



Teen Girls' Stories of Sex Trafficking in U.S.

International Sex Trafficking Is a Well-Known Problem, But It Happens Here as Well

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Fifteen-year-old "Debbie" is the middle child in a close-knit Air Force family from suburban Phoenix, and a straight-A student -- the last person most of us would expect to be forced into the seamy world of sex trafficking.

But Debbie, which is not her real name, is one of thousands of young American girls who authorities say have been abducted or lured from their normal lives and made into sex slaves. While many Americans have heard of human trafficking in other parts of the world -- Thailand, Cambodia, Latin America and eastern Europe, for example -- few people know it happens here in the United States.

The FBI estimates that well over 100,000 children and young women are trafficked in America today. They range in age from 9 to 19, with the average age being 11.

And many victims are no longer just runaways, or kids who've been abandoned. Many of them are from what would be considered "good" families, who are lured or coerced by clever predators, say experts.

"These predators are particularly adept at reading children, at reading kids, and knowing what their vulnerabilities are," said FBI Deputy Assistant Director, Chip Burrus, who started the Lost Innocence project, which specializes in child- and teen-sex trafficking.

And, he said, these predators are going where the kids are.

"What you can see, time and time again, is that the predators will adapt their means to whatever the young people are doing -- whether it's malls, whether it's ski slopes, whether it's beaches," Burrus said. "Predators ... are going to do everything in their power to try to convince young girls, young boys, to come with them and enter this particular lifestyle."

Abducted From Her Own Driveway, Teen Says

Debbie's story is particularly chilling. One evening Debbie said she got a call from a casual friend, Bianca, who asked to stop by Debbie's house. Wearing a pair of Sponge Bob pajamas, Debbie went outside to meet Bianca, who drove up in a Cadillac with two

older men, Mark and Matthew. After a few minutes of visiting, Bianca said they were going to leave.

"So I went and I started to go give her a hug," Debbie told "Primetime." "And that's when she pushed me in the car."

As they sped away from her house, Debbie said that one of the men told Bianca to tie her up and said he threatened to shoot Bianca if she didn't comply.

"She tied up my hands first, and then she put the tape over my mouth. And she put tape over my eyes," Debbie said. "While she was putting tape on me, Matthew told me if I screamed or acted stupid, he'd shoot me. So I just stayed quiet."

Unbelievably, police say Debbie was kidnapped from her own driveway with her mother, Kersti, right inside. Back home with her other kids, Kersti had no idea Debbie wasn't there.

"I was in the house. I mean, it was a confusing night. I had all the kids coming in and out. The last I knew she had come back in," Kersti said. "It was just so weird that night. I mean, I normally check on all my kids, and that night I didn't. I should have."

Debbie said her captors drove her around the streets of Phoenix for hours. Exhausted and confused, she was finally taken to an apartment 25 miles from her home. She said one of her captors put a gun to her head.

"He goes, 'If I was to shoot you right now, where would you want to be shot -- in your head, in your back or in your chest?'" Debbie said. "And then I hear him start messing with his gun. And he counted to three and then he pulled the trigger. And then I was still alive. I opened my eyes, and I just saw him laughing."

Debbie said she was then drugged by her captors and other men were brought into the room, where she was gang raped.

"And then that's when I heard them say there was a middle-aged guy in the living room that wanted to take advantage of a 15-year-old girl," she said. "And then he goes, 'Bend her over. I want to see what I'm working with.' And that's when he started to rape me. And I see more guys, four other guys had come into the room. And they all had a turn. It was really scary."

A Lucrative Offer at the Mall

Debbie's indoctrination into the world of sex exploitation was particularly brutal. More often, young girls are unwittingly lured in to unwilling prostitution with promises of jobs, money, clothing and modeling.

That's what 19-year-old Miya said happened to her when she was working at a Phoenix mall selling sunglasses. Miya was working three jobs -- 14 hours a day -- to pay off her bills and save for college.

One day when she was working, she was approached by a young woman and a well-dressed man. "He asked if it would be out of place if he said I was pretty," Miya said. "I was like, 'No.' I mean, it was a compliment."

The man was charming and had a flattering offer for Miya.

"He said that he was a model agent, [that] he was looking for new models in the area," she said. "It's not like something I've been wanting to do or anything, but, I mean, it was ... it seemed interesting."

