

Human Trafficking

Painful Stories

Lauri L. Burns, founder of The Teen Project, Inc., asked three clients — a mom and two teens — to share their experience with Your Teen. Burns, teen expert and former teen prostitute, dedicates her life to youth in crisis.

Parent 1

By Lauri L. Burns



I was 19-years-old when I got into prostitution. This could not have been predicted; from the outside, my life looked really normal.

I grew up in a Jewish home in Long Island, New York. I could read and speak Hebrew and had a bat mitzvah at 13, as expected. I took singing lessons, played the viola and was gifted in math and English. My mom was a part-time dental assistant, and my dad was an airline pilot. We lived in a place called Old Bridge Estates, in a fabulous big house on a hill. We always had cleaning people and everything we ever needed on a material level.

Looking back, though, I was prime for prostitution from the start. You see, behind the closed doors of my home, things were different than they looked. My dad had a very bad childhood

and was still a very angry man. When I turned five, my father began physically abusing me, and I became skilled at mentally numbing myself to the beatings.

I began hitchhiking when I turned 13. Hitching gave me a sense of control that I lacked at home, and to tell you the truth, I loved it! I felt free and independent. My mom moved us to California to get away from my dad when I was 15, and a few girls and I hitched from California to the Colorado River. It felt powerful! I can still remember getting out of that last car when we arrived at the river—wow, we'd made it! That only fueled the fire.

I was 19 when I decided to walk out on the street. I had gotten pregnant, had a baby and was broke. I thought to myself, "Look, you've been hitching forever, so you can do this— maybe someone will offer you some money. If you don't want to, you don't have to... you can just do it like a test. If you feel weird, do nothing and just

hitch back home."

I went to the street known for prostitution and stuck my thumb out. I took the first deal that came my way. Over the next few days, I went from being starving poor to making about \$120 hour. I felt powerful! I could make all the money I wanted! I could successfully block from my mind how I was earning my money. I just focused on the money, the money... and eventually, getting out.

Forward three years later: I was dying from drug addiction and had been in too many terrifying situations to mention. At 23, two gunmen beat me and left me for dead in the woods; a stranger saved my life, and I am forever grateful.

Today, I spend every waking hour reaching out to girls in need. I believe my life was saved to save the others left behind. I have fostered 30 teen girls and 11 homeless girls. My story and the stories of some of the young ladies I have helped are in my book, *Punished for Purpose*.

Seventy-five percent of the proceeds go to the precious young victims that continue to fall into this trap.

My 41 daughters have given more to me than I ever could have given them. I am thankful to have walked before them, if only to be the one chosen to find them and bring them home. My own daughter graduated from Columbia University's School of Social Work in 2010. Inspired by her (then 17) sisters, she couldn't have chosen a different path.

Lauri L. Burns is the founder of The Teen Project, Inc. www.theteenproject.com 1.888.4.TEENHOME

Parent 2

By Anonymous

I can't say for certain when I first suspected my daughter was involved in the "adults only" world of Craigslist. However, I can say with certainty there were many red flags: some very obvious and

"Children may complain they feel trapped by your protection, but point out how the trap of slavery is far more dangerous."

"I believe my life was saved to save the others left behind."

"Never assume that your child is not the type to get into any dangerous behavior."

some, I admit, I ignored as too preposterous to believe. "Not my daughter" doesn't let you think of your own child "that way."

Before I continue, let me say this: every child with a computer has been approached by a predator. Our child was no exception.

My daughter was the last person I'd worry about getting into prostitution. She is sweet, funny and smart. We live in a great community. We are a loving family; we support her dreams. Yes, we have our share of troubles, but no more than many. Outwardly, she was zero-risk, but she never felt like she fit in well with her peers. She'd been bullied in grade school, which I believe made her more vulnerable.

When she became very interested in her computer and online games, we monitored her well, or so we thought. We checked her email and chats to see if we needed to confront her with anything. By high school, she was very clever and learned to hide things from us. I think it started with predators having inappropriate chats and asking for pictures in exchange for

money. Then, she began meeting strangers online whom she felt she knew and could trust. We took her to therapists and psychiatrists, hoping they could get to the root of why she trusted the Internet more than real life. It would have been great to remove the Internet from her life altogether, but access through smart phones and friends' houses made that impossible.

