

Title: Slavery In Our Own Backyard
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Slavery in Our Own Backyard

If you thought that human slavery ended in 1865, think again. It is alive and well and thriving in the Inland Empire. Across this valley human beings are forced to work without pay, without legal protection, without the freedom to leave oppressive bosses and, worst of all, without being noticed.

You may have heard of human trafficking, but assumed it to be something that goes on in other countries. That trafficking is prevalent in the U.S. probably comes as a surprise to you. That it is going on in your own backyard will leave some of you gobsmacked. Nevertheless, you can and should know how to identify the signs of trafficking, and take part in eliminating it in the IE and elsewhere.

With an international airport in our midst, as well as the close proximity to major prostitution hubs, such as Nevada, Los Angeles and San Diego, the Inland Empire has long been a popular stop for unsavory individuals who broker the sale of other individuals for sex. If you keep up with our local news and politics, you've undoubtedly read stories of prostitution busts, and men who've been found guilty of selling women for sex and profit. Our location also makes it easy for criminals to make bail and flee prosecution by simply making their way to another nearby trafficking hub.

A few recent examples of human trafficking occurring in the Inland Empire include the case of Reginald E. Christopher who not only engaged in daily sex with a 13-year old child, but also sold this young girl's body to other men on Holt Boulevard; a street that runs through Montclair, Ontario and Pomona and is known as a major prostitution strip. Christopher, an ex-con on parole for a previous rape conviction, was not only sexually abusing and selling a 13-year old child, but was ultimately caught when trying to use his victim to recruit another woman into his operation. Fortunately, the new target for recruit was a policewoman working undercover.

Then there was the case of a 22-year old man who was found guilty of pandering earlier this year near a busy truck stop in Ontario. On his cell phone was evidence of him attempting to sell a woman for sex. Perhaps the most daunting story in recent IE trafficking history, however, is the murder of 41-year old Kimberly Michelle Sum of Ontario.

Kimberly's two children, as well as a friend, identify her as a sex worker who operated out of the Hotel Indigo near Haven and the 10 freeway in Ontario. Kimberly had formerly worked for at least two pimps, one of which was just convicted of her murder this past February. In an attempt to frighten Kimberly to return to work for him, a known Pomona pimp by the name of Larry Darnell Shyne arranged for Kimberly to be robbed by two other men from Pomona who contacted her from a CraigsList ad. When Kimberly didn't

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produce the money that Shyne assured the men was in her hotel room, she was beaten before being shot and killed.

Among other lives ruined due to trafficking in our backyard includes that of Sara Kruzan from Riverside. Sara was trafficked right here in the Inland Empire beginning at the age of 13 until she killed her former pimp at the tender age of 15. The man she murdered was formerly a family friend who groomed Sara from a young age while she was still under her mother's roof. Eventually, he raped her and, after she ran away from home, he put Sara to work on the streets where she was sexually abused by countless men seven days a week 365 days a year-- while this manipulative pimp controlled every facet of her young life.

Now, serving life without the possibility of parole, Governor Schwarzenegger understood that, while Sara is guilty of the murder she was convicted of, she never should have been tried as an adult and her traumatized state should have been factored into her sentencing. Granted clemency as our former governor left office, at nearly 30 years old and a model prisoner, Sara's sentence now finally includes the right to express herself before a parole board.

When speaking of adult women, many find it difficult to fathom that they are forced into prostitution. As any credible expert will tell you, however, a common theme in these women's lives reveals a sordid history of physical and sexual abuse during childhood. Already psychologically damaged by beatings, molestation or rape by a parent or some other trusted adult, young girls commonly flee from such abuse and unknowingly run right into the arms of another adult who supplies them with drugs, claims to care for them and then manipulates them into a life of slavery. With drug addiction, false affection and threats of physical violence being a pimp's primary tools for control, these frightened and devalued teens eventually feel they have no other choice but to comply with selling their bodies for a pimp's profit. Eventually, these teenagers grow into adult women who know nothing else but prostitution.

Exploited young girls and women are not free to spend the money that they earn—in fact, they don't have any control over the profits at all. They are forced to work without wages, do not enjoy personal freedoms, cannot leave their jobs at will. Simply put, these women and girls are being enslaved.

Think about this for a moment: We've all heard of 'teen prostitution', but how can a teenager consensually engage in such a career? Too young to consent to sex with adult men, how is it that a *victim* can even be legally classified as a *prostitute*? To every one of you reading this, it's time for a mental shift. These teenagers are not prostitutes. They are not consenting. They are not adults. They are victims.

