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Freedom for sale

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IN THE AGE OF ESCORT SERVICES AND FAST FASHION, WE ARE ENSLAVING MORE HUMANS THAN EVER BEFORE, INCLUDING PEOPLE IN OUR OWN BACKYARD.
The streets of the Red Light District, adorned with women prowling in neon-laced storefronts like half-naked Barbie dolls in their boxes have become the iconic image of the modern-day sex industry. But the dark reality behind Amsterdam’s red glow spreads far beyond the city streets and creeps into the unsuspecting small towns many of us call home.

Each year, hundreds of Iowans are taken to Holiday Inns, run-down crack houses or quaint apartments with the doors constantly looked over by discreetly armed guards, someone accompanying their every move with a gun in their pocket. They are given food to eat, a place to sleep and rides to work, in exchange for their freedom. Multi-million dollar companies like Craigslist, Pornhub and H&M have enabled a form of slavery across the globe.

It can be hard to measure the number of people trafficked each year, but the Polaris Project, an organization dedicated to ending modern day slavery, received over 29,800 reports of human trafficking via their hotline over the past eight years. According to their data, the number includes reports received across all 50 states, and the numbers are going up every year.

While the terms sex slaves and human trafficking likely incite images of the Red Light District or the film Taken, human trafficking is happening in our own backyards — places like I-35, at truck stops, local massage parlors and the Cedar Rapids Hy-Vee.

Human trafficking is defined as people coerced into involuntary servitude for the purpose of financial profit for traffickers, and anyone under 18 who works without monetary pay.

In Our Own Backyard

Some students at Iowa State are working toward educating the public and ending human trafficking right here in Iowa. The Iowa Network Against Human Trafficking (NAHT) chapter at Iowa State has over 20 members, led by president Rachel Sporer, junior in global resource systems horticulture and hopeful future peace corps member.

A supportive family and a lot of Law & Order SVU contributed to Rachel’s commitment to human rights. “I feel so blessed, I have never experienced any of these terrible things and I feel like I need to help,” says Sporer.

Starting in high school, she volunteered with community groups in Des Moines to help homeless and at-risk youth. Her freshman year of college, her friend brought her to a NAHT meeting when she learned about the locality of human trafficking.

“It’s just so much more common than people think, and when they find out people are usually like ‘What the fuck? We gotta do something’, ” says Sporer, who notes that awareness is a huge issue in small towns.

In small towns across Iowa, as local parades or fairs are happening, just down the street there are people being trafficked for sex and labor for the profit of others, in exchange for some valued goods.

“This is why people mainly think of impoverished counties, but it happens here too,” says Sporer. “The exchange of valued goods is what leads to trafficking, and that can be anything from a roof over someone’s head to a daily meal — food and security are pretty high on the hierarchy of needs.”

This helps explain why so many runaway youth get involved in human trafficking, as they are spotted out and about while they should be in school, and take up offers of food and shelter out of desperation, often being offered modeling jobs or a house to live in, in exchange for work.

“There are a lot of people in our community that are in need, they have a low socioeconomic status,” says Sporer. “And those are the ones at risk for trafficking because they’re the ones with dire needs and people are just waiting to exploit those and take advantage.”

Beyond Sex

Human trafficking isn’t just sex work, it also encompasses situations in which people are forced to work in exchange for things that fulfill their basic needs, instead of paychecks.

“Language barriers are also a huge factor, if someone can’t speak the language it’s hard to get a job,” explains Sporer, and says this causes people to resort to other ways of exchanging work for something of value, like food or shelter.

Whether we know it or not, we have likely inadvertently contributed to a supply chain than enslaves millions of people around the world. Coffee beans, iPhones and fast fashion from stores like Forever 21 and H&M all appear new, sleek and stylish from their meticulously designed storefronts, but behind the glass lies a much bleaker reality.

Ruth Buckels, statewide coordinator for Teens Against Human Trafficking (TAHT), says after becoming aware of labor trafficking she is much more conscious of her buying habits, citing Wordly Goods as a great local option for unique gifts.

