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Supporting the victim after trafficking



Wednesday, September 12, 2012 - [Speaking Out](#) by Holly Smith

WASHINGTON, DC, September 12, 2012 – In the summer of 1992, I was lured away from home at the age of 14 by a man who promised me a new life. I wanted to be a singer, a rock star, a celebrity on MTV. I wanted to stand on a brightly-lit stage with a crowd of fans screaming before me. I wanted to be liked by a million people.

I wanted all of this because I was lonely. I was a middle school kid feeling left out and left behind by my friends, all of whom seemed to be prettier or funnier or just plain *cooler* than me. When this man pointed *me* out of the crowd, I felt special. He said he knew people in Hollywood and that he could help me become a famous actor like Julia Roberts.

“You’re too mature for high school,” he said, “You could be a model.”

I don’t know if I believed him or not, but I know I *wanted* to believe him. I was mesmerized by the idea of a new and glamorous life. I thought this guy was a talent scout, and I was star struck.

This man actually was scouting that day, but he wasn’t looking for musical talent or acting abilities. This man was looking for a girl with qualities that he could exploit for personal gain. He recognized in me the following vulnerabilities:

- Anger
- Naivety
- Severe depression
- Low self-esteem
- Low self-value
- A craving for attention
- Lack of guidance or structure

Lack of positive role models
A history of sexual abuse, physical abuse, or neglect
A history of sexual exploitation or sexual assault
A distortion of positive values or morals
Lack of any understanding for personal rights or boundaries
Among other predisposing factors

Child sex traffickers are cunning creatures in that they can spot a child in distress and lure him or her away with false promises. Within hours of running away with this man, I was coerced into working the streets of Atlantic City, New Jersey. Approximately thirty-six hours later, I was spotted by a police officer on Pacific Avenue.

I was handcuffed and arrested for prostitution. I was insulted, threatened with juvenile detention, and handed over to my bewildered and misunderstanding parents.

There was no immediate aftercare. There was no placement for counseling, and there was no follow-up. Within days of my "rescue," I attempted suicide.

Professionals often ask me about my opinion for victim services. And I have to admit, I don't feel very qualified to offer this advice because I received none. I have little basis with which to grade the efficiency or benefit of one service over another.

All I can offer is twenty years of retrospect on my own experience and my own journey toward healing.

The most common question I hear from professionals is regarding housing. A common debate is whether child victims should be arrested, housed in immediate aftercare placement, or sent home. I personally cannot see that placing a child victim in juvenile detention is a good idea.

At fourteen, I was terrified of getting beat up in high school; this was one of the many reasons I wanted to run away in the first place. I cannot imagine how abandoned and desperate I would have felt inside a juvenile detention facility after those thirty-six hours in Atlantic City.

As far as whether a child should be placed into a program or sent home, I think that depends on the child and his or her situation. Every child victim of sex trafficking followed a different path which ultimately led to commercial sexual exploitation. I know several survivors who either did not have a home to which they could return or the home was not a viable option for placement.

I was one of the few kids who had a stable home environment. My best response is that, regardless of where the child victim is sent- home, foster care, or a program- that child *must* receive victim services specific to this type of trauma.

Following is a list of services that I'm certain would have helped me. However, this list *must* be expanded to include ideas from child sex trafficking survivors of different backgrounds. I was a white teenager from working-class parents living in the suburbs.

The services which would have helped me may not have been as beneficial for another survivor who cycled through foster homes or detention facilities, or for another survivor who was controlled at home by family or gang members.

