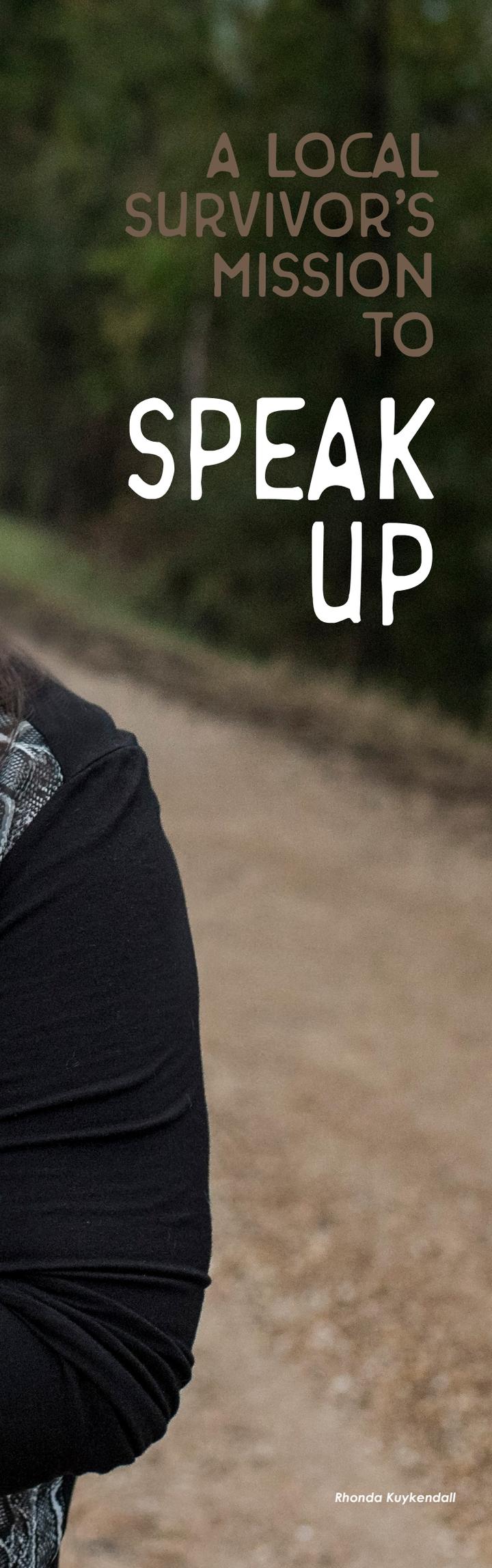




SEX TRAFFICKING
IN OUR
S COMMUNITIES:



A LOCAL
SURVIVOR'S
MISSION
TO
SPEAK
UP

WRITTEN & PHOTOGRAPHED BY
RHONDA KUYKENDALL

For several years as a kid, I resided in Fulshear right around the sharp curve where Bois D' Arc meets Winner Foster and where the expansive fields are scattered with white prickly poppies, barbed wire fencing, and cows. I lived down a gravel road, called Pumping Plant Lane, in a trailer house across the road from Mr. and Mrs. Crow's brick house. My daddy worked for the Brazos River Authority, monitoring the waters coming from the Brazos River. I attended Huggins Elementary back when the school was brand new. Growing up in this area was much different than today—parties at Crutcher Ranch, FFA events, and dates with my high school sweetheart, whom I married when I was just sixteen years old. My mom and dad were forced into marriage by my mother's father, and my parents' hatred for each other was bigger than their love for us. We were the collateral damage to their marital union. My earliest memories of life involve domestic violence, knives, blood, police, multiple sexual assaults, and child sex trafficking at 10 years old. I would be flown out on a Friday, returned on a Sunday, and would be back in my school chair at Rosenberg's Taylor Ray Elementary on Monday morning. This was my "normal."

From the outside looking in, no one would know the horrors of my early childhood years because I kept silent for decades. There were many perpetrators, so many sexual assaults before the age of twelve years old. A surprise confrontation in a local store with a man who sexually assaulted me in Thompsons, Texas at eight years old forced me back to my past. After confronting him, he committed suicide one week later and my mother attended his funeral. After his death, I began having nightmares of another attacker, one I considered the "worst of the worst" of my abusers: a child sex trafficker who lived in my father's apartment complex in Pasadena, Texas. I did find him in prison convicted four times in three different states, all sex crimes against children.

My trafficker was past the statute of limitations (SOL) in Texas, and I could not file charges against him. A statute of limitations is an amount of time a person has to press charges for a crime committed against them. In Texas, a victim had ten years past their 18th birthday to file charges for child sexual assault. Over the next five years I worked to abolish the SOL in Texas, and I did just that. As of September 2007, there is no SOL for childhood sexual assault. My trafficker was released from prison in 2015 and is living free in south Texas.

