

Giving a Voice to the Silent

Community task forces create first lines of defense against human trafficking in rural communities

By Victoria Hampton

As a child, Jane was an explorer. While the wind whipped through her brown hair and the sun beat down on her family's rural central California ranch, Jane and her brothers created imaginary worlds. Goats and chickens acted as companions on their quests, and trees and forts built their magical realms.

Yet even the most elaborate games of make-believe only offered temporary escapes from the cruelties of Jane's everyday life.

"I was about 6 years old when my cousin started to traffick me for drugs," says Jane, now 33.

It was not a villain from a faraway city who stole Jane away from her family and forced her into a life of human trafficking. It was Jane's cousin and grandfather who forced her into illicit acts for her family's financial gain in the small town where she grew up.

"Looking back on it, it was a very slow process of isolating me and manipulating me and grooming me to the point where I thought that what I was doing was helping my family," Jane says.

Jane's experience is similar to millions of victims who are bought and sold for commercial sex and forced labor in the United States. Nonprofits and task forces throughout the Northwest are taking action against this crime to help victims and survivors as well as safeguard their communities. People like Jane are no longer alone in their fight for a better life.

In the Life

"Human trafficking is one of the fastest-growing criminal enterprises in the world," says Amanda Swanson, Oregon Department of Justice's human trafficking response and intervention coordinator. "Before the pandemic, it had surpassed the gun trade and was projected to surpass the drug trade. Human trafficking, you really can break down to economics 101. If there is demand, somebody is going to supply."

From her 16 years of experience working hundreds of human trafficking cases in Oregon, Amanda knows the crime is perpetrated by people who victims know, trust and sometimes love.

"The top two most common forms of trafficking are familial trafficking and romantic relationships," Amanda says. "It's the family. It's a partner. It's a boyfriend or girlfriend. It's not the person who is going to jump out of the bushes. It's possibly our neighbor or a family member."

Familial trafficking is when a trafficker exploits a minor within their own family. Other traffickers exploit their partners or spouses. In both scenarios, perpetrators manipulate their victims and prey on their vulnerabilities. Traffickers offer safety, security and basic needs that may be lacking in someone's life.

"Most of the time, there is a lot of stuff going on at home, whether it is abuse or neglect from their family," Jane says. "They feel like they don't have those basic, fundamental things we all need as humans, like love and acceptance."



Using a process of force, fraud and coercion, traffickers build up individuals, making them dependent on their abusers. They use this control they've gained to force people into illicit acts. By the time this happens, victims have no way out.

"A lot of times people still think, 'How could somebody get trapped into this?'" Jeri MooMaw says. "The grooming process is similar to a cult leader. Over time, (traffickers) are cutting off any other avenue of needs fulfillment so (victims) become dependent on them."

Jeri—a child sex trafficking survivor and executive director of Innovations Human Trafficking Collaborative—has worked with clients who live everywhere from gated communities to homeless encampments.

“When you’re being forced to do things that you don’t want to do—besides the physical pain that you go through—I think it is just a really difficult thing to cope with mentally. There was a point where my brain just kind of broke.”

— JANE, HUMAN TRAFFICKING SURVIVOR

Jane overlooks Summer Lake in Oregon while wrapped in a blanket gifted to her by a friend who wanted to honor Jane’s heritage. After escaping familial trafficking, Jane takes small steps to reclaim pieces of her inherited identity while creating a better life for herself.
PHOTO COURTESY OF JANE



Human trafficking affects victims from all age groups and walks of life.

Once a trafficker has effectively isolated their victim, they use tactics of fear, shame and helplessness to keep them in the life. For Jane—a child who did not know a lifestyle beyond the one she lived on her family’s isolated ranch—traffickers used fear as their tool to keep her compliant.

“They told me that people could read my mind, and I believed that,” Jane says. “My brothers would be hurt if I didn’t do what they would ask me to do.”

In communities, trafficking happens under the radar.

“Especially in rural communities, (trafficking) doesn’t always look like the way we think it would,” Jane says. “I

wasn’t standing on street corners. I lived at home with my family. Most of my trafficking happened in people’s homes.”

Jane’s abuse continued throughout her childhood while she went to school, played sports and attended church. She seemed like any other child, with a shy and obedient nature.