My ideas:

Programs which build self-esteem and self-value;

A program or alternative school with smaller class sizes in a safe environment;

Physical activities which promote discipline, self-confidence, meditation, and character development (e.g. yoga, martial arts);

Programs which teach coping skills (e.g. meditation, exercise, anger management, therapy);

A program about [media literacy](#) (e.g. deconstruction of advertising and messages in popular culture);

Therapy for [early childhood sexual abuse](#) ;

Therapy for prior sexual assaults /exploitations, including a discussion on personal rights and boundaries (e.g. Nobody has the right to touch you; You have the right to say NO at anytime, no matter how far things have gone with a person in the past);

Programs which teach concepts for healthy, positive relationships;

Sex education, including realistic discussions about positive sexual health, activity, and empowerment;

Exposure to empowered survivors of child sex trafficking either directly (e.g. face-to-face contact, emails, letters) or indirectly (e.g. books like Carissa Phelps' [Runaway Girl](#) or Rachel Lloyd's [Girls Like Us](#));

Community support (e.g. mentor programs like Big Brothers Big Sisters or discounted memberships to local businesses like yoga or dance studios);

Life skills (e.g. everything from how to read nutrition labels to how to read bus schedules);

Exposure to new and different things (e.g. extracurricular activities, volunteering, field trips);

Exposure to local role models in various fields of interest;

Therapy for other mental health issues (e.g. depression, mood disorders, etc.);

Part-time job training or support.

It is very important for service providers to understand that the dynamics of the sex trafficking victimization *cannot* be introduced into therapy until the child undergoes some of the therapeutic elements above. For example, child victims of sex trafficking *will not* understand that they were exploited by sex traffickers *until* they understand that their earlier sexual encounters were abusive or exploitative. Children who are influenced by early abuse or by the many negative messages in popular culture learn not only to accept exploitation and victimization, but to *expect* it. These children must be deprogrammed from this way of thinking in order to stop the cycle of abuse.

Any therapist or youth facility organizer who wants to treat child victims of sex trafficking must understand these kids as well as traffickers do. Like the traffickers, they must be able to recognize in these children those issues which made them vulnerable in the first place. Recognizing those vulnerabilities will direct the path of victim services for that child. And in order to do that, I believe there must be input and collaboration with survivors from a myriad of backgrounds.

[Shared Hope International](#) is catalyzing efforts to create a national network of shelter and services by collaborating with survivors from different backgrounds as well as existing service providers. This initiative will be launched at the National

Colloquium: Shelter and Services Evaluation for Action happening in Washington D.C. on November 30th, an event co-sponsored by [ECPAT-USA](#) and the [Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies](#).

For more information about the National Colloquium: Shelter and Services Evaluation for Action, please visit <http://www.sharedhope.org/SharingTheHope.aspx>.

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.

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Wendy Brooks, Follower of Christ | Writer | Abolitionist | Prayer

Thank you for sharing your story, and the realities of aftercare.

4 months ago 2 Likes

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Greg337

I see these bums almost every day,they look for the little ones.They tell them they are now a woman but they still break like little girls

4 months ago

Like Reply



Laura Sesana

Holly, thank you for sharing your experiences. I can't even imagine how difficult it must be to revisit that time in your life, but CONGRATULATIONS, because your courage is helping other victims. Hats off to you!

4 months ago 2 Likes

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Holly is a survivor of child trafficking and an advocate against all forms of human trafficking. In order to raise awareness of human trafficking within the United States, Holly has appeared on the Dr. Oz show and has been featured in Cosmopolitan magazine. Holly is requested on a regular basis to provide testimony and input to law enforcement officials, social service providers, human trafficking task forces, legislators, educators, and journalists.



Most recently, Holly was the keynote speaker for the April 2012 Trafficking in Persons Symposium in Salt Lake City, UT, an event hosted by the United States Department of Justice. Holly works with survivors and anti-human trafficking organizations across the country.

When she isn't speaking, Holly is working on a memoir about her experience with falling victim to child traffickers at the age of fourteen. Holly earned a B.A. in Biology with a Minor in Writing from the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. She currently lives in Richmond, VA with her husband and their Miniature Schnauzer. Holly invites you to join her on [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#) and to seek additional tips on [her personal blog](#).

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