I began to study child sexual abuse. I know poly victimization is when a person endures multiple harmful childhood traumas. I understand ACE (adverse childhood experience) surveys, which are tools used to score how much trauma a person has endured in their childhood. An ACE survey asks 10 questions about your experiences before the age of 18. They include questions about sexual and physical abuse, drugs, divorce, addiction, and neglect. I scored a seven myself. In other words, there is no better person to fight for victims of sex trafficking because, simply put, I get it.

Today, here in Fort Bend County, I am on the Board of Directors of Child Advocates of Fort Bend, and I chair their Legislative Advocacy Team. I also chair the Fort Bend County District Attorney's Human Trafficking Team, where we work on implementing state and city laws and community awareness programs. As of November 1, 2021, I am the Anti-Child Trafficking

Consultant for Texas CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate), and my job is to craft trauma-informed anti-child trafficking programs to educate CASA programs across the state of Texas.

SEX TRAFFICKING

IS THE RECRUITMENT,
TRANSPORTING, OR
SOLICITING FOR THE PURPOSE
OF A COMMERCIAL SEX ACT
THROUGH THE USE OF FORCE,
FRAUD OR COERCION.

If the victim is under the age of 18, force, fraud, or coercion are not necessary to be guilty of sex trafficking. Any commercial sexual activity with a minor is sex trafficking. Texas has the most reported number of child sex trafficking cases in the United States, and our neighbor Houston is the worst city in the country in reported child sex trafficking cases. Sex trafficking does exist in Fort Bend County, Texas. Sex trafficking exists in every city of Fort Bend County, whether that city is small, large, urban, or rural, and can occur in multiple ways. In our county, there are no strip clubs, cantinas, or "the track" where street solicitation occurs, but we do have illicit massage businesses (IMBs), hotels, motels, subdivisions, and pornography. IMBs are typically in strip centers next to high schools, day cares, and nail salons. They can be in run down areas of town, or they may be high-end establishments. In a recent research study, seventy active IMBs were found in Fort Bend County and known to be reviewed on an active sex buyer review website. The actual number of IMBs is much larger, but the number reviewed on one site is seventy. In September 2021, the Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office performed "Operation Lavender," focusing on ten IMBs across Fort Bend County.

Technology has made it easier to harm kids. The term "child pornography" is no longer used, because children cannot agree to sexual acts. The term has been replaced by "child sexual abuse material (CSAM)." When looking at pornography of minors, the viewer is participating in child sexual abuse. To see the scale of the problem, let's look at the numbers. In 2004, there were 450,000 files of CSAM downloaded; in 2019, there were 70 million files downloaded, according to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Sixty-three percent of kids victimized by child sex trafficking had been advertised online, and as many as one in seven were runaways.

CSAM is different than online sexual advertisements, which are prevalent in our cities. Every day in the United States 1,150,000 ads for sex are posted online. In a recent local study, 6,700 online advertisements for sex originated in Fort Bend County. When a sexual advertisement is posted online, a sex buyer will answer the ad. The buyer

and trafficker or victim will agree on the service, cost, and location. They will meet at a hotel, motel, or a private residence to transact the sexual act. In fact, several years ago, there was an international sex trafficking ring in Cross Creek Ranch in Fulshear. With the demand high, traffickers are grooming young girls and boys into *the life*.

As caregivers, it is impossible to be with our kids continually. Kids should be taught how to protect themselves, and parents or teachers should empower them with knowledge without fear-mongering tactics. Traffickers are not waiting on street corners ready to snatch children. Teenagers are not being abducted at Katy Mills Mall or at Target. Abductions are extremely rare; coercion and mind control are the predominant tools of a trafficker. False narratives are spread, and opportunities for life-saving teaching moments are lost. We do not want to scare our kids but share facts and strategies to protect themselves.

HOW DO CHILDREN BECOME VULNERABLE?

Traffickers do not want attention. They first target kids who come from hard places, ones who are runaways or in the foster care system. It is estimated that seventy percent of child sex trafficking victims have a history of being involved in the child welfare system. Any child, however, can be groomed and victimized. With the proliferation of social media, traffickers no longer need face-to-face access to youth. Traffickers will troll social media looking for someone vulnerable. They will search for kids who have broken up with their boyfriend or girlfriend, may have failed to make it on to the tennis team, or are having a fight with their parents. This is where they will engage and pose as a friend, an encourager, someone to be trusted. This is Step One of the grooming process.