Furthermore, these victims are being recruited right under our noses. With digital technology being what it is, the days of pimps cruising playgrounds and after school

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hangouts is a thing of the past. These days, people are bought and sold with the click of a mouse on social networking websites and on classified ad websites. If your young person has access to the Internet via computer or smartphone, she or he is a potential victim.

Not all victims are unsuspecting middle-schoolers or high-schoolers, either. In fact, not all of them are even recruited into slavery by men. Case in point, Kristen Tebow, a Kansas State University student who was drugged into unconsciousness by a so-called girlfriend and gang raped while her friend collected money from the men involved in her assault. Consider, also, the story of Shauna Newell who was kidnapped by a female “friend” from high school and the man pretending to be her father. Shauna’s captors spent time earning her trust and the phony father/daughter duo even visited Shauna’s mother to assure her that Shauna would be safe at a sleepover. Hours later, Shauna was drugged, beaten, repeatedly gang raped and held captive for several days. When she was finally found, she was in a car bound for another state where she was to be sold. Stories like these must do more than turn your stomach; they must compel you to action.

Some girls are kidnapped off of the streets and others never leave home. Although her terrifying ordeal took place nearly 30 years ago, in her book *The Slave Across the Street* Theresa Flores chronicles how she was recruited into slavery while living in her parent’s home at only 15 years old. Flores’ story of being gang raped by neighbors and then blackmailed into sneaking out of the house and performing sex acts while her parents slept illustrates for us how cunning some pimps can be and how easy it is for crimes like these to fly beneath our radar.

By now, you’ve probably noticed that every one of these cases involve American girls and women, many of which are from our local cities. One need only visit Holt Boulevard after hours, a local truck stop, any of the countless massage parlors that are opening in our cities or search the Internet for more instances of trafficking occurring right here in the IE. The overwhelming majority of these cases involve women, many of which are underage teens. Because human trafficking is now more profitable than drug trafficking, it’s not hard to imagine this situation worsening.

If you are moved to stop women and children from further victimization, here are a few things that you can do:

1. Tell your friends, family members and especially your children about human trafficking. It’s not a pretty topic and it’s one that can be particularly frightening for children, but information is power.
2. Continue to educate yourself. Google this topic for more information and Google your city, in particular, to stay aware of what’s going on locally.
3. Contact your local police department and inquire about joining a human trafficking task force. If your city doesn’t have one, consider starting one.

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4. Stop glamorizing the word pimp. Pimping is criminal enterprise and shouldn't be used to describe fixing up cars or redecorating houses. As your awareness rises, so must your consciousness and your conversation. When you hear others use this word take the opportunity to educate them on why you don't use it and encourage the person you're speaking with to elevate her or his awareness, too.
5. Stop labeling and stigmatizing teen victims as prostitutes. For that matter, do your part to lobby local lawmakers against giving underage victims criminal records for prostitution. A 15-year old girl from Cambodia that is trafficked to the U.S. and sold for sex is often pitied as a slave. Yet, we criminalize our own underage girls who are led into the sex industry by labeling them as prostitutes. Many jurisdictions even imprison them when what these young victims really need is rescue and treatment.
6. Visit the National Human Trafficking Resource Center website, also known as the Polaris Project, to find out how to spot trafficking victims, how to report suspected trafficking cases and call their hotline at (888) 373-7888 if you suspect someone is being victimized by traffickers.
7. Search online for information on what to do if you think someone is being trafficked. Bookmark what you find, forward it to everyone in your address book and share it on social networking sites.
8. Watch the video *Very Young Girls* for more information on how prevalent domestic sex trafficking is in our country.
9. Wake up. Realize that as more sports arenas, convention centers, major hotel chains and business centers expand in the Inland Empire, so does the market for sex trafficking. Don't think your city is immune. Be vigilant. Be aware. Be willing to stomp it out.
10. Pray for human trafficking victims who are also praying for someone like you to help rescue them from the daily horrors they face.

When you picked up this magazine you may not have known that slavery still existed. You may not have known that you could have stopped it even if it did. Least of all, did you plan on becoming an abolitionist. But if you embrace the tips detailed for you above, then an abolitionist is precisely what you've become. On behalf of trafficked victims everywhere, allow me to say: thank you.