

TRAFFIC STOP—

PUTTING THE BRAKES ON SEX TRAFFICKING

“He has sent me to proclaim
freedom for the prisoners ...
to set the oppressed free.”

Luke 4:18

February 7 marks the 50th Super Bowl, one of the most celebrated and watched events in sports. While millions are enjoying the football game live or on television, there is an evil flip side. More young girls and women are victimized through sex trafficking during Super Bowl weekend than at any other time of the year.

Annie Lobert, a sex trafficking survivor who wrote the 2015 book *Fallen: Out of the Sex Industry and Into the Arms of the Savior*, says that at events where many men congregate, she was often forced to service 10 to 30 men a night.



Although accurate numbers are difficult to find, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security recognizes sex trafficking as a \$32 billion a year industry that also victimizes between 300,000 and 400,000 American children. An estimated 100,000 to 300,000 are at risk of being coerced or forced into sex trafficking each year, cites The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

Sex trafficking has become so prevalent that it was the theme of last October's event at Northside Christian Academy. West Columbia private school teamed up with Lighthouse for Life (LFL), a 501 (c) 3 non-profit organization seeking to combat sex trafficking, and hosted "A Night of Education & Commitment to Stop Human Trafficking." Its special guest was Grammy-nominated singer Natalie Grant. The goal was to make people aware of the evil of human trafficking, the second-fastest growing criminal activity on the planet. "Let's work together to set the captives free," Jimmy Currence, Interim Executive Director of LFL, challenged the packed crowd.

But sex trafficking in South Carolina?
In Columbia?

Grant, along with S.C. Attorney General Alan Wilson and S.C. House Representative Todd Atwater, addressed the crime that is happening in our own backyard. Wilson also spoke about a recent victory—South Carolina's first human trafficking convictions. Two men were sentenced to 12 years in prison.

Shortly after, on November 2, *The State* newspaper featured a story about a multi-state brothel bust in Greenville where 29 people were arrested on sex-trafficking charges.

"This is not a Hollywood crime," Wilson said. "It's not a big city crime. It's a horrible crime happening in high schools, neighborhoods, everywhere."

Wilson and Atwater pointed to Theresa Flores' well-documented case in *The Slave Across the Street*. Flores, 15, was enslaved in the world of sex trafficking even though she

lived in an upper-class neighborhood in Detroit, Michigan. At a party, someone slipped her a drug that made her unconscious. A man committed lewd acts against her, took pictures, then blackmailed Flores, telling her he would harm her family if she didn't allow him to sell her for sex.

"Slavery is outlawed in every country on earth," Atwater said, "and yet it exists. There is a market, and there are marketers, but there is not always the product. That's why girls are taken, coerced, forced, and blackmailed."

Andrea Wind and a team of volunteers have formed Lighthouse for Life to combat sex trafficking through education, restoration, and empowerment. Wind, currently on sabbatical, birthed LFL two years ago in the Columbia area after she heard a sermon on the subject. As the mother of two young children, she was horrified at the thought of children like her own being plunged into such a lifestyle.

She decided not only to found the organization, but also to spearhead the first safe house in South Carolina—a place where victims can find refuge, counseling, and education. LFL's safe house is due to open this year..

Lisa Kejr, LFL's first full-time employee and administrator, can cite numerous examples of sex trafficking in South Carolina. She vividly remembers a call she received from a woman at a restaurant. A sobbing girl in a bathroom told her that a male held her against her will.

Like Wind, Kejr has a background in education. Besides having a degree in elementary education, she's also trained to work with children with emotional disabilities. She feels strongly that God intends for her to use this training to help victims of sex trafficking.

Jennifer Thompson, a public school physical education teacher for the past 15 years and a volunteer with LFL, says she teaches adults and students at schools and churches to look for signs of traffickers and victims. She shares startling statistics, explains the mission of LFL, and tells real-life stories about trafficking



By Deena C. Bouknight

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cases like the phone call Kejr received. She also points to warning signs in young girls who may be victims (see sidebar).

She recommends everyone keep the National Human Trafficking Resource Center phone number, (1-888-373-7888), in their phone and be prepared to call 9-11 and the center if they see anything suspicious. Tragically, less than two percent of sex trafficking victims are rescued, but education and awareness can change this.

Young women are often trafficked from parking lots such as those at Wal-Mart and Target. Traffickers will try to coerce on social media. Sometimes a girl will recruit another girl.

“Someone might post that they’re having a bad day, and someone offers to have them meet to talk about it,” says Thompson. “A new girl attending a school thought she was meeting a teenage boy, but three grown men were waiting and took her for the weekend.”

Pimps target lonely, insecure, and troubled girls. The average age is 12-14.

RESTORATION

The good news is that God can restore the years the locusts have eaten. Through ministries like LFL, victims undergo intense therapy and experience what trust and love look like. They can have a life after being trafficked.

“We plant seeds, hope, and pray,” says Thompson. “It’s worth it if we can help even one.”

Kejr says the safe house will admit girls ages 12-17 once it’s properly staffed with at least two paid employees and volunteers. It will be no trouble, she says, to fill up the house with a half dozen victims. The goal is to partner each girl with a mentor. They hope to open more houses of refuge in the future.

Currence, the pastor of GraceLife Church where LFL founder Andrea Wind attends,

believed in Wind’s vision so much he became a member of the board of directors and then readily stepped up to serve as interim executive director while Wind is on sabbatical. Currence’s role as a pastor will provide a spiritual component to the safe house as will optional Bible studies and prayer times.

LFL’s goal is to use every possible platform to promote the ministry and secure funds for the education, counseling, staffing, and living expenses related to the safe house. The Northside event garnered much interest. After the concert, a teenager who participates in beauty contests said she plans to use her time in the spotlight to draw more attention to the desperate plight of victims.

“Sex trafficking is the work of Satan,” Currence says. Perpetrators take someone “made in the image of God and steal their purity and identity. They promise girls heaven and lead them to hell. We need to be aware of the evil, call it evil, and rise up and act.”

For more information on sex trafficking or Lighthouse for Life, visit LFL’s website, www.LighthouseForLife.org. *ROC*

WARNING SIGNS TO HELP SPOT SEX TRAFFICKING VICTIMS

- ***Controlling or abusive “boyfriend”***
- ***Older relationship with another male***
- ***Physical signs of abuse – bruises, cuts, burns***
- ***Appearance of expensive gifts, clothing, or other costly items***
- ***Lack of interest in previous activities***
- ***Gang involvement***
- ***Tattoos***
- ***Inappropriate clothing***
- ***Demeanor – fear, anxiety, depression, submissiveness, nervousness***