“One part of me was doing all this terrible stuff, and the other part of me was who I kind of presented to the world,” Jane says. “If you had looked at me, you wouldn’t think, ‘This person is being trafficked.’”

Jane was terrified of what might happen if she opened up to anyone about her abuse. Her cousin—the same one selling her for sex—introduced her to substance abuse to help cope with the

trauma and physical abuse inflicted by her buyers and to make her easier to control.

“When you’re being forced to do things that you don’t want to do—besides the physical pain that you go through—I think it is just a really difficult thing to cope with mentally,” Jane says. “There was a point where my brain just kind of broke. It’s incredibly difficult to process.”

She also started self-harming and attempted suicide multiple times. Jane was connected to a school counselor and saw a therapist. While she was too scared to speak her truth, no one recognized the signs of what was going on behind closed doors.

“Nobody ever asked me why,” Jane says. “I don’t understand why nobody saw the bigger picture.”



LEFT: As a survivor of human trafficking, Jeri Moomaw founded Innovations Human Trafficking Collaborative to help victims and survivors access life-changing services. PHOTO COURTESY OF JERI MOOMAW **RIGHT:** From left, Oregon Department of Justice employees Kaitlyn Hardy and Amanda Swanson; Lizzie Martinez, Lincoln County Trafficking Intervention task force coordinator; and Shawna Gray, Siletz Tribal Gaming Commission executive director, host a human trafficking presentation at Chinook Winds Casino. PHOTO COURTESY OF LIZZIE MARTINEZ



Communities for Change

To help mitigate this crime in local communities, county task forces are relying on what small towns do best: help one another. County task forces are community-based multidisciplinary teams with the training and skills to identify, respond to, and help victims and survivors of human trafficking.

Each task force is different but often includes employees from the local police department, domestic violence and housing assistance organizations, youth nonprofits, school districts and other county organizations with existing resources to support victims and survivors.

“Our goal is to have them in every county,” says Amanda, who is responsible for building Oregon’s response to sex and labor trafficking.

This effort starts with building awareness and understanding the root causes of trafficking and how it thrives in communities. From there, task forces find the best ways to support victims and survivors by pooling resources and educating their communities about human trafficking and where they can direct suspected victims for help or report a suspected incident.

“One of the goals of the task force is

to build this team of people who know what trafficking is and know how to respond to it so that when a victim or survivor is identified, they know what to do and the other agencies they can reach out to support the person,” says Ashley Johnson, Anti-Trafficking Alliance of Central Oregon task force coordinator and “at:project” coordinator.

If a victim is in a police station, entering foster care, contacting a domestic violence center or sitting in a school counselor’s office, the goal is for the professionals they’re encountering to know how to identify the signs of trafficking and connect them with what they need in the moment. Starting with meeting basic needs—something to eat and a safe place to rest—may lead to counseling, housing and job support, or prosecution of their trafficker.

Community awareness and collaboration changed Jane’s life.

After escaping her traffickers in her early 20s, Jane eventually found her way to Central Oregon. Even through the trauma and abuse Jane experienced, she didn’t think of herself as a survivor.

“At this point, I still didn’t understand what trafficking was,” Jane says. “I didn’t know that was what had happened to me. I knew it was a lot of abuse and a lot of really

bad things that shouldn’t have happened.”

When she moved to Oregon, Jane was in an abusive relationship and struggling with her mental health. While working in a hospital, she suffered from a concussion after hitting her head on a piece of equipment. During her medical examination, the doctor found evidence of multiple concussions Jane had suffered from abuse inflicted by her traffickers and buyers.

Finally, someone asked Jane a question that took down all the walls she’d spent her lifetime building: Why did this happen to you?

“I just broke down and told him everything,” Jane says. “That was the first time I had really opened up about the things I had been through in my life. Up until that point, I was too scared. I told myself I was never going to tell anyone what had happened.”

Thanks to the local advocacy and awareness efforts by the county task force, the doctor knew where to direct Jane to get the help she needed. Jane was connected to at:project, a local nonprofit created by law enforcement and the district attorney’s office employees, service providers and agencies to support survivors of human trafficking in Central Oregon.

The at:project helped Jane gain her

“Getting connected with the at:project was probably the best thing that has ever happened to me.”

—JANE



Want to find out more? Listen to Jeri Moomaw, Innovations Human Trafficking Collaborative executive director, speak about holding perpetrators accountable at ruralite.com/giving-a-voice-to-the-silent.

independence and a new outlook on life through therapy, housing assistance and the support of others who understood what she was going through and were there to support her every step of the way.