Taken by the idea of modeling and making extra money, Miya agreed to meet the couple that night at a local restaurant.

"They said they were on their way to California to go back to their office and they were going to do some more photo shoots, and they wanted me to go along with them," Miya said. "He said that I could probably make about a thousand or more. ... He said I could try it for three days. ... And so I went with them."

The next morning Miya was thrilled when the couple took her to have her hair, makeup and nails done. At that point, she said she had no idea she was not being made over for a photo shoot but for a much more insidious reason. Later, when the couple began taking pictures, Miya said she became alarmed.

"They used just a cheap camera you can buy, the throwaway," she said. "And they said once we get to California that we would be at a photo shoot, and that they'd be using, uh, some really good equipment, they'd have makeup artists and stuff like that."

Miya said she didn't know what happened to those pictures until later, when she arrived in California with the couple. "He showed me a Web site that he put them up on," she said. "And it was an escort service site."

Treated Like a Dog

After the horrifying gang rape, police say Debbie was trapped in one of Phoenix's roughest neighborhoods. In a rundown, garbage-strewn apartment, her captors were trying to break her down.

"They were asking me if I was hungry," she said. "I told them no. That's when they put a dog biscuit in my mouth, trying to get me to eat it."

After a sleepless night, Debbie was tossed back into the car and again driven around Phoenix. She said they talked to her about prostitution, and that one of the men forced her to have sex with him in the car and then later in a park.

The same man took her back to his apartment, and Debbie said, "I ended up in the dog kennel."

Greg Scheffer, an officer with the Phoenix police department, said Debbie was kept in a small dog crate for several days. Lying on her back in the tiny space, her whole body went numb.

"She was subject to various abuses while in there," Scheffer said. "This is all part of the breaking down period where [he] gains complete control of this girl."

Unbeknownst to Debbie, police say her captors had put an ad on Craig's List -- a national Web site better-known for helping people find apartments and roommates. Shortly after the ad ran, men began arriving at the apartment at all hours of the day and night demanding sex from her.

She said she had to comply. "I had no other choice," she said.

Debbie said she was earning hundreds of dollars a night -- all of it, she said, going to the pimp.

Scheffer said Debbie was forced to have sex with at least 50 men -- and that's not counting the men who gang-raped her on a periodic basis.

Debbie had no idea who the men were. "I didn't know them," she said. "But most of them were married, with kids. And every single one of them, I asked them why they were coming to me if they had a wife at home. ... They didn't have an answer. So, like, I felt so nasty."

For more than 40 days, police say Debbie remained captive, often beaten and forced daily to have sex of the most degrading kind. During that time, she said she did not try to escape because her captors had done what police say so many pimps do -- threatened her and terrified her.

Debbie said that the pimps told her they would go after her family, and they even threatened to throw battery acid on her 19-month-old niece.

"After they told me that, I didn't care what happened to me as long as my family stayed alive," she said. "And that's pretty much what I had in my head. Staying there to keep my family alive."

Making a Break for It

Miya says she endured her own brutal ordeal and was forced to work as a prostitute.

When she failed to come home from her job at the mall, Miya's family began desperately searching for her -- they frantically called her cell phone and sent her text messages, begging her to come home. They got no response.

Eventually, they filed a missing person report with the police, contacted the media and plastered fliers and yellow ribbons all over town.

Meanwhile, Miya's boss at the mall called Dianne Martin to tell her he was afraid that her daughter may have been abducted by the suspicious couple.

Miya's parents soon learned from police that more than approximately 30 other girls had been approached by the same couple in that mall and in surrounding areas -- the same couple, apparently, who were seen with Miya and who claimed to be recruiting models. But in the end, Miya was the only girl who'd gone with them.

Within days, Miya had been moved several times, farther from home, and she said she was too scared to try to escape. "I mean, I was really far away from my house, and I didn't know where to go," she said.

Ernie Allen, the director of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, said that's not uncommon for kids lured into the sex trade.

"There are many of these kids who are seduced, thinking ... that they're gonna have economic opportunities, that they're gonna be a model, that they're gonna be in show business somehow," Allen said. "And then, later, discover themselves in a situation in which they have no control, and they're, they're slaves. So ... this is a problem that has many faces."

Miya was essentially on tour -- she said her pimp had also taken out ads on the Internet, advertising where she would appear next. The fact that she was kept off the streets made it almost impossible for police to track her down.

