

# Sold into sex trafficking: a survivor shares her story

by Cynthia Gould | Wednesday, October 21st 2020



Hadassah survived human trafficking and now warns others about the problem in Alabama. (ABC3340 Photo)



BIRMINGHAM, AL (WBMA) - Construction for a new home for sex trafficked minors is underway in central Alabama. [WellHouse Child](#) is the first facility of its kind in the state. It will offer emergency housing and recovery programs for victims of trafficking who are under age 18.

"Nobody wakes up and says I want to sell my body," explains survivor Hadassah who went through intense therapy at WellHouse. The non-profit has provided assistance to 500 victims in the past decade.

For months Hadassah was trapped in the horrific world of sex trafficking. "I watched them beat one of these women half to death" recalls Hadassah.

Her ordeal started while she was on a trip to Texas with people she thought were her friends. She was left stranded at a hotel and sold to a trafficker. Her I.D. and phone were taken. "Once you're in it, you're cut off from the world," says Hadassah. She explains you simply don't have the courage or means to walk away. Fear and intimidation have you paralyzed.

That is until one night, July 4th, she ran for her freedom. "Everybody fell asleep and I started running up the highway," recalled Hadassah. She was rescued by police, but once home the trauma she had endured was so bad she turned to drugs. In her small town she felt people didn't believe her story. Her recovery finally began when she found help at WellHouse.

She believes the sexualization of children in our society grooms girls for traffickers. Her self esteem and feelings of self worth were low when she began hanging out with the wrong crowd.

"Too many participants defend things that are not defensible," explains Wellhouse CEO Carolyn Potter. She cites the controversial Netflix film *Cuties* as an example of exploitation of children.

She says another common thread they find in victims is childhood abuse whether it be physical, emotional or sexual which opens the door for predators. She says some parents traffic their own children selling them for drugs or money.

"It absolutely could happen to anyone," warns Potter. They see victims of all ages, from all socio-economic backgrounds. Force, fear, and coercion make it so hard for victims to break away. "The things another human being will do to a young lady is beyond anything we can comprehend," remarks Potter.

While COVID-19 has impacted many industries, it has not slowed human trafficking according to law enforcement. "Now everything is social media related, handled by chat," explains Jefferson County's Lt. Byron Deramus with the sheriff's office.

Lt. Deramus says transactions are handled secretly on phone apps and not out in the open on city streets with interstates offering easy connections between cities. "A lot of activity is in hotels right off the interstates," says Lt. Deramus.

Earlier this month two men were arrested in Fultondale charged in a trafficking operation. Thirteen others were charged with prostitution. "The victims don't realize they're victims," says Lt. Deramus. He asks the public to keep their eyes open and report things that don't seem right.

"If you see something, don't turn your head. That happened to me so many times," recalls Hadassah.

Experts say it is crucial for communities to keep talking about this issue and raising awareness; there are so many misconceptions.

*"The WellHouse is one of the largest providers of comprehensive services for female survivors of sex trafficking in the United States. Since inception in 2010, it has provided housing and care for over 500 victims, many referred through relationships with local and state law enforcement, Homeland Security, FBI, and special street operations."*