“I look at where things are made and I always buy American unless I go to a free trade store,” says Buckels. “With free trade, somebody has gone to that country and met that vendor so you can know that the money you spend is going directly back to them.”

While she hasn’t worked directly with victims of labor trafficking, Buckels says through talking with local therapists who work with trafficking victims, she knows it’s here.

“In Iowa it’s the food market,” says Buckels. “It’s bringing in other populations and paying them terrible wages, often the men doing labor, such as detasseling, during the day and women and children doing the sex trafficking at night.”

People are exploited for their work in fields, mines and sweatshops in countries all over the world, making products that will eventually end up in a shiny glass store piled up in stock for our consumption. The low prices offered by fast fashion companies frequently foster a production environment of environmental irresponsibility and forced labor, often involving children and mandatory overtime in unsafe conditions.

“I get it, I love a ten-dollar dress as much as the next person, but by buying fast fashion from stores like H&M and Forever 21, you’re not only exploiting the original designer of these rip-off clothes, you’re furthering the demand for slaves,” says Sporer.

Educating to End Trafficking

Rachel isn’t the only one in Ames who has found herself swept up in working to end the tragedy of human trafficking. Amber Lawrence got her undergraduate degree in education and her masters in counseling, and always assumed she would be doing a job where she could help people, but she never imagined she would be doing this.

“I didn’t even know human trafficking was a ‘thing’ until 2009, at least not in this country,” says Lawrence. “When I first learned about human trafficking, about people being bought and sold, it was crushing. I think it took me a few days before I could even say the words aloud.” Once she started reading up on the issue from...
books like "Terrifying No More," "Too Small to Ignore," and "The Hole is Our Gospel," the course of her life radically shifted.

"Human trafficking is like staring at evil in the face. It is a heinous crime and one I have cried over many, many times," says Lawrence. "I think it is hard to hear these stories and tell these stories over and over again and not constantly wrestle with the depravity of mankind."

Most recently, it was a video she saw on Facebook posted by the International Justice Mission that reminded her of the work she does with victims here.

"It absolutely broke my heart...I cried and it broke me for a couple days," says Lawrence. "Young children are being forced, often by parents, to perform sexual acts by themselves and with other children/siblings while being filmed on a webcam. The victims are often in poverty-stricken areas and the buyers are often in the USA or Western Europe."

She now works as the Human Trafficking Community Educator at Youth and Shelter Services in Ames and spends her days traveling from school to school to ensure counselors and students alike have the resources and education they need to handle cases of human trafficking if they were to arise.

In addition to daily visits to high schools, Lawrence works with teen-led organization, TAHT, whose mission is to raise awareness about human trafficking through the voice of young people. The 'champion' program assigns a teacher or staff member to take up this issue and talk about it in their classroom, encouraging students to take the conversation from there. Right now, there's a champion in 30 schools, but Lawrence's long-term goal is to establish a presence in all 135 schools across Iowa.

Lawrence says one of the biggest challenges to ending the problem is the inadvertent perpetuation of our sex-saturated culture by everyday people. From the normalization of women being seen as objects for sexual pleasure in the media to using 'pimp' as a glamorous term.

"We have this rite of passage for young men to go to a strip club and many of these women dancing there are not free people, and we communicate to the young girls that this is what it means to be a woman in the United States...your body is not your own, it is simply there to bring pleasure to men," says Lawrence.

She says the Internet and social media have made it incredibly easy to purchase a boy or girl, recruit victims or look at pornography.

"The sex trafficking industry is blowing up and it's difficult for law enforcement to keep up. It takes an average of 30 officers to perform one sting, and those kind of resources are just not available in every community across the state," says Lawrence.

Lawrence mentioned a recent case where a man lured in two teen girls from Waterloo he met over social media to come meet him in Chicago.

"He bought their bus tickets, and of course they didn’t know that is what they were walking into," says Lawrence.

The man and his wife proceeded to force the girls to steal clothes to sell for cash, pose in online ads and prostitute themselves.

