

Sharing Their Stories

KALAMAZOO CONFRONTS HUMAN TRAFFICKING

BY ANDREW DOMINO

He has shared his story with thousands of people, but feels he can never tell it enough.

In October 2017, Scott Lee Jenkins wrote some 900 words about his daughter's close call with an online "friend" who, he said, was tied to a human trafficking group, and who could have contributed to his then 12-year-old daughter's abduction, if he hadn't ended the interaction and taken his suspicions to police.

Scott Jenkins wrote about his worries and what he'd learned about human trafficking while investigating his daughter's online companion, then posted it on his blog and his Facebook page. He had only 200 followers on Facebook, but when he woke up the next day, the story had gone far beyond those followers: 56,000 shares overnight and a million in less than a week.

His story, with the straightforward name of "My Daughter Was Almost the Victim of Human Sex Trafficking," appeared on family-oriented websites like scarymommy.com, where attention continued to grow. Scott, who lives and works in Kalamazoo, says he was overwhelmed at the attention at first. But since then, his story has become less of a blog post about his life, and more of a warning to families around the world.

Sex and Labor

The most recent data available on The National Human Trafficking Hotline (NHTH) shows 136 cases reported to the hotline in Michigan in the first half of 2017. Among victims, 88 percent were women, with 35 percent of them under age 18 — the kind of victim Jenkins' daughter could have been.

In Kalamazoo County, victims of sex trafficking and other types of sexual crimes are often referred to the Kalamazoo YWCA, which provides therapy and medical care at its offices located at 353 E. Michigan Ave. Its website notes that the "Kalamazoo YWCA is the only provider of comprehensive services for both sex and labor trafficking survivors, including men, women, and gender non-conforming people in the state of Michigan." Jessica Glynn, Senior Director of Law and Policy at the Kalamazoo YWCA, said 47 survivors have been seen there since 2016. The majority of cases were related to sex trafficking, with both the perpetrators and the victims from Kalamazoo.

The federal government defines trafficking as "forced labor through force, fraud or coercion." Despite being kidnapped by their traffickers, but victims sometimes return to their regular lives after an assault, only to feel guilt or shame if they don't continue to meet with or serve the person trafficking them.

"I've heard victims say things like, 'I did this,' or, 'My parents would kill me if they found out,'" said Sara Morley LaCroix, founder of the Kalamazoo Anti-Human Trafficking Coalition. Her husband's job required a move to Grosse Ile, near Detroit, but LaCroix lived in Kalamazoo for 15 years, and returns once or twice a week to southwest Michigan to help local victims of trafficking and campaign for more awareness of the issue. She says the first meeting of the Coalition, in 2012, drew

only seven people. Among the seven, one was a trafficking survivor and another was a representative from the Kalamazoo County Sheriff's office. That's when she knew it was a serious problem.

While sex trafficking, where victims are often forced become prostitutes or exotic dancers, is the most common type (80 percent of cases reported in early 2017 to the NHTH), it's not the only kind of trafficking. Another is labor trafficking, where victims are trapped in jobs with little to no pay and sub-standard working conditions. They're often picking fruits and vegetables, cleaning in private homes or assembling products in factories. "Make sure you know what you're buying," LaCroix said. "Do you know who's doing your nails? Do you know who's growing your food?"

Warning Signs

Jenkins says he noticed a change in his daughter's behavior, as she became "secretive and sneaky." He looked at his daughter's tablet computer and discovered a 15-year-old boy named Bruce, who was connected online to adult men. Jenkins thinks Bruce was likely an innocent "lure" to attract girls to meet with traffickers. "Everybody's looking for the scary person, not for the handsome boy on Instagram," Jenkins said.

LaCroix said cases like the one involving Jenkins' daughter are common in sex trafficking. The attackers don't grab someone off the street; they're more likely to strike up a conversation online, eventually leading to an in-person meeting that goes very wrong. Other victims are used by family members who need money, or drugs and have nothing else to sell except their children.

There is still much to be done to combat human trafficking. One thing every parent can do is to be aware of who their children are interacting with, both in person and online.

"There is a gap between children and parents, technology-wise," Jenkins said. "If you don't know how to use it, don't let your children have it. We need to know what our kids are looking at."

LaCroix said awareness is important, and she's been able to talk with several church youth groups and adult organizations about human trafficking. She also said more service providers are needed, so victims who are able to escape have a safe place to go with everything from shelter to therapy.

Glynn said helping people stay out of situations where they can be trafficked is important, too. "Education, affordable housing, discrimination, hunger: we need to increase the services that are critical to life," she said. There are some grants and federal funding available for service providers, but not enough for the size of the problem. "We need to talk about this earlier — human trafficking should be (discussed) in school," LaCroix said. "Trafficking isn't about sex or about hurting people: it comes down to money, how much someone can make from a victim."

Resources

SCOTT LEE JENKINS' STORY:

scottlejenkins.wordpress.com/2017/10/26/just-how-far-does-human-sex-trafficking-reach

NATIONAL HUMAN TRAFFICKING HOTLINE humantraffickinghotline.org

YOUTUBE VIDEO: "Human Trafficking: Making the Invisible Visible" from *Wayne State University School of Medicine*, youtube.com/watch?v=2yXGc8dvuUw

SARA MORLEY LACROIX Kalamazoo Anti-Human Trafficking Coalition, (269) 303-0725, kahtc.org

YWCA KALAMAZOO

ywcakalamazoo.org/caring-for-victims-of-assault-violence/anti-trafficking-program, Hotline (269) 385-3587

INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT HUMAN TRAFFICKING & WHAT'S BEING DONE TO COMBAT IT?

Join us at April's Mastermind Meeting which is being held on **TUESDAY, APRIL 10** from 5:30 to 8:00 P.M. at the Fetzer Center. The evening's speakers will be Sara Morley LaCroix, Founder of the Kalamazoo Anti-Human Trafficking Coalition and Jessica Glynn, Senior Director of Law & Policy at the YWCA. This event is open to the public, with both women and men encouraged to attend. Tickets are \$25 each and include dinner. They can be purchased at www.wlsmastermind.com/events. Registration deadline is April 4 at 8:00.



You can see more of Andrew Domino's writing at www.dominowriting.com