By the time she graduated from high school at 17, her online life had crossed over to her real life. She'd hidden strip club attire in her room. She was using drugs. Her phone had calls to numbers that didn't belong to friends we knew. I knew things had escalated, and I needed to take action. I installed key logger software on our computer and found that she had begun posting online ads as an escort.

There was no doubt she was in crisis, and I asked a trusted friend, Lauri Burns, to help us intervene. Lauri had been a foster parent to teens for years and ran an outreach for at-risk youth. She also happened to get into prostitution, herself, at 19.

I never thought that I would be able to relate, but I was wrong. With Lauri's help, we began the process of drug treatment for our daughter. We started her back in therapy and monitored and restricted her Internet and phone. It's been a very hard road for her, and it didn't just stop overnight. It takes lots of love, support, understanding and time.

How might my story help other parents? Well, first, never assume that your child is not the 'type' to get into any dangerous behavior. Second, the Internet is the most dangerous tool that we give our children access to. Get a key logger installed; it may save them. Third, if you have any suspicions, investigate until you are left without a doubt. Even if your investigation takes you places you don't want to go, you have to remember this: Your child is already there, and they need you to rescue them. And, finally, reach out to people you can trust and who have the experience to help. Parents need support so that we can be there for our kids.

Teen 1

By Anonymous

I used to be a normal high school student. I had been on School Council since junior high and I was a top competitor on the swim team. In my free time, I modeled with a prestigious modeling agency and landed major fashion shows and music videos. That all changed when I was taken from my mom because of abuse. I was stripped of that life and exposed to a new one.

At 17-years-old, I experienced

much beyond my years. I was a ward of the State of California and lived in over 12 places in less than a year. Moving from one group home to the next, I gave up on ever having a safe family.

But then, I met Lisa. A friend from school introduced me to her, and we hit it off from the start. She begged her mom to help me, and I moved in with them Thanksgiving 2010. I was finally with someone who cared, in a place I wanted to be. Over the next few months, she became the sister I never had.

The day after Christmas, she met an older boy on Facebook. He told her that with her good looks she could make a thousand dollars every night. I had seen enough movies to know this sounded like trouble. But no matter what I said, she just wouldn't listen to me. She said I was crazy and jealous because she finally got a boyfriend. Needless to say, she invited him to come over. The next day, he rolled up with a friend in a brand new Jaguar; we couldn't believe it. We thought we had landed some really good guys for once. Looking at their clothes and car, we thought they were solid. That first day, they were complete gentlemen.

Shortly after that, the boys suggested we go to their hotel to relax. When we arrived there, they introduced us to Oreo, a beautiful older woman. Oreo quickly took us under her wing and told us how these guys had helped her to become rich. She said that she would be willing to teach us too. The next thing I knew, she was getting us high.

My next clear memory was standing in a small dress and

heels on a street corner in Los Angeles on a cold winter night. My feet ached as if I had been there for hours, but I had no recollection of how I got there. A car pulled over and Oreo asked the man, “Who do you want, baby?” The man pointed to me, and she said, “There you go, Sugar; this is your chance.” The next three weeks were a complete blur; they kept on giving us drugs and pushing us into cars. February 11, 2011, I was arrested in Las Vegas for prostitution and placed at Children of the Night, a program that helps kids get out of street trafficking.

It is still hard for me to believe what happened. It all went so quickly, and no matter how many times I play it through, it just doesn't make sense. Since then, I have had a good deal of therapy, graduated from high school and moved into The Teen Project. I am attending college to be a fashion designer.

My sister, Lisa, never made it out. She calls me from time to time, crying and pleading for help, but a few hours later she calls back, saying she is fine. She says she loves him too much to leave. I know now that I can never go back for her; I would be risking my own life. I pray for her and all of the other young girls that talk to strangers on the Internet. It was only three weeks of my life, but the vivid details of what occurred will never leave me.

I am forever changed.

Teen 2

By Anonymous

It all started when I was 17-years-old, a month or two after I graduated from high school. I was having a hard time getting a job. I had no real job experience and the economy was down: even for a position at Starbucks, I was competing against people with college degrees and far more impressive resumes. I quickly became frustrated with my search.

One day, while browsing the jobs on craigslist, I spotted the “Adult Gigs” and “Adult Entertainment” section. I decided to check it out, mere curiosity at the time. The moment I clicked the link, I was met

with hundreds and hundreds of links and posts from various men and women (mostly women) offering their “companionship” or “GFE” (Girl Friend Experience), in exchange for “roses” (i.e., monetary compensation). I was awed by how much money they made. Anywhere from \$100 for 15 minutes to \$600 an hour was the going rate. So, just for the hell of it, I posted my own ad.