“Getting connected with the at:project was probably the best thing that has ever happened to me,” Jane says. “I had true, genuine, caring support for the first time in my life, and I feel like that was the turning point for me, and everything just got so much better.”

How You Can Help

As a former homeless youth in Lincoln County, Oregon, Lizzie Martinez has firsthand experience of the transformative nature of community support for people experiencing hardship. This inspired Lizzie to dedicate her career to giving back to her community. Lizzie is the Lincoln County Trafficking Intervention Task Force coordinator and works for Children’s Advocacy Center of Lincoln County.

“Just the strength and resilience that I have seen as I’ve walked alongside survivors makes it very motivating to advocate for them in the professional arena and be a voice where they so often don’t have one,” Lizzie says.

Protecting communities from these crimes goes back to where the exploitation of children and adults often starts: vulnerabilities. Lizzie understands everyone has a different capacity to help in their communities, yet there is power in every action taken to raise awareness and support existing programs that help the most vulnerable members of communities.

From small to large, there are ways residents can address vulnerabilities and help safeguard their communities:

- Listen to survivors’ stories at thelifestory.org.
- Donate to a food bank.
- Volunteer at a school as a tutor.
- Donate clothes to youth and adult organizations.

- Research and share internet safety training resources with families. The school district may have resources available.

- Support a domestic violence or housing assistance organization.
- Report any suspected incidents of human trafficking to police.
- Organize a trafficking awareness event, such as a film screening or guest speaker. Contact a county or state antitrafficking agency for training support.
- Volunteer with Court Appointed Special Advocates or a youth advocacy organization.

- Do not buy or encourage others to buy sex.

- Form a task force with programs and services that can support victims and survivors of human trafficking. It can start with a group of concerned community members meeting at someone’s house and expand from there, which is how the Anti-Trafficking Alliance of Central Oregon was formed.

“Being able to address those vulnerabilities makes such a big difference that people don’t even realize,” Amanda says.

A decade later, Jane is still an explorer, and her reality is a place she no longer has to escape from. She takes her lived experiences and helps victims and survivors as a supervisor at an antitrafficking organization in Central Oregon.

“Something that I’ve realized doing this kind of work is how many people have stories similar to mine,” Jane says.

Jane is working on a degree in social work and plans to apply to a master’s program to continue supporting others and be a voice for change.

“I feel like it is a way of taking some of my power back,” Jane says. “Everything that I am learning right now is helping me feel even more confident and capable in my ability to show up for other people.” ■

At her request, Jane’s name was changed and her last name omitted to protect her privacy.

Need Help?

Contact the National Human Trafficking Hotline

This 24-hour, confidential hotline connects victims and survivors of sex and labor trafficking with services and support to get help and stay safe.

If you need assistance, here’s how you can connect:

Call: 888-373-7888

Text: 233733 (BEFREE)

Chat: humantraffickinghotline.org/chat

If you suspect potential situations of sex and labor trafficking in your community, call the hotline or report it to your police department.



The Eyes of the Road

Transportation employees take the wheel to stop human trafficking in its tracks

By Victoria Hampton

Jennifer Geisler knows that anyone who steps into one of her buses could be a human trafficking victim. As chief operations officer of Sunset Empire Transportation District in Astoria, Oregon, Jennifer and her team rely on their yearly training from TAT—formerly known as Truckers Against Trafficking—and open communication to keep their riders safe and get them the help they need.

In February 2023, Jennifer's team quickly responded to a situation involving two girls who boarded a bus in Seaside to connect with a person they met online in Portland. Calls to the Seaside transit office came from the dad of one of the girls and local police. Transportation Support Specialist Stephanie Rodriguez reviewed camera footage and contacted Jennifer and supervisor Rick Yelton to confirm the girls were on board. Jennifer, Rick, bus driver Chuck Poellnitz and police worked together to bring the girls home.

Jennifer can't help but think about what might have happened.

"This could very well have not been a happy ending had we not been able to get involved," Jennifer says. "That's why we continue to do training every year, to be able to help save our children and other young people as well as elderly and disabled who are just as much of a victim in this situation. It's just watching out for each other."

Jennifer credits TAT's free training to raising her team's awareness and ability to help riders in need.

