

Features

Alabama-based WellHouse helping human trafficking victims from across nation

Nicole Allhouse | 03.22.22



The WellHouse.

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"Gasoline dripped from my naked body as I stood near the gas station pump. I shook because when he doused me with gasoline, I had a lit cigarette in my mouth. All I wanted was to call my mom. I was finally ready but had avoided calling her for so long. I hadn't wanted the questions or the shame. But I didn't have her number. He did. And he had my phone. Anyone who had helped me thus far only got me into deeper trouble. Who could I turn to? So, I just shook, not only afraid of [being set] ablaze but of the gaze of the onlookers surveilling my exposed skin, dripping with fuel, the fumes stinging my nostrils. And hope seemed as far away as that Kentucky summer before I became a teenager."

This is Julie's story. She was only a teenager when a stranger began trafficking her. And for her safety and protection, we are only calling her by her first name.

The memory of being doused with gasoline is one of the dozens of personal accounts shared in a new book titled, "She is Safe". It will be published this summer, inspired by the women at The WellHouse, in Birmingham.

"I want people to know there is hope here," said CEO Carolyn Potter. "The WellHouse is a beacon of hope for women. They can come and take a breath and heal. We allow people a second chance at having a life."

The WellHouse is a Christian and faith-based residential living facility designed to provide restorative services to female survivors of human trafficking who have been sexually exploited.

"We have 50 beds here, and they stay full," said Potter. "We have served 600 women from all over the county since 2011 but have helped thousands. Some states do not have a WellHouse, or ladies need to escape their city due to danger, so they come to Birmingham."

Potter said The WellHouse does not physically hunt out and rescue people; instead, people call the crisis line, seeking help.

"In some cases, we pick them up or send them a bus ticket or plane ticket," said Potter. "Sometimes a local hospital or law enforcement officer will send them here. It doesn't matter how we get them; we love them. And in some cases, when victims come to The WellHouse, they don't even realize they are victims. Most people come here who are turned in by a sister or friend or someone else who suspects something is wrong."

Potter said once women arrive at The WellHouse, they are placed in a stabilization unit for a couple of weeks, giving the staff time to do multiple assessments on how to serve them best.

Next, there is an immediate shelter phase where a custom treatment plan is developed which includes but is not limited to therapy, life skills, and family reunification.

The women are also offered the chance to work at The WellHouse, in the Shop Well Store. Items are produced and sold there, and funding goes back into the program. Plus, Potter said, the female workers get paid like a real job, so it's their first phase into actual employment.

Then there is long-term programming, Potter added, which includes more therapy, person-centered case management, and one-on-one meetings with the women to determine their life goals. Potter said every woman is assigned a mentor committed to walking alongside her for the rest of her life. By this time, the women have a job and oftentimes a vehicle. They can live at The WellHouse apartments with the end goal to exit and live independently.

But this one-year to three-year recovery process from the day the women enter The WellHouse to the time they officially exit the program doesn't always stay on track. Potter said it is common for a woman to come to The WellHouse, return to their abuser, and return to The WellHouse again.

"But that's OK. We understand it's a cycle, and challenges pop up," Potter said. "But we always have our doors open. There is no rejection here. And there is zero judgment here. We know for some it just takes longer than others."

Potter said she hopes people are enlightened on what trafficking is because there are many misunderstandings.

"It's not the chains and ropes we see in the movies," said Potter. "Most people who are trafficked have been victimized at home, sexually or mentally abused, so traffickers lure these girls in by showing them positive attention and love, forming a psychological bond. Predators seek out girls with low self-esteem who can be easily controlled. They meet the girls anywhere from the local mall to striking up conversations with them on social media. And then traffickers get the girls addicted to drugs to make them fully dependent. Did you know there are even websites dedicated to trafficking women? It's sick. Some of this happens on the dark web, and in other cases, people are selling girls and women online and not even trying to hide it."

According to Potter, it's not just strangers that we have to worry about.

"In many cases, family members even traffic their children - for drugs, money, food, to pay off a debt," said Potter. "This happens at an alarming rate."

Potter said the need for help is only increasing. In fact, The WellHouse only served adults up until this past year, with some of the survivors middle-aged. But in 2021, because the administration saw the need, The WellHouse opened a home for those 11 to 19-years-old.

"Trafficking is happening every single day," Potter said. "In Birmingham, Homewood, Vestavia, Cullman, Pelham, Montgomery - it doesn't matter your zip code. It happens in plain sight, but we often don't want to see it. Or people are not educated on what to look for."

Signs of Human Trafficking

Because of that, Potter wants readers to know some of the signs of women being trafficked:

- A younger girl with a much older man
- A girl who is not in school or has not been to school in quite some time
- She doesn't look you in the eye
- She shows up for medical help, and he wants to be present
- She is branded with street names of their trafficker
- She does not have a phone or a way of communication with the outside world.

Knowing from experience

Julie says fear also paralyzes people from helping women they suspect may be trafficked. She was able to escape from the hotel she was being trafficked out of, but many people don't get that chance.

"I learned quickly that what happens in the streets stays in the streets," Julie said. "I was desperately hoping for someone to do something, but they lived in fear just like me, not wanting to get shot or beat up. Even the manager at the hotel knew what was going on."

Potter said helping women like Julie finally experience freedom is the most rewarding work.

"I view this as my purpose in Christ," said Potter. "My faith sustains me here. People ask me why I do this emotionally-taxing job, and I ask them, 'why would I not? Abused and neglected women are worth it. It's the hardest job I have ever done, but if I can show them God's love, I want to.'"

Potter said The WellHouse did a study in 2018. Out of 95 people who went through the entire process and graduated from The WellHouse program, 72% did not go back to human trafficking, which shows the positive power of proper recovery.

Julie knows that firsthand.

"The people at The WellHouse loved me when I was at my lowest," Julie said. "They loved me until I could love myself. Until I could understand that I deserved a better life. The longer I stayed in the program, the drugs continued to leave my system, and I got psychological help through counseling. I began to get well. I began to realize the toll that drugs had taken on my mind. It was a slow transformation. But I began to bond with the women around me. We discussed all that we had experienced. Through the process, I found out who I was."

And Julie is currently two-and-a-half years sober.

"My time at The WellHouse has had a ripple effect on my life," Julie said. "I work at a sober-living maternity house, helping pregnant women who are fighting for their sobriety. A decade ago, I never would have believed that I would be working with mothers in recovery. But I have this deep empathy for people who are going through a hard season. I went through something similar, crunching through ice on the side of the road in a frigid Kentucky winter and feeling the sting of fear from fumes in the sticky Texas summer heat. But now, things seem to be falling into place. And it's a new season for me and my son. It feels like springtime again."

In honor of Julie and every other victim out there, Potter said The WellHouse is holding its first-ever Survivor's Conference in Birmingham on Nov. 10.

"We hope people come out and get educated on this topic," said Potter. "Even law enforcement often will think it's a woman's choice to be a prostitute, not realizing they are being trafficked. Our keynote speaker that night used to be on the streets. Now she is a paralegal. It shows you there is always hope here, as I mentioned initially. Hope lives at The WellHouse."

Potter said the organization is always in need of volunteers and women's clothing, feminine products, and monetary donations.

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