Next thing I knew, I was getting calls and texts from a bunch of men who saw my ad. At first, I hesitated to reply, but I finally did and went to meet one man. He was in his mid-30s, and I met him at his house while his wife was out getting her nails done. It was a nice place, and he looked normal, which made me feel more at ease. We had sex for 15 minutes. He tried to coax me into not using a condom, but I insisted, and he eventually agreed. He gave me \$150 for the deed, and I was on my way.

I'm a very shy person and have always avoided social situations. I didn't have any real close friends, and I was picked on in school. At first, escorting helped me feel beautiful...wanted. But, it was all just a lie, and it soon became a path filled with sexual abuse and beatings. I was robbed and raped several times, and I internalized the hurt, hating myself more and more every time.

It was my mom who busted me. Even though I was really angry at the time, deep inside, I felt grateful. Without her intervention, I don't know if I could have stopped. I was caught in a vicious cycle of feeling bad, getting money to get drugs to feel better again, only to feel bad again. Today, I am 21, sober and a lot wiser than I was at 19. The experience changed me. I look at everyone differently now. I now know how very dangerous the Internet can be. It's a portal to everything, with only your keyboard acting as the barrier.

Professional

By G. Nickens

Many years ago as a rookie police officer, I was stoked to patrol Century Boulevard in a black and white cruiser. The mingling city

lights and bustling activity created an aura of Miami Vice. The “ladies of the night” or “working girls” were present, and we would joke with them or tell them to move along, mainly because concerned citizens were complaining. We didn't give the prostitutes much thought; after all, our primary focus was to catch real criminals: killers, robbers and gangsters.

Soon, I learned that many of these girls were desperate junkies, working for their next fix or looking for a way out. Some had been lured by money or other false promises. Some were seemingly attractive, while hidden from view were the bruises, scars, sores, missing teeth, diseases and personal tragedies. Also lurking in the shadows were the foul, revolting monsters who controlled them.

Prostitution, human trafficking—whatever you choose to call it—is slavery. Today, there are more slaves than any other time in history, and approximately 30 million are sexually enslaved worldwide. This figure is growing at alarming rates. An estimated 100,000 children are exploited in the sex trade in the United States every year, and the global sex trade exploits over 1 million children annually. The average age of the victims is 12-14, although much younger children are abused as well.

All children are at risk. Human traffickers typically prey on individuals who are vulnerable in some way. Some examples of high-risk populations include undocumented migrants, runaways, at-risk youth, the weak, the disabled and the oppressed. Some victims willingly go into the sex trade, while others are lured in. Yet, both typically end in the same dead-end trap: a shattered life of hell that includes diseases, rapes, addictions, legal troubles, criminal records, unwanted pregnancies and children, abortions, dysfunctional relationships, depression, suicides and hopelessness.

Sexual abuse is shrouded in shame and seldom talked about openly. You may encounter people every day and never realize they are or have been a victim. They often do not seek help immediately, due to a paralysis of not knowing who to trust and where

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to go. Traffickers use shame, fear or brainwashing to make victims distrustful of authorities. They instill a fear of independence through violence, substance abuse, weapons, sexual assault, mutilation, deception, confinement, isolation, affection, manipulation, lies, false promises, and material or monetary indulgence.

Now, after many decades in law enforcement, I can see the grave consequences of trafficking. Predators use the Internet and social media to lure people. Parents should know their kids' social groups, who they're hanging out with, and where they are. Parents need to control and

monitor their children until they display a capability to make responsible decisions.

Parents, don't be afraid to lay down the law in your home. After all, it is your home, and they are your children! As parents, we have the right to set the rules for the safety and security of our family. Children may complain they feel "trapped" by your concern and protection, but you can point out how the other "trap of slavery" is far more cruel and dangerous. ■

G. Nickens is a Retired Police Detective/Consultant.



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START THE CONVERSATION

By **Sondra Miller**
Vice President of Community Engagement, Cleveland Rape Crisis Center

Learning about the realities and prevalence of sex trafficking can frighten and unsettle any parent. The first question that usually comes to mind is, "What can I do to protect my teenager?" The most important thing you can do is to build a good relationship with your teenagers and maintain strong communication. Let them know that they can talk to you about anything, even if it's difficult.

