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# "He owned me": Kings County woman talks escaping human trafficking in Toronto

Traffickers target those with addictions, mental health struggles, says woman

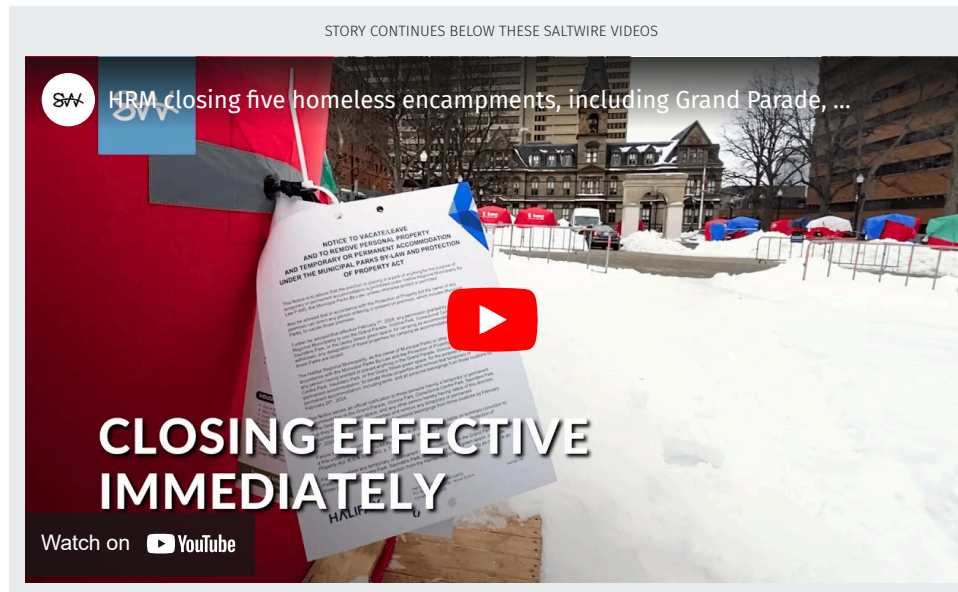
**Sara Ericsson · SaltWire Staff** | Posted: May 10, 2018, 8:39 a.m. | Updated: May 10, 2018, 9:28 a.m. | 5 Min Read



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*Due to privacy concerns, the name of the woman interviewed for this story is being withheld.*

KINGS COUNTY – "I was pimped out for four months before I escaped."

A young Kings County woman is telling her story on her experience being a victim of human trafficking in Toronto when she was 18 years old. Now, at the age of 23, she is a mental health support worker in training and draws on her own experiences to help other youth at risk.

She sees young men and women at risk of being groomed for trafficking and worries they won't see the signs as they present themselves – something she also missed as a youth. And right now, she knows of over 40 youths in the region currently involved in the sex trade – with many who became involved against their will.

"I didn't see any other choice. The pimps made us feel loved, but really we were trapped – there was no choice," she said.

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#### How she was groomed by her trafficker

Her struggles began at the age of six, when she realized her thoughts felt different than those of the other kids at school.

She knew something was going on, but didn't know what depression was, and therefore didn't know what to do about it.

Her struggles continued throughout junior and high school, culminating with regular drug use that turned into a serious addiction and a suicide attempt. She was in and out of the hospital several times by the age of 18.

"That's when I decided to leave. I drove to Toronto, and that's where I met him," she said.

The man who was to become her pimp started off as her boyfriend, telling her she was special, that he loved her and that they needed to help care for each other.

#### "I thought to myself, 'what do I really have right now?' and the answer was nothing."

That meant sleeping with other men to earn them money, according to him. She said she just wanted to be loved and thought that's what true love looked like – "I had no reason to question that because I believed he loved me" – and began sleeping with men for money.

Then things started to change. Her boyfriend, who claimed to love her, started instead to hurt her, and she realized she wasn't his only girlfriend.

"I started wondering if this was what love looked like. That's all I wanted, and he had made me feel loved, but now he was abusing me. I knew I had to get out, but didn't know how," she said.

"He owned me"

For four months her life consisted of living alone in hotel rooms in Toronto and other areas as she worked to earn money for herself and her boyfriend.

The trafficker had her keys, her phone, her wallet – everything that belonged to her was in his possession.

"I thought to myself, 'what do I really have right now?' and the answer was nothing," she said.

She was 18, and he was nearly 30. This was just one of many problems she began acknowledging as she reflected on her situation. The man, who she'd realized was her pimp and not her boyfriend, even asked her to have his name tattooed on her body.

"He owned me. I was his property – if I didn't want to work, he'd do things and try to hurt me," she said.

During a hospital stay in Toronto, she was approached by a woman who'd been trafficked herself who offered her support to escape her situation, but waved her off.

"It was a different mindset. I wasn't having it at the time because I thought he'd find out," she said.

As she continued getting pimped out and abused by her boyfriend, she began looking for ways to escape. She made her move when he was asleep, grabbing her keys and all her things she could carry and run with.

### **"They prey on the struggling girls – the ones with addictions, the ones with mental illness."**

She drove away, shaking, stopping only to call her parents to tell them she was coming home.

"I was terrified. You worry that if you do escape, the guy will come find you and hurt you, but I knew this was my chance to run," she said.

#### **Why she thinks it happened to her**

This young Kings County woman believes her trafficker knew of her mental health and addiction struggles and victimized her because of it.

"They prey on the struggling girls – the ones with addictions, the ones with mental illness," she said.

She began accepting what she'd realized during that last month – she'd been a victim of trafficking, against her will, and was never loved by her pimp.

Now, as a mental health support worker in training, she sees other women who trade sex as payment for food or rent and others who've also been trafficked, and feels troubled, wondering if they too have been used and abused like she was.

She understands why these young men and women rarely come forward to the police, since they don't want to give up the trafficker they believe is caring for them.

"Just like me, these people sometimes think it's their only choice, and then they become trapped and have no choice," she said.

"Those guys are there to use you, to make money off of you, and that's it."

But she says as soon as she got out, life on the other side felt like sunshine – she was able to get a job, save money, and pursue a new career. She now hopes

to advocate for and support other victims of human trafficking once she completes her training.

"I've been through so much, and I came out on top. You don't have to go the bad way – you can go the good way and do so much with your life," she said.

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