Human trafficking is a crime in which people are bought and sold for forced labor or commercial sex. For more than a decade, TAT has worked alongside the transportation industry to bring awareness to this crime and empower drivers to report incidents they see on the road.

"It makes our drivers consciously aware of these situations, and they have the tools to call and question what's happening," Jennifer says.

Driving Change

Kylla Lanier couldn't have imagined how her family's life would change when she cracked open a book from her mom. She and her sisters were consumed by a world they didn't know existed when they read David Batstone's "Not for Sale: The Return of the Global Slave Trade and

How We Can Fight It."

"I'll be honest, we were just shocked," Kylla says. "We didn't realize slavery still existed."

It was this awareness that drove the family to create TAT. What started as local advocacy in 2009 grew into a specialized training program focused on drivers who travel the 4.2 million miles of highways in the United States.

"Most truck drivers, if they knew what was going on, they'd do something about it," Kylla says, TAT's deputy director and senior director of external affairs.

Today, the organization offers free human trafficking awareness training for transportation employees—such as long-haul truckers, delivery drivers and public transit drivers—along with law enforcement, government agencies, private and public companies, and community members.

"The general population in the United States, they do not understand prostitution," Kylla says. "Almost every person in prostitution is there against their will. This is a system of exploitation."

The exploitation of girls, boys, women and men isn't the sensationalized experience people see in movies, Kylla says. Victims are often trafficked by people they know who rely on psychological manipulation to



TAT is dedicated to giving transportation employees the training they need to identify signs of human trafficking while on the road.
PHOTO BY MIKE TEEGARDEN



ABOVE: Clockwise from left, Stephanie Rodriguez, Rick Yelton, Chuck Poellnitz and Jennifer Geisler played a role in preventing two teenage girls from running away aboard a Sunset Empire bus. PHOTO BY MIKE TEEGARDEN
TOP: Sunset Empire Transportation District's employees are trained to identify signs of human trafficking. PHOTO COURTESY OF SUNSET EMPIRE TRANSPORTATION DISTRICT
RIGHT: Kylla Lanier gives a presentation on human trafficking awareness to 300 law enforcement officers at the 2022 Western States Information Network. PHOTO COURTESY OF TAT

trick and threaten them into providing commercial sex or forced labor. It is a crime that happens everywhere.

"It's happening in every community, whether people want to acknowledge it or not," Kylla says. "It is important we are aware and make sure our community is safe. It is an everywhere problem, so it is an everywhere solution."

TAT's free training includes industry-focused, documentary-style videos, corporate and community training resources, printable posters and wallet cards, and a mobile app. The training videos bring together survivors' firsthand accounts and antitrafficking education.

Awareness on the Road

TAT's survivor-driven education changed Oregon Department of Transportation's Maureen McNeill's perspective on her work eight years ago when she attended Kylla's presentation at a law enforcement conference in Bend. During the presentation, a young human trafficking survivor shared some of her darkest moments and how she carries the weight of those experiences with her every day.

"I sat right across the table from her as she told her story, and it really stuck with me for a long time," Maureen says. "I said to

myself, 'I need to do something about this.'"

As the backbone of the country's economy, Maureen knows each truck driver she meets may encounter human trafficking victims and perpetrators. Traffickers use the same extensive road network as truck drivers to transport their victims, including the rural stretch of I-84 Maureen manages from Umatilla to Baker City.

"They are the eyes of the road," she says. "When they're stopping in rest areas, truck stops and casino parking lots, they are likely to see something."

When Maureen was promoted to Blue Mountain regional manager of commerce and compliance, she added human trafficking awareness to trainings she and her team present to trucking businesses and farming operations in Eastern Oregon. She has fliers and wallet cards at weigh stations

for her employees to hand out to drivers.

"Traffickers are on our highways, and they need to stop and use facilities," Maureen says. "That's where we're going to spot them."

Kylla hears stories of industry professionals across the country who have encountered suspected human trafficking and reported it to local police. Oftentimes, the people who step up to help in these situations never hear the outcome of their efforts. Yet, Kylla knows how much of a difference these actions make from the survivors she works with at TAT.

"When you see survivors thriving—these are creative, strong, smart people that deserve a chance at a better life," Kylla says. ■

Bring attention and advocacy to your community with TAT's free human trafficking awareness resources at tatnonprofit.org.