Sex traffickers target boys and girls from all backgrounds and neighborhoods. Adult predators as well as other teenagers

can lure teenagers into the sex industry. So, it's a good idea to discuss relationships openly and know your children's friends, boyfriends and girlfriends. It's also important to know your child's Internet, texting and call history.

You can steer your children away from bad relationships by keeping them busy (but not overwhelmed) in activities and sports they enjoy. Developing new skills helps children build self-esteem, making them less vulnerable to predators and their manipulation.

Spending time with your

teenager, even if they seem uninterested, and being present when they do need you are the best gifts you can give them. Scheduling time to be together, during family meals, for example, is extremely important. Time in the car can also be very valuable.

Help your child make sense of things they are exposed to through television, music and video games, which may mirror the culture of prostitution. Expose your child to male and female role models who treat each other with respect, and talk to your child about sexual violence.

The number one prevention tool is a healthy relationship between you and your teenager. You've already invested your love; now, make sure to invest your time, attention and guidance.

So how do you start the conversation?

1. Start by saying, "If anyone ever has or anyone ever does hurt you, you can talk to me." This is the most important thing you can say. Don't assume they have not been hurt by sexual violence before. Leave the door open for your teen to talk about past circumstances that they haven't shared with you. Teens can be coerced or forced to have sex by someone they know, trust and, possibly, love. So don't say, "If anyone ever hurts you, I'm going to ___ them." Your teen may be concerned about the other person getting in trouble or even worried about you getting in trouble if you harm someone else.

2. Spark a conversation in the car. The car creates uninterrupted

time when you both can be attentive. Discuss ways teens are targeted for sex trafficking. Give teens the facts about sex, sexual coercion and assault before they get misinformation from peers. Remember, teens crave factual information about sex from someone they trust. Don't make it a joke. Rape is never funny. Sexual violence is a serious issue and should be handled that way. If you approach it as a joke, your teen will, too.

3. Use a book to start the conversation. One example is Theresa Flores' story, *The Slave Across the Street: The True Story of How an American Teen Survived the World of Human Trafficking*. Theresa was 15 years old and living with her parents in an upper-middle class suburb of Detroit when she was enslaved into sex trafficking. Flores lived a terrifying double-life for two years and, now, decades later, she has dedicated her life to preventing this horrific crime. It can happen to anyone, anywhere.

4. Use media stories to start the conversation. "What do you think about the case in the news? What are you hearing at school about this? What do you think about it?" It is easier for them to open up about what other people think first. Then, you can share your message: "If anyone has ever or anyone ever does hurt you, you can talk to me." ■

If your child has experienced sexual violence, call our 24-Hour Hotline at 216-619-6192. For more information, visit clevelandrapecrisis.org.

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Human Trafficking

Advice for Prevention

By **Karen McHenry, LISQ-S, LCDC**

Director, Homeless Youth Program, Bellefaire JCB

Human trafficking is a fast-growing industry in the United States. Law enforcement reports that drug dealers are switching to human trafficking since it is easier to move humans than illegal drugs across state lines.

Unfortunately, the increased use of technology increases the opportunity for traffickers to contact and seduce teens. According to the National Missing and Exploited Children Organization, 1 in 5 children are sexually solicited online. This is true for both boys and girls and children in large cities, inner-ring suburbs and suburban neighborhoods.

Our teens are very vulnerable. They experience uncertainty and loneliness as they grapple with their own identity. Friendships can be transient at this point. Teens with limited education, little fam-

ily support, limited guidance or a history of sexual abuse are at greatest risk.

A few basic tips for teens to reduce the risk of trafficking, include:

- Don't share personal information on the Internet.
- Don't accept Facebook requests from unknown people.
- NEVER share naked photos of yourself with anyone.
- Tell a parent or a trusted adult if you feel threatened or uncomfortable during online communication.

Adults can play an important role in prevention as well:

- Be vigilant in monitoring online activity, including your teen's Facebook page.
- Talk with your teen about sexual trafficking.
- Pay attention to your teen's friends and where they hang out. ■



"If anyone ever has or anyone ever does hurt you, you can talk to me."

The most important thing you can say to a teenager to start a conversation about sexual violence. For more tips about how to talk to your teen about rape, visit www.clevelandrapecrisis.org/resources.



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