"So the Internet for the pimps is a huge benefit for them, because it allows them to make their money, do what they want to do with these juveniles or with their prostitutes and have very little contact with the police," said Scheffer.

But then after six days, Miya said her captors slipped up. She said they decided to put her out on some of the roughest streets in San Francisco to turn tricks.

For her, it was like a death sentence, and she finally worked up the nerve to escape. At 5:30 one morning, she made a break for it.

"I waited till they were completely asleep. And I put my suitcase by the door. And I was about to leave and ...sure enough, the phone rings," she said.

Miya said she handed her captor his phone and then told him she was going to go downstairs and smoke a cigarette. And then she ran for her life.

"And that was the last time I talked to him," she said. "I grabbed my suitcase, and I ran to the elevator and I got outside and I started running until I got as far away as I possibly could."

Reunited With Family

Miya said she was moved around so much at night, she didn't even know where she was. After escaping, Miya finally felt safe enough to approach a truck driver, who told her she was in Union City, Calif.

Miya called home and spoke to her grateful mother. "She told me she didn't know what to do or where to go," Martin said.

Her stepfather contacted the police, who found Miya and took her to a police station. "I was just so glad I was out of their reach," she said.

But before her journey was over, Miya had one more hurdle to overcome. Police asked her to help catch the man she said lured her away from the mall -- which would mean facing the man she said held her against her will and forced her to perform degrading sexual acts.

Police tracked the man to a motel room. "They found out what room he was in," Miya said. "He tried jumping out the window. And they caught him."

For Debbie, who police said been held by her captors at gunpoint and kept in a dog cage for more than 40 days, the chances of getting out alive seemed slim. But then police investigating the case heard tips that she was being kept in an apartment in the Phoenix area.

Police searched the apartment but didn't find Debbie.

But they were still suspicious. So on Nov. 8, police broke down the doors to the same apartment and realized with a shock why they'd been unable to find Debbie -- she was there, but she was tied up and crushed into a drawer under a bed.

Debbie said she heard Officer James Perry calling her name but was too frightened to answer. "I didn't know what to say; I was just lying under the bed, stiff as a board, shaking," she said "And then he opens the middle drawer, and he was like, 'Oh my God!'"

Trying to Regain Innocence

When Debbie was finally freed from the drawer, she was sobbing, and said she gave the officer "the biggest hug in the world."

"I was so relieved!" she said. "And then that's when my ... I was standing there, and my knees started ... they gave out."

While it seems unbelievable that these girls didn't try to escape earlier, experts say it's not so uncommon.

"These are human beings who are owned by someone else, who lack the ability to walk away, who lack the ability to make a decision in their own self-interest to do something else," said Allen. "If that's not slavery, I don't know what is."

Police arrested two people at the apartment, and Debbie was taken to a safe house for children while her mother was called.

"I remember I got the call while I was driving to work," Kersti said. "That was scary. I had to pull over. But, uh, it was just wild, it was. I drove as fast as I legally could. I walked in and I saw her and we just flew to each other."

Within hours, Debbie was safely home. "I was so happy," she said. "I was so happy to see my mom. I was so happy to be home. I'm able to be with my family. I don't know -- it's crazy."

The two officers who rescued Debbie were so touched by her strength and her story that they visited her this Christmas and gave her a cross -- a token of affection and protection.

"She is a very strong, amazing girl," said Scheffer. "We ran into a few other girls that are like that. I don't know how they have the strength. They are very brave."

The man Miya says lured her from the mall was charged with pimping and pandering in connection with the 17-year-old with whom he was travelling. He has pleaded not guilty.

As for the people accused of snatching Debbie, they are charged with kidnapping and sexual assault. All have pleaded not guilty, except for one who awaits extradition from Illinois.

Both girls are trying to go on with their lives. Miya still has three jobs -- she's even gone back to work at a mall. But she's determined now to do some rescuing of her own. She's saving money to open an animal shelter.

Debbie has been joyfully reunited with her family, but they have put their house up for sale. They've decided to leave Arizona and move to the Midwest, where Debbie hopes she can find some of the innocence she lost one grim night in September.

Note: This report has been revised to clarify that the man Miya says lured her into prostitution was charged with pimping and pandering only in connection with the minor with whom he was traveling.

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