**When Human Trafficking Hits Home**

When talking to Ruth Buckels, it’s impossible to ignore her fierce commitment to her kids — yet gentle demeanor when talking with them. She seamlessly switches between recounting horrifying acts of violence against her own children, to assuring her young ones running across the kitchen that only wax paper, not plastic, can go in the oven.

Somehow Buckels radiates a fond feeling of being home for the holidays, even if you’re sitting in an office miles away just talking to her on your cell phone.
vulnerable,” says Buckels. “And that vulnerability is used to
“Maybe they snuck out of a parental home, or maybe they smoked
a teenager doing something that sounds exciting.
Buckels says many cases of human trafficking start with a
behind them.”
says Buckels. “Don’t react. Just know that they’ve made it through
“You’re just sitting here looking at them thinking, don’t react,”
endured, and that linger in her mind to this day.
Buckels described explicit, graphic acts that Iowa teens have
In retelling some of the survivors stories she asked not be printed,
Nobody does that. It’s not human. It’s not even animal.”
know, on average today I want to have sex with 15 strangers.’
Buckels says ‘trafficking’ wasn’t even part of our vocabulary here
“The cruelty of human-to-human behavior haunts me,” says
human trafficking victims and listening to their stories.
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Now she works as the statewide coordinator for AMP, an Iowa
six of my kids
or family member did that to them,” says Buckels. “Six of my kids
now have come back and told me they’ve been trafficked, they just
researching human trafficking and learning all she could possibly
Buckels wasted no time contemplating the irreversible, and began
the knowledge,” says Buckels.
“Once they have a definition and learn what it is, many young
“Brittany has been trafficked
Yeah, because she needed a safe place to live.”
“Ma’am, do you know why Brittany is in foster care?”
Surprised and a bit confused, she asked, “Witness to what?”
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In 2008, she received a phone call that instantly diminished any
those kids need to be protected a little different,” says Buckels.
but it can also be detrimental in the case of trafficking because
“That can be a good thing because these kids can get a fresh start,
child’s background.
It requires a complex response, and
approach that involves law enforcement, county attorneys,
victim service agencies, nonprofits, first responders and medical
Making Progress
want to live,” says Buckels. “And that pain radiates from her .”
Buckels recalls a woman who was pregnant, presumably by her
everyday life of survivors she talks to.
people,” says Buckels.
Black eyes, bleach and broken bones were all parts of the
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bonfire with some football players the Thursday night before a
She recalls the story of two girls who snuck out and went to a
game. They drank, hooked up and pictures were taken.
‘they’ll call me if they need me,’ and ‘that would never happen to
pleads for parents to know their child’s friends and not rely on the
predators to pick out the neglected and vulnerable children. She
As a parent, Buckels wishes she had known how easy it is for
in having everyone trained and equipped with what they need to do
“People matter,” says Lawrence. “Even if this crime was
ordinary people will choose to join the fight as well.
Energy toward ending human trafficking in Iowa, they hope
issue is contributing to the issue. Empower, spread love and make
“You need to be aware of the issue,” says Sporer . “Ignoring the
courtrooms and police stations,
While progress is being made in courtrooms and police stations,
the National Human Trafficking Hotline can be
reached at 1-888-373-7888.
Since her start as a foster parent in 1988, Buckels has received countless calls and welcomed over 60 kids to her home, whether it be just for a night or a few years. Often times she gets little to no notice before the kids show up, and no solid information on the child’s background.

“That can be a good thing because these kids can get a fresh start, but it can also be detrimental in the case of trafficking because those kids need to be protected a little different,” says Buckels.

In 2008, she received a phone call that instantly diminished any ounce of naivety about the world she once held.

“It was a phone call from a prosecutor wanting to speak to my daughter, Brittany, because she was their star witness,” says Buckels.

Surprised and a bit confused, she asked, “Witness to what?”

“Ma’am, do you know why Brittany is in foster care?”

“Yeah, because she needed a safe place to live.”