Grooming is a slow process that can take three months up to one year. John Clark, with Operation Texas Shield, laid out a six-step process for grooming.

BEFRIENDING is the first step. **INTOXICANTS** are introduced 100% of the time. It may be alcohol, pills, cocaine, or it may be Gucci handbags and Louis Vuitton high heels. This is the honeymoon phase where everything is fun. Next comes **ALIENATION** from family and then **ISOLATION** from friends. "Why are your parents so strict? You are so mature," a trafficker may say. The victims are no longer hanging out with their normal group of friends. They are not involved in the same activities they were before. Traffickers now work to **DESENSITIZE** victims to their way of life. This is the process where moral standards are lowered. Selling drugs, stripping, and prostitution are just ways to make ends meet. Once these steps are taken, the trafficker looks for the opportunity to **CAPITALIZE**.



7/16/2007 •

79th Legislative session Bill Signing abolishing the SOL on child sexual assault



• 7/19/2021

87th Legislative Session Bill Signing HB3900 with Senator Joan Huffman and Governor Abbott



7/19/2021 •

87th Legislative session Bill Signing with Rep Jacey Jeffton and Joe Madison of Demand Disruption



• 7/19/2021

87th Legislative Session Bill Signing with Survivor Sisters Nissi Hamilton, Lisa Michelle, Gov Abbott, Rhonda Kuykendall, and Jessica Wesley



• 9/23/2021

Speak Up Event in Richmond Texas with Speakers Gwen Wilson, Rhonda Kuykendall, Rich Love and Mary Wells



9/2/2021 •

Missouri City Quails

5 TIPS TO CONSIDER ON HOW TO KEEP YOUNGER KIDS SAFE

1. TALK SCENARIOS WITH YOUR KIDS

Over 90 percent of the time, a child who is sexually abused will be known to the family. Perpetrators do not drive up in scary white vans and snatch children. The perpetrator is an uncle, caregiver's son, neighbor, or coach. Take the time to ask your child, "What would you do if your coach ever made you feel uncomfortable?" or "If you are over at a friend's house and someone wants to play a game that makes you feel weird, what should you do?" Begin now to have these conversations with your kids. Tell your children that they should come and tell you even if nothing happened. Have an open dialogue with your kids, and be sure to use anatomical names for body parts. Children who have a history of sexual abuse are at a higher risk for sex trafficking.

2. BOUNDARIES ARE A MUST

We give kids mixed signals. On one hand, we teach children to respect each other's boundaries. On the other hand, we force them to hug grandmother or give uncle a kiss. Another dangerous but innocent mistake parents often make is to instruct their children to "obey the babysitter." Explaining to our kids that they have a voice and that their bodies are theirs to protect is empowering.

3. EXPLAIN TRICKS

Abusers will use tricks, threats, or bribes to keep kids silent. Explain to kids the difference between a surprise and a threat. Let children know that they can tell you anything that makes them feel uncomfortable, weird, or uneasy. This is how my trafficker kept me silent for decades. He told me I was going to be a model. Everything he did to me is what models do; so, if I told anyone what happened to me, it was my fault. I wanted to be a model, so all the sexual abuse that followed was what I wanted. Remember to look at these ideas through the lens of a child and not as an adult. Of course, these manipulations would not work on an adult, but on a child, they do.

4. USE TRUSTED ADULTS

Some kids have a hard time coming to tell their parents, so teach them who the trusted adults are in their lives. Using the "What if" model, ask your child, "What if you are in school and something happens to you, who do you tell?" Provide other adults beside yourselves into their lives so kids have options to share concerns.

5. STAY CALM

By opening the dialogue continually, your child feels comfortable to share hard subjects with you. Your children need someone who is readily available and accessible when they need to talk. Be that someone, and remember to stay calm.

Digital Citizenship is the process of teaching kids how to participate in an online society with respect for others and safety for themselves. Our goal as caregivers is to educate ourselves and, in turn, educate our kids through a constant dialogue of communication.

