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Offering hope for girls once caught in sex trafficking net

By Diane Claytor



New Day for Children residents enjoy the sunset during an outing on a houseboat. Photo provided

talking about, Wilson said she was reluctant to give numbers, because, as she said, "they don't really matter; even if it's 10, it's simply an intolerable situation."

Sitting in a Lafayette coffee shop, Wilson told of one smart, beautiful middle school girl who lived "within 15 minutes of here." Her parents both enjoyed professional careers; she was very involved in school and sports activities and appeared to be a very well-rounded and loved kid. But then she met two high school boys - maybe at Starbucks or the shopping mall - who complimented her, suggested hanging out and soon convinced her that she could help them get money for dates by selling herself. Perhaps believing she was in love, she obliged - meeting up with men after school and on weekends. This went on for two years without her parents' knowledge. Driving to a Nevada casino and being sold for sex in a hotel caught the attention of the police and this poor, young child was rescued. "If this can happen with intelligent, involved parents, it can happen with anybody," Wilson explained.

Stories abound and each is sadder than the last. There are kids being locked up and those sold by family members. While many involve young runaways who get caught up with the wrong people, Wilson reported that "most kids being sold for sex are in their normal lives - living with their families, going to school every day." And, to no one's surprise, social media plays a huge role.

Wilson relayed another story about a sweet young girl with very involved and loving parents. "At 12, she thinks she has found an online boyfriend who starts 'liking' her pictures, then sends private messages and pictures of himself." He soon asks for - and because she wants to please him - receives, more risqué photos. It's only when the FBI, conducting a nationwide sting, turns up on her doorstep does she learn that she was sending naked pictures of herself to a 60-year-old man posing as a teen-aged boy. Wilson noted that it could have been so much worse. "He could have suggested meeting and then raping her, or kidnapping and sexually exploiting her," she said.

New Day and their primary partner, Together Freedom (along with several other partners), provide shelter, education, medical care and therapy to help heal mind, body and spirit of these young girls who "have been rescued from child sex slavery," Wilson said. It is one of the few residential programs in the country, offering a safe and secure environment and boarding school format.

The cottage, located in a serene and secluded spot in Northern California, can accommodate up to 12 girls, 10-18 years old, suffering from the desperation of sex trafficking. "These girls will live in loving, nurturing family-like environments where they have a hope of recovering their lost childhoods and building trust," states New Day's website. Currently, there are six young victims living on the campus.

There is no limit for how long a girl may live at New Day, which, Wilson said, makes their program unique. While their average stay is 15 months, "we've had girls stay for over four years." The program is faith-based, but nondenominational. Referrals come from families, law enforcement and social services programs.

Because New Day is not a lock-down program and can only accommodate a small number, Wilson admitted that often times girls must be turned down, particularly if they're a flight risk. "When we first started," she explained, "we wanted to save everyone, to scoop these kids up and just give them love. It was a rude

Sex trafficking of children, child prostitution. ... These are not subjects most of us want to think about, let alone discuss. We may read a headline or hear a news story. We'll feel profound sadness for the victims and great repulsion for the perpetrators and customers. But we'll then go on with our day, secure in the belief that this is a foreign country or inner city problem, not something that happens in upper middle class suburbs.

Kathy Wilson, spokesperson for New Day for Children, suggests we think again.

New Day is a nonprofit organization that provides hope for a new life to American girls rescued from sex trafficking. Working with New Day since its beginning almost 10 years ago, Wilson sadly explained that commercial sexual exploitation of children - boys and girls - knows no demographic nor geographic boundaries. When asked how many children we're

awakening when we realized we simply couldn't help everyone who needed it."

Wilson, who admits she is in a "world I never dreamed I'd have anything to do with," is passionate about New Day and all they have been able to accomplish. Seventy-seven girls have come through the program since its inception and, she proudly reported, "80-85 percent have stayed 'out of the life.'"

Funding for New Day comes primarily from donations and grants. "We ask families to pay, but if they can't, we don't turn away their daughter," Wilson explained. "We certainly could not run this program without the generous help from the community."

On April 14, a 5K Run/Walk for New Day will be held at the Lafayette Reservoir. For only \$35 (\$20 for kids) you can help restore the hopes and dreams of young girls who have thankfully been rescued from sex trafficking. For information or to register, please go to newdayforchildren.com.

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