engaged in extracurricular activities and was visible. Sound familiar?

What doesn't make sense is that he was a Connecticut victim of child sex trafficking - and no one knew it. Recruited by peers, who were coerced by an adult male in the community, Mark was forced into sex trafficking. The beginning is all too familiar. During an

impressionable time, Mark was looking for acceptance as a teen.

Mark estimates he was sold to over 500 men and women - White married men being the biggest buyers.

For over 5 years, daily coercive tactics from his trafficker and even fellow victims served as reminders that Mark was to do what they said or be faced with violence, embarrassment, and shame. Mark never had "serious injuries" from his traffickers but was threatened at one point with a gun to his head. "This was one of many instances when they showed harm could be caused," according to Mark.



"They know what they are doing in a very smart way," Mark stated. "They take what they know about you and use it against you in a calculated negative way." For example, those same protective factors which apparently made Mark less of a text-book target, were "flipped" against him to keep his compliance and secrecy.

He did not drink or engage in substance use. Mark followed the rules. Boys are socialized to be strong, able to defend themselves and it is socially accepted that they engage in sexual activity. "If you do not do this, you are not a guy," he would be told. Sexually explicit photos taken of him were held against him and threatened to be released if he wavered in his compliance. This issue of sextortion is becoming increasingly common and is an easy tactic for traffickers to use through online solicitation.



Tammy Sneed is the Department's Director, Office of Human Trafficking Services. "We don't give boys and men permission to be victims," she stated. In Connecticut, only 9% of reported trafficking victims are boys and nationally the number is approximately 36%. According to Tammy, the numbers are low because of how we socialize males, the negative stigma attached to males reporting themselves as victims and the greater community not talking about males being harmed.

"Prevention and awareness are key to being kept out of 'the life.' Once you are in, it is so hard to get out," stated Tammy.

One form of trafficking was to have Mark be paid as a stripper in front of men. He told some of his classmates at school to "test" their reaction. "I do this and get paid," he explained. His Math teacher became aware and did nothing - if they only had today's training and awareness.

The trafficking ended when Mark was a young adult. He reports feeling that growing older made him "less desirable... buyers wanted children." Perhaps the most influential factor was a violent assault which he considers his "rock bottom." Mark escaped "the life" but it was not without threats from his traffickers.

"So much shame comes with it. So much stigma. For boys, this is viewed as a weakness."

Mark also reports that race was a major factor in his experience. "We were sold for a certain amount of money for 30 minutes or an hour. Allow me to repeat myself: we were SOLD. In my case, being a person of color sold by a White person to other White people was painful on multiple levels... Trafficking is horrible for all victims, regardless of race. But the factor of race can't be overlooked. Traffickers use your race as a selling point for their advertisement of you. White kids were priced higher. I was literally worth less in this market."

Mark completed college and gained employment at the Department of Children and Families. All of what he was subjected to was still a struggle for him when he started at DCF. "I knew something happened to me and had experienced horrible things, but I didn't have a name for it," he stated.

That changed one day when he was in DCF's training on Child Sex Trafficking - now he had the words. "We gotta talk," Mark stated to the trainer.



"Gray on details," is how Mark remembers exactly what happened to him. This is a component of his trauma response and that he may remember "things in the minute" about his experiences including when he is educating members of the community about sex trafficking.

"Still a battle," is how Mark describes the impact of trafficking on his self-esteem which he states is the "biggest impact on (him)." Educating others assists him with overcoming some of the trauma. DCF staff and community members have come up to him after he speaks to disclose their own victimization.

Given the unique harm for trafficking victims, traditional therapy may not prove beneficial. Therapists may be unable to understand the dynamics and coercive control unless they've received highly specialized training. There is no known Evidenced Based Program (EBP) for trafficking victims across the country. Mark found pro-social activities to be more therapeutic than any traditional therapy models.

Great misunderstanding is present throughout our communities. A child displaying runaway behaviors, school truancy, aggressive behaviors or engaging in substance use could all be manifestations of trauma associated with trafficking. "You have to pull back the layers, victims will never present as just a victim," according to Mark.

"If a child is forced to have sex with their father, we know what to do," stated Tammy. "If a child is forced to have sex with a 20, 30 or 40 year old, we blame them." Victim blaming needs to stop.

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"In order to believe the victim, you have to acknowledge the adult is exploiting them," confirmed Tammy.

"It is the adult who is the criminal here."

"Being a professional is therapeutic," Mark stated. "Repurpose the trauma in a positive way."



Mark stands among us as a leader in the Department and community. While few may know his story, hundreds will feel the effects of his words and insights he imparts to others and perhaps without ever remembering his name.

It is his hope that by telling his courageous story, there will be one less victim of child sex trafficking and one more person will be rescued from "the life."

The name of the individual in the story has been changed to ensure confidentiality.