8 STRATEGIES TO PUT INTO PLACE FOR OLDER KIDS

- 1 Talk to your child. **OPEN COMMUNICATION IS KEY.** It is never too early to start talking in an age-appropriate way. In addition to child sex trafficking, important related issues may include sexual health, healthy relationships, consent, and boundaries.
- 2 Talk about **PHRASES** traffickers may use, which include "dating, befriending, grooming, luring, breaking, or tuning out."
- 3 Role play "**EXIT PLANS**" for when your teen feels uncomfortable. Let your teen know that the situation does not have to be urgent for them to exit the situation. Encourage them to think about small, subtle scenarios by using the "What if" game. "What if your friends leave you at a party accidentally, and a guy you don't know offers to drive you home?" may be one question.
- 4 Download a **RIDE SHARING** app on their phone and choose at least three people they can call if they want to leave an uncomfortable situation. Giving teens several options and plans is empowering.
- 5 Address the **MYTHS** and **MISCONCEPTIONS** that glamorize the commercial sex industry. Harm has been done by movies like "Pretty Women" and "Best Little Whorehouse in Texas," because these films have sanitized the commercial sex industry.
- 6 Build **RESILIENCY.** Social media and gaming platforms are increasingly the go-to avenue for traffickers to approach potential victims. Statistically, your child will be confronted with inappropriate material online. Help them be prepared.
- 7 Keep your eyes and ears **OPEN** for abnormal behavior.
- 8 Use the **RESOURCES** below to begin learning together with your children.

Source: *Trafficking Truths* by Rebecca Bender

Once the pre-teen to teenage years arrive, caregivers may be unaware of their teen's behavior online, but there are outward signs. The teen may have a new circle of friends, kids that you do not know. There may be a change in school attendance or a change in interests. The teen may come home with expensive handbags and clothing. The teen begins to wear sexually provocative clothing the caregiver did not purchase. There may be



• 9/12/2021

Event with Cat Hoffman, fellow survivor

multiple social media accounts. Be on the lookout for branding, burns, or tattoos. If you see these signs, search their phones and social media for other dangerous contacts.

A COMMON SEX TRAFFICKING PHRASE IS

**“SEE SOMETHING.
SAY SOMETHING.”**

In our area, sex trafficking occurs in our local subdivisions. If you see behavior that looks suspicious, report it. Common signs of a home where trafficking is occurring include seeing young girls or boys who do not seem to be related to each other, a constant stream of vehicles that come late into the night, and a house where it appears there is not a family residing in it. On November 10, 2020, one such home was found just across FM1463 in Katy in the Cinco Ranch South Lake Village neighborhood. The sex trafficking ring was operating from a residential home, trolling social media, grooming potential victims, posting sexual advertisements, and negotiating sex transactions with buyers. The planning phase would occur from the home, and victims would meet buyers at local hotels and motels.

While sex trafficking does occur, an awareness in our community drastically decreases the risk to your family, friends, and relatives. Choosing to be proactive creates a safer environment for all of our kids. Today, I work in anti-sex trafficking because I understand the devastating effects of the trauma. While the trauma is debilitating, it is the silence that kills the soul. Speaking Up and changing the world for those who come after you is healing. To follow the work being done to protect Texas kids, follow www.facebook.com/theirvoiceintexas.

If your organization is interested in learning more about sex trafficking in Fort Bend County, contact Rhonda Kuykendall at rhondakuy@comcast.net.

National Human Trafficking Hotline 1-888-373-7888

- Text HELP to BEFREE -

Call 911 if anyone is in immediate danger.

RESOURCES

THORN – Nonprofit cofounded by Ashton Kutcher to battle child sex trafficking with factual statistics and resources for parents – www.thorn.org

REAL FRIENDS DON'T – Real friends don't pretend to be something they're not. Real friends don't make you feel uncomfortable – www.realfriendsdont.org

KEEPING KIDS SAFE IN THE DIGITAL AGE – Comprehensive guide, workbook with statistics, real-life stories and resources for kids, teens and their caregivers to learn together <https://www.streetgrace.org/resources/>

NETSMARTZ – Age-appropriate videos and activities to help teach children to be safer online <https://www.missingkids.org/netsmartz/home>

DARKNESS TO LIGHT AT CHILD ADVOCATES OF FORT BEND (CAFB) – A program to educate caregivers in the community about child sexual assault – www.cafb.org

BOOKS FOR TEACHING YOUNG KIDS ABOUT CHILD SEXUAL ASSAULT
<https://smile.amazon.com/hz/wishlist/ls/39YV6TCHP1ZZF>

BOOKS FOR EDUCATING CAREGIVERS ON SEX TRAFFICKING
<https://smile.amazon.com/hz/wishlist/ls/JAQXOH38ZBPO>

ABOUT ME

ACCOMPLISHMENTS/AWARDS

Honors Program at UHD pursuing bachelor's in social work

2019 – CAFB Legislative Advocate of the Year

2019 – CAFB Child Advocate of the Year

2014 – US Congressional Award for protecting abused kids in Texas

CURRENT WORK

Texas CASA - Anti-Child Trafficking Consultant

Fort Bend County District Attorney -

Chair, Human Trafficking Team

Child Advocates of Fort Bend -

Board of Directors and Chair, Legislative Advocacy Team



Rhonda Kuykendall on Pumping Plant Lane where she lived as a child in Fulshear