

# Unthinkable Tragedies

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*When I was abandoned by my biological mother at six months of age, I became a “ward of the court,” a common term used in the 1960’s. For most of the first 16 years of my life, my mentally ill maternal grandfather and alcoholic grandmother were my guardians. (I think the only thing they actually “guarded” was the monthly check that accompanied my presence in the dilapidated, filthy shack we lived in.) I experienced verbal and physical abuse, poverty, filth, and hunger for my entire childhood, except for the very brief time when I was with a foster family.*

I do not know the names of my foster parents, and I don’t know what city they lived in; in fact, I remember very little about them. But I know that they showed me simply by the way they lived their lives that there were people in the world who lived in a clean house, had plenty to eat, didn’t yell at one another or hit each other, and who actually seemed to enjoy one another’s company. The brief time I spent with those people was the first time I could change clothes without someone watching. It was the first time I slept peacefully through the night without my stomach all tied up in knots. Consequently, I’ve always thought that people who care for other people’s children are some of the best people in the world.

Sadly, I was removed from the care of those wonderful people because they took me to church, which was considered wrong in the Southern California county where I lived in the days immediately following the Supreme Court ruling to remove prayer from schools.

I was placed back with the people who beat me, burned me, and told me repeatedly that they hadn’t signed up for raising another kid. I emancipated at the first possible opportunity—age



16. I grew into adulthood thinking there was nothing worse than child abuse. I couldn't find a way to repay those foster parents, but I dedicated my career to protecting and defending good child welfare providers through insurance and risk management.

When I was 27, I started a retail insurance brokerage, which was the only insurance organization in the U.S. dedicated solely to protecting child welfare organizations. When I was 34, I founded a national company to help retail brokers all over the country do the same for the child welfare organizations in their areas. I've sold those companies, and I now serve as the national child welfare specialist for Market Insurance Company.

Through my involvement with child welfare organizations throughout the U.S., I've heard about sexual exploitation of children, but I had never fully connected the dots between foster care and the commercial sexual exploitation of children until I met Sandie Morgan, Director of Vanguard University's Global Center for Women and Justice.

Sandie taught me that the selling of children for sex is a business, so it's important that we call it what it is—not "prostitution" but "Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children." Law enforcement professionals call it "CSEC." Twelve-year-olds dressed up to look like they are 23 years old are not prostitutes but victims. They don't want to be on the streets soliciting sex. The pimp isn't their boyfriend and protector as many have been brainwashed to believe.

Sandie taught me that cartels and gangs understand that when they sell drugs or guns, the asset is gone. But

when they sell a child, they have "reusable assets" that can be sold as many as fifty times in one night. My stomach clenched when I heard this.

Although I was not trafficked, I could so easily have been in that position. When I was 8 or 9 years old, I knew through the other kids on my street that I was the only little girl who had not been raped. The day I met Sandie Morgan, I learned that

*80% of young people in the business of human trafficking were once in foster care; over 1.7 million children are engaged in the human sex trade in the United States.*

the only thing worse than abusing an innocent child is profiting from the abuse of a child.

Everyone involved in foster care needs to understand that foster kids are prime targets for traffickers. They've been abused, often in a sexual way, so they think so little of themselves. Those who have been sexually molested have a tangled thought process about sex trafficking. Some victims say, "My sexual innocence was being taken from me at home for free. At least now I'm earning money for it." Some victims

think the pimp (often referred to as their "Daddy" or "boyfriend") actually rescued them from the street. These are the cases when the child ran away from a group home or foster home and no one came to get them.

Vanguard's Global Center for Women and Justice reports that runaway kids are approached by traffickers within 48 hours of running away. They also report that many kids hanging out in parks, malls, etc., resist traffickers the first few times they approach. But by the fourth time a trafficker approaches them, they are usually out of options, and ultimately succumb. Pimps tell girls, "See, no one is looking for you. No one is coming for you. No one cares if you live or die. But I've been here trying to look after you and bringing you something to eat four times now." How can she argue with that logic?

One pimp actually wrote a "guideline" for people who want to get into the trafficking business! He used Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to give step-by-step instructions on how to coerce the girl or boy to willingly cooperate. It's evil, and it's being done throughout the U.S.

Make no mistake that this heinous crime is prevalent in the U.S.

By now you may be wondering what you can do about the commercial sexual exploitation of children. The answer is "MUCH!" First is prevention. As people who care about foster kids, the best thing we can do to help kids avoid being trafficked is to help them gain a sense of their own worth and value. We can instill this attitude by helping them to identify their good characteristics, including those developed as coping mechanisms for the pain they've felt. These may be



the very things that bug you about the kid! The characteristics of successful survivors of abuse include strength, resiliency, resourcefulness, persistence, courage, the ability to adapt to different people and environments, and the ability to assuage angry people.

Pointing out a child's unique characteristics is like describing to a blind child how he or she looks. Imagine telling a child who is blind that she has beautiful, shiny brown hair, beautiful eyes, and long, brown eyelashes. As she begins to believe she's beautiful, she sits up a little straighter. As foster kids begin to believe that they are stronger and more resourceful and braver than the average person, they begin to believe they have worth and value.

Another way to prevent the children within your influence from being trafficked is to instill a sense of their belonging. Include them in your family activities, family pictures, and family responsibilities.

An important element of stopping trafficking in your area is to help stop the demand. Teach the boys in your care how to treat girls. Teach all the children within your influence that the "pimp culture" isn't acceptable. For example, kids (and adults) think nothing of naming a TV show "Pimp My Ride" and listening to music that

speaks of pimps and the girls [not the words they use] in the "stable." My friend Joanne Feldmeth, director of Royal Family Kids Clubs, says, "The media tends to glamorize the pimp, excuse the john, and shame the victim." If foster kids throughout the U.S. refused to go along with the "cool factor" of the "pimp culture," we could do what gay and lesbian advocates have done with the use of the word, "gay" to mean uncool or stupid. Using the word "gay" to mean stupid is now considered taboo.

Lastly, you can help stop trafficking in your community by being on the lookout for any suspicious activity. Watch for adults, usually men, talking with young girls. It happens at massage parlors, truck stops, hotels and motels, parks, fast food restaurants, malls, and on the street. When you see it, you can call the National Trafficking Hotline, 1-888-3737-

888, or go online to make a report that will be investigated [www.polarisproject.org/what-we-do/national-human-trafficking-hotline/report-a-tip](http://www.polarisproject.org/what-we-do/national-human-trafficking-hotline/report-a-tip). You can provide your name or remain anonymous. A complete list of tips for recognizing the signs is [www.polarisproject.org/human-trafficking/recognizing-the-signs](http://www.polarisproject.org/human-trafficking/recognizing-the-signs).

You can also stay informed on the issues by subscribing to the Global Center for Women and Justice podcast: [gcwj.vanguard.edu/eht-podcast/eht1](http://gcwj.vanguard.edu/eht-podcast/eht1)

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