“Is that all you know?”

“Yep, that’s about it”

“Brittany has been trafficked”

“And at that point I knew I had failed her drastically in not having the knowledge,” says Buckels.

Buckels wasted no time contemplating the irreversible, and began researching human trafficking and learning all she could possibly know. Now, you could hardly imagine Buckels as someone who neglects to see the harsh realities of the world, but she admits she used to have as much of a wide-eyed view of the world as any other lowan.

“I learned about it in church, I heard about it overseas, and it was parents selling children and bad men taking children, but it wasn’t anything that was happening here, so I didn’t pay close attention,” says Buckels. “I lived in this world of nice and naive, and I enjoyed it. I almost miss it.”

Buckels says ‘trafficking’ wasn’t even part of our vocabulary here until around 2000, which has led many young adults now to hear about these instances and think ‘Yeah, that happened to me.’

“Once they have a definition and learn what it is, many young adults look back and recognize that their neighbor or babysitter or family member did that to them,” says Buckels. “Six of my kids now have come back and told me they’ve been trafficked, they just didn’t know it had a term.”

Now she works as the statewide coordinator for AMP, an Iowa organization dedicated to helping foster youth achieve their full potential, and TAHT. Buckels’ travels across the state meeting human trafficking victims and listening to their stories.

“The cruelty of human-to-human behavior haunts me,” says Buckels. “It’s stuff you would never think of, and I carry those stories with me. Nobody woke up this morning and said, ‘You know, on average today I want to have sex with 15 strangers.’ Nobody does that. It’s not human. It’s not even animal.”

In retelling some of the survivors stories she asked not be printed, Buckels described explicit, graphic acts that Iowa teens have.

As a parent, Buckels wishes she had known how easy it is for predators to pick out the neglected and vulnerable children. She pleads for parents to know their child’s friends and not rely on the ‘they’ll call me if they need me,’ and ‘that would never happen to my kid’ approach to parenting.

She recalls the story of two girls who snuck out and went to a bonfire with some football players the Thursday night before a game. They drank, hooked up and pictures were taken.

“The photographs then were used by one of the football players to blackmail them and keep them doing these things with other people,” says Buckels.

Black eyes, bleach and broken bones were all parts of the everyday life of survivors she talks to.

Buckels recalls a woman who was pregnant, presumably by her pimp, and could be sold for more money because buyers thought it was cool to rape a pregnant woman. She was 17 years old.

“She’s lived a thousand more lifetimes than I will ever live, or ever want to live,” says Buckels. “And that pain radiates from her.”

Making Progress

Lawrence suggests we are moving toward a multidisciplinary approach that involves law enforcement, county attorneys, victim service agencies, nonprofits, first responders and medical workers coming together in a strategic way to address the issue.

“It is a complex issue and it requires a complex response, and there is a big push to get all law enforcement trained on this,” says Lawrence. “We have good laws in Iowa. It really comes down to having everyone trained and equipped with what they need to do their job.”

Lawrence and Buckels are also beginning to work on training hotel employees across the state on what to look for and how to get victims help.

Sporer is helping make differences in both public perception and government too. In September, Sporer and the NAHT Iowa chapter successfully advocated for the establishment of human trafficking coordinator positions in two state agencies, creating a presence in both the Department of Public Safety and Office of the Attorney General.

While progress is being made in courtrooms and police stations, both Lawrence and Sporer say they are still fighting the battle of convincing people that this is even an issue in Iowa.

“You need to be aware of the issue,” says Sporer. “Ignoring the issue is contributing to the issue. Empower, spread love and make people feel like they’re worth something.”

As Lawrence and Sporer continue to dedicate their time and energy toward ending human trafficking in Iowa, they hope ordinary people will choose to join the fight as well.

“They’ll call me if they need me,” says Lawrence. “Even if this crime was happening to just one person it would be worth the fight to end it. I do this job to give a voice to the voiceless and advocate for those who are unable to do it for themselves.”

The National Human Trafficking Hotline can be reached at 1-888-373-7888.