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Truckers Work to Drive Out Human Trafficking

Mary Sturgill, WLTX 7:56 p.m. EDT April 30, 2015



(Photo: WLTX)

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Columbia, SC (WLTX) - There is a product for sale in the United States and it's one that should not be.

Human trafficking is a big business across the country, including right here in South Carolina. Numerous agencies and non-profits are attacking the problem by trying to help victims, but one company is traveling across the Southeast, targeting those who purchase people for sex.

They call themselves the Vigilante Truckers. Owner Bo Quickel tells News 19, "I want to end slavery, so in order to end slavery, I have to focus 100 percent on the demand."

That demand is seen in all 50 states. Advocates say many ads like the ones often found on webpages such as Backpage.com are really trafficking victims advertised as escorts. That's why Quickel started a war against human trafficking by educating and enlisting the help of truck drivers. "It's not because they are bad people, it's because there are two seats and a bed and the girls knock on the door," he says.

It's why he created Vigilante Truckers back in 2011. His trucks are in Columbia once a week, and each truck carries a message to educate truckers on what human trafficking is and provide the hotline number for anyone who may need to see it. "Those billboards, I call them, on the

tractors as well as the trailers, will literally drive sex trafficking out of the truck stops, out of the rest areas, off the exit and entrance ramps to the highways," Quickel says.

With the help of a few corporate sponsors--but mostly paying out of his own pocket,--Quickel has wrapped eight of the trucks in his fleet at \$2,000 each. Quickel says, "What that does is it creates what I call a slavery freedom zone."

Recently, Vigilante Truckers created a smartphone app and added it to their arsenal. Quickel says it will be an important tool for truckers to use to report human trafficking.

"That allows our drivers to take pictures of any trafficking they see going on, and it uploads it to our national database so that we can rescue the girls with reverse facial technology," Quickel says. "We can give the pimps' pictures to law enforcement."

And Quickel says it enables him to have a conversation to shed light on what is really being sold. "In order to reach these drivers and reach their hearts, and give them an understanding of what they are buying, what I try to do is get a driver to understand that he is not paying money for sex," Quickel says. "He's paying money for rape."

He says what's taking place in many cases is not prostitution, where the woman keeps the money she makes. "So when I explain to them that the girls gets zero dollars, then we have to discuss why it is that she would still have sex with him, and when he understands that the reason she is having sex is because of physical abuse, mental coercion, mental manipulation, she has seen people killed and she has been threatened with her life, they realize then that they are paying the pimp to rape the girl," he says

Quickel shared his mission by speaking in Columbia at a rotary meeting. Rod Funderburk was at that meeting, and agrees with Quickel, saying stopping human trafficking hinges on people understanding the definition of what's being purchased.

"You have to define the act as rape," Funderburk says. "It's probably the method by which we have to put a dent in this industry. As long as you assume you are purchasing a service, then you can whitewash it and accept it. You can make yourself feel like its ok, but if you put the definition of rape on it, then you have a chance of convincing people that it's the wrong thing to do."

And Quickel says he hopes a new understanding changes behavior, "If I can educate them just on that simple fact, they don't answer the knock on the door anymore and in fact become quick volunteers of the Vigilante Trucker."

According to the FBI statistics, about one thousand truck drivers have called into the hotline to report human trafficking. Quickel's hope is that more will be vigilant about helping to stop it.