WASHINGTON, DC, September 19, 2012 - “How old are you?”

It was the middle of the night. I was standing on Pacific Avenue in Atlantic City, New Jersey when a round and squinty-eyed policeman approached and posed this question to me.

“Eighteen,” I offered.

My feet were blistered. I tried to hide this discomfort as I shifted my weight onto the other foot. My hair fell in front of my face, and I knew parts of my scalp were visible. A double dose of hair dye had burned my dirty-blond hair and colored it an ugly yellow.

“Don’t lie to me,” the officer leered.

Thirty-six hours earlier I was on my way to Hollywood. I was going to be a singer or songwriter, an actor, or maybe even a model. A man I had met at the mall promised these occupations to me, but what he ultimately delivered was a dress and red high heels which were two sizes too big for
I insisted to this officer that I was eighteen years old. I did this for a couple of reasons. First, I was instructed to do this by the man whom I’d met at the mall and by his girlfriend, who had dyed my hair hours earlier. Second, I didn’t want to go back home, but neither did I want to be on that street corner. I wanted to be in Hollywood—auditioning for a television show or meeting my favorite rock stars or dancing in a fancy club. But, by that point, those dreams seemed stupid to me.

When the officer walked away from me, seemingly satisfied with my made-up story, I called out to him.

“What if I was under eighteen?” I asked.

This was a serious question. I wanted to know—What were my options? Where could I go? Could I go somewhere other than home? Was there a place to which I might belong?

“That's it,” hollered the officer, “I've had enough of you.”

He handcuffed me, shoved me into the back of the police car, and then assailed me with insults from the driver’s seat. I stared out the window. I was so angry—not so much with him, but with myself for taking the chance at trusting him. I should have known not to trust him, I thought, I should have known not to trust anyone.

I was fourteen years old.

Last week I wrote an article listing my ideas for victim services; however, I believe that any discussion of immediate needs for victims of sex trafficking must include the topic of law enforcement training. As this police officer insulted me with names and labels, my connection to the society I had left only thirty-six hours earlier grew more and more distant until a deep valley separated me from it. I, the teen prostitute, on one side; and the officer, the authority, the police of that society, sat on the other side studying me with disgust and scorn.

I won’t repeat here the words that this officer used against me. My point is not to paint a picture of blame or wrongdoing; my point is to underscore the need for law enforcement training. The initial exchange between a child or teen victim and an officer sets the tone for all subsequent interactions between the minor and other law enforcement, advocates, and social service providers. Without receiving compassion or empathy from the police, a child may come to view anyone involved in his or her case with contempt and distrust, thereby compromising the child’s openness towards after-care services.

I know this because I was there. I folded my arms against any help offered by all members of a society that immediately judged me without knowing my circumstances. By the time I met detectives who recognized me as a victim; I was angry, distant, and withdrawn. I flat out refused to cooperate, and the opportunity to quickly apprehend my perpetrators was lost. By the time I reluctantly agreed to work with police, the traffickers had fled. I reacted with equal reluctance and distrust towards the social workers and child psychiatrists who offered to help me.

Proper and thorough training for all levels of law enforcement is the best way to prevent any initial mistreatment to or misunderstanding with a child victim. I also believe this training must include the perspective of a survivor of child sex trafficking, as well as survivors of other forms of human trafficking. An officer must know that, even if a potential child or teen victim presents as uncooperative or belligerent, the officer must respond with discipline not discrimination.

The U.S. Department of Justice’s AMBER Alert Initiative has pioneered a survivor-informed training program for law enforcement and other partners which offers a multi-disciplinary team approach for law enforcement and other partners which offers a multi-disciplinary team approach for law enforcement and other partners which offers a multi-disciplinary team approach...
involving prosecutors and service providers. Their goal is to address not only the rescue of the victim but also his or her long-term wellbeing. Their focus is for law enforcement to play a major role in the rescue and stabilization of the victim with the understanding that support services must be in place. They urge prosecutors to work aggressively with law enforcement at targeting traffickers and organizations promoting or engaged in human trafficking, as well as addressing the demand side. For more information, please check the AMBER Alert Training Calendar or contact askamber@fvtc.edu.

I urge you to invite AMBER Alert, or another survivor-informed organization, to your next law enforcement training event.

Holly Austin Smith is a survivor advocate, author, and speaker. She invites you to join her on Facebook or Twitter and to follow her personal blog.

This article is the copyrighted property of the writer and Communities @ WashingtonTimes.com. Written permission must be obtained before reprint in online or print media. REPRINTING TWTC CONTENT WITHOUT PERMISSION AND/OR PAYMENT IS THEFT AND PUNISHABLE BY LAW.
While I am the first to admire our first responders, I have always wondered where some of them left their humanity. Several years ago I parked my car at the edge of a parking lot due to heavy occupancy. As I was getting out I noticed that semi hidden from view was a young man that appeared to be sleeping in the grass at the edge. I did notice that the position of his body was odd. When I came closer, I realized the guy was passed out. So I called 911, and decided to wait to point out the location of the boy. When they arrived they proceeded to roughly kick him over to see his face. Then they took their time in putting him in the ambulance. They appeared extremely angry that I had called them. One of them even remarked, "As if we didn't have enough to do, we have to take care of these GD druggies." I am not sure how they were able to determine this by just looking at him.

They can't determine that by looking at anyone.

A victim of human trafficking can be hooked on drugs. So I dont believe that judgements or deciding who or what the victim is until they arrive too hospital is important as much as gertting them the medical attention they need IMMEDIATELY. Once at hospital, police, detectives, rape victim advocates, human trafficking advocates can all determine together the victim and the case. This would stop alot of stereotyping by getting the police officer, or bystander so much off of is this person a drug addict or not, too actually doing your job and getting medical attention. That should be the law and your number one prority. The police who kicked him will remain street cops where they are needed too stop the war on drugs, not on human trafficking. Only special officers get qualified too even be part of any human trafficking unit. Eliminates alot of problems right from the beginning as too not tear us apart and remain focused on the victim and then our other job duties...

I am a police officer and I schedule continuing education training for my state agency. I have Human Trafficking classes in place to educate the street officer. I have attended this class and I could not believe how ignorant I was on this subject. I hope to schedule more classes in 2013. With budget cuts every year, it gets harder and harder to find the money to pay the experts (yes they charge) in this area to teach. Education is the key.

No Officer Kelly, not all agencies ask for money too provide you with information, facts, and knowledge. They do it because it is thier cause and all they believe in, especially with it soon going too pass all drugs and weapons for these criminals. I would suggest calling Polaris Project and Im sure they can furthur assist too you. Kudos for wanting your police department PROPERLY trained.... Thats more appreciated then you will ever know....
OMG, this sensitive serious article, which is very good, has an ad for meeting your Asian Lady right beside it. Bad taste Washington Times.

Roy Kathie

Holly Smith is so amazingly and generously honest -- as such her words bring great comfort to other survivors. I was moved to tears as I read this. Whenever I read Holly Smith, I want to read more. She is an important writer.

Manhattan Call Girl

Type your comment here.

Reactions

Trackback URL: http://disqus.com/forums/