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No longer alone

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Forever Found offers hope, support to victims of human trafficking

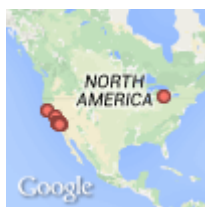
By Anna Bitong

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ACHIEVING AWARENESS—From left, Megan Hamlin, Michele Henderson, Jamie Watson, Katie Rhodes and Vicki Frederick make up the backbone of Forever Found, a nonprofit based in Simi Valley that is dedicated to helping victims of human trafficking. RICHARD GILLARD/Acorn Newspapers *Part two of a three-part series.*

Dianne Amato was 16 when she met a pimp in a San Francisco park and he tricked her into going to a hotel room with two other girls. He told her she was going to work for him. He took her shoes and purse so she wouldn't leave. She left anyway, escaping in the middle of the night.



Where's the story? [11 Points Mentioned](#)

The daughter of Italian immigrants, Amato started skipping school and smoking marijuana at 13. When she was 17, her high school boyfriend, whom she described as a “Romeo pimp,” persuaded her to become an exotic dancer to make money.

“It was like buying into ‘the dream,’” Amato told the *Acorn*. “The dream was, we were going to be together. He was going to go to school first and I would work; then it would be my turn to go to school. I wouldn't have to do this for a long time.”

Instead she entered a nightmare. Her parents found out she was a dancer and kicked her out of their house. Homeless and feeling like she had no other choice, she began working under the

control of pimps as a prostitute in massage parlors, motel rooms and rented houses in Los Angeles.

It was dangerous work. She feared for her life as robbers held guns to her head on more than one occasion. She witnessed the kidnapping of a prostitute from a massage parlor. A customer raped another prostitute, a friend of hers, after slashing her neck.

This time, Amato didn't know how to escape.

Her experience is not unique. Katie Rhodes, local program director of Forever Found in Simi Valley, which began in 2010 to find homes for child survivors of sex and labor trafficking in the United States and abroad, said the group recently began receiving phone calls from adult victims of sex trafficking.

Last fall, Forever Found began offering programs specific to Ventura County in response to a growing number of trafficking victims being identified in the area, Rhodes said. Those who called Forever Found were referred to the Dream Center in Los Angeles, which provides shelter for victims of human trafficking and other services.

Rhodes is not aware of any local victims who are ready or willing to talk about their experiences.

"Most of the time, victims don't want to talk about their stories," she said. "Most people who've been trafficked in Ventura County have been moved to other locations for their recovery. It usually takes years before someone is ready to talk about it and we've only just begun identifying victims."

Where are the victims?

Rhodes said local trafficking victims can be found online, including the website backpage.com.

"There have been cases of people advertised online and later identified as trafficking victims who have passed through our county," she said. "For people who don't believe the sex industry exists in Ventura County, it's all online."

Sex trafficking takes many forms, she said.

"In Ventura County we've actually had many cases of parents selling their children for sex in order to (pay for) their drug addiction," Rhodes said. "But historically, those cases have not been filed or identified as being human trafficking."

Christine Cesa was sold for sex by her father when she was a child in Cleveland, Ohio, a story that she told a crowd at the eighth annual Stop Human Trafficking and Sexual Slavery educational forum at the First Presbyterian Church in Oxnard last month, hosted by the volunteer organization Soroptimist International.

She was 4 years old when she was brought to the basement of a church, where men bought tokens to abuse her. For years she was raped in homes, motel rooms, strip clubs and once at a Christmas party. She was smothered, burned, choked and beaten into submission.

“I knew I had to do what I was asked or I would be killed,” Cesa said. “And I knew my life was not worth much.”

She escaped the abuse with help from a church, then earned a scholarship for college and now advocates for children at risk for sexual exploitation.

“There are millions of people who are trapped and helpless,” she said. “You are the voice for them.”

Helping victims

Forever Found is part of the newly formed Ventura County Coalition Against Human Trafficking, which is creating a countywide response to the problem. The coalition, which includes local law and federal enforcement agencies, is planning a sting operation, Rhodes said, which will be paid for by donations to the nonprofit’s local law enforcement fund for investigating trafficking cases. The nonprofit received a \$20,000 donation from a couple who want to help combat trafficking in the county, Rhodes said. Local law enforcement has limited resources for the effort.

“If (the fund) were to grow more, we could have an officer dedicated part-time to human trafficking, which has never happened before in our county,” Rhodes said.

Forever Found will also start a mentorship program for trafficking survivors this summer, offering the type of guidance that may have changed Amato’s life sooner.

Amato was 35 when she enrolled at Cal Baptist University in Riverside to study behavioral science with an emphasis in social work and started a new life after 15 years as a prostitute.

“School and therapy is what saved my life,” she said.

Amato is now a program director at The Mary Magdalene Project in Van Nuys, a nonprofit that helps victims of trafficking and prostitution out of that life. She’s helped women who’ve been trafficked all over California, including Ventura County. Among the lessons she’s learned is “survivor-led groups and mentorships really do work and help women get out.”

“I never knew anyone who’d gotten out,” she said. “I believe if I’d known somebody that said, ‘I did it. You can do it too. This is how,’ my exit would have been quicker and it wouldn’t have been as painful. I had no one to talk to.”

To submit an application to be a mentor or volunteer at Forever Found, or to donate to the group or their law enforcement fund, visit www.foreverfound.org.

For information about how to volunteer at The Mary Magdalene Project, visit www.mmp.org.

Forever Found staff will help lead a “Harm At Home” training from 6 to 8:30 p.m. this Fri., April 24 at the Ventura County Community Foundation, 4001 Mission Oaks Blvd., Camarillo. Speakers will include Rhodes and Detective James Langford of the Oxnard Police Department’s Vice and Narcotics Unit.

The third and final part of this series will look into local efforts to find and prosecute traffickers, and how to identify potential victims.