

Vicki Zito **Mother of Trafficking Victim**

Alright, just to get a quick check on a pulse of the room, how many of you are here because you have to be? Honesty is absolutely expected. Okay, that's cool. How many of you are here because you wanted to be here or you wanted to learn more? Okay, very cool. How many of you have ever heard about human trafficking prior to this week? Alright. How many of you believe that it is happening here in your own community? How many of you believe that it is more prevalent overseas? Huh. Fabulous. You guys are educated. Yeah.

So a little bit about me. I am Vicki Zito. I am a registered nurse. I've been a nurse for almost 19 years. A mother of four: three girls and a boy. And happily married for almost 20 years now. And about five years ago this exact week, I was a mother on a mission. On March 18, 2008 my 17-year-old daughter asked if she could go to the grocery store one night, on spring break, and grab a soda with a friend. She left in her slippers, and she didn't even... she didn't even take her purse, which if you're a girl, a teenage girl, you realize how important that is. Left for the grocery store, and she never came home.

And it was at that time that we began a search for my daughter. We contacted law enforcement because we thought, "Okay, my daughter's missing. Law enforcement will – yay – come to the rescue." And I was very sad to find out that law enforcement was not initially willing to engage. They told me that they're sorry, but statistically speaking, my daughter was a runaway. And I tried to make them understand and impress upon them, "No, this is not my daughter's character. She wouldn't have chosen to be gone. She was going to the store. She had every intention of returning from the store. And you don't understand; you don't know my daughter." And still they were not able to help me at that time.

And so then I asked them, "Well, what can I do? I've never had a child go missing before." And they were really not able to give me any answers as to what I could do or what organizations I could go to that could perhaps help me to find my daughter. So I set out on a mission, in front of my computer, with just an email to my limited address book that was, "Please help me. My daughter is missing. I can't get law enforcement to help us. Please help me find my daughter."

And from that, that email went almost viral. Our community responded in such a magnificent way that it was humbling and encouraging. And at a time when I was going through one of a parent's worst nightmares, the way my community responded was nothing short of just amazing. I had friends, family, community members putting up missing persons' posters of my daughter all over Northern California, contacting all of the emergency rooms, hospitals, all in just a hope to be able to find my daughter. And all along, thinking, "I hope law enforcement is right. I know that they're not. But if I can hope that maybe she's at a friend's house somewhere and just not coming home, then that to me is much better than the other thing that is nagging in the back of my brain, thinking that my daughter is dead somewhere, or worse."

And unfortunately for us, she'd been missing for eight days, and my daughter was found being advertised for sale, for sex, on Craig's List. And the Innocence Lost task force -- I believe there was an FBI agent here last night -- that's the team that actually found my daughter and were able

to rescue her. And it was that night that I learned, as they were bringing my daughter home from the Bay Area, what had happened to my daughter, and what this beast called trafficking really looks like to the survivors.

I learned that my daughter's perpetrator took her from a Safeway parking lot, lured her into the vehicle by using two friends that she knew. He was supplying them with drugs; they were supplying my daughter to him. Within five hours, he had posted pictures of my daughter, advertising her for sale, for sex on Craig's List and within 24 hours, was actively trafficking her in the Rocklin area. He took her from the Rocklin area to the Bay Area and sold her over to... some vicious, vicious pimps. They're called guerilla pimps. And their sole purpose is to do whatever it takes, use whatever force it takes to get the girls to do what it is that they need for them to do. And it's simple: exploiting the child for their profit. And my daughter had to live through that -- she was also drugged -- until she was rescued. And had I not set out on a mission to find her, I honestly believe that my daughter would've never been found, if I had waited for somebody else to do something.

So when my daughter was rescued, I learned about trafficking. And I was trying to wrap my brain around it, because it all seemed so surreal and so CSI-like. It truly was like something I would see on a nighttime drama. And I thought, "There is no way this can be happening." And I don't mean to sound so naive to think that bad things don't happen, to everybody, but I thought, "We left Las Vegas, and we moved to El Dorado Hills, to this safe community, in my "Leave It to Beaver neighborhood" -- that's what I call it. I didn't ever lock my doors. My kids walked to and from school. We knew everybody. There was this false sense of safety. And when my daughter was taken, and she was recovered, life as we knew it was over. I no longer lived in that bubble, and maybe it wasn't safe or healthy for me to live there to begin with, but I liked it there. And so the way we look at the world has changed.

I learned that the majority of victims of this crime have no family, they have no home, they have no community that is out there saying, "Look, my daughter is missing. Help me find them." I learned a term that disturbed me to my core when I was speaking with professionals as it pertains to the victims of these crimes, the survivors, and it was the term "throwaway." And I honestly, I felt like I was going to throw up whenever I heard that term. Because as a mom, a mother of four, I can't ever imagine thinking of my child or anybody else's child not being anything more than just this wonderful, beautiful, living, breathing being. I mean, my kids get up in the morning and they have messy bed-head, and I just say, "Oh! That's wonderful! This is my children." I can't imagine not ever thinking anything but wanting to love them and protect them and only wanting the best for them. And so I don't get the mindset that, as a society, we could say, "Well, if they've run away, then we're really not going to help them." And it's sad that we've gotten there as a society. And so what I found out is that, "Okay, this is horrible. This has happened to my daughter. I don't know what to do with all of this. It's such a nightmare that I really don't even know how to cope or to come back or to heal from that."

And when my daughter was rescued, it didn't just end there. What I found that, even after all of my years in an emergency room in Las Vegas, where we have a registered, card-carrying, indigent population, where I could find services, I could circumvent the system and get them whatever they needed upon discharge. And when my daughter was rescued, and I found out what

she had been a victim of, that I could find no services. To say I felt helpless was a gross understatement. And I thought, "How can this be?" There's nothing. We looked. Everybody that I called would be like, "Well, we don't really cover that." "Oh, was she trafficked internationally?" "No." "Oh, I'm sorry; we have no services for domestic survivors." And so then it just continued to be this, "Okay, she's had this horrible thing happen to her. Now what do we do?" And trying to find homes or services, and there weren't any that I could find at that time.

And so it became my mission then, once my daughter -- we got through a whole year process where her perpetrator, one of her perpetrators was arrested, and prosecuted federally, and is now serving a 12-1/2 year sentence in a federal prison. There are, however, still several people that are a party to this that are at large. My daughter was threatened that if she spoke that they would kill her. They showed my daughter a picture of our entire family, and they pointed guns at all of us and said that we were all dead if she said anything if she was to encounter a police officer. And I say that because it's important as a society that we understand that the survivors of this crime and those that are being exploited are held under extreme duress. And you have no idea what is either... they're either running from -- because it's not running to; it's what they're running from -- or what their circumstances have been that has led them to where they're now being exploited, and to understand that they're a victim.

Because I took my daughter to the emergency room, because she had been repeatedly raped over the course of eight days. And I couldn't even get the triage nurse to look me in the eye, to look my daughter in the eye. My daughter had been missing for eight days. I hadn't slept for eight days. My daughter was obviously drugged. And the nurse never once asked who I was, if it was okay with my daughter that I was in the room with her, never even showed her a shred of compassion. And asking what we were there for, and I told her, and she said, "Well, are the police here?" And I said, "I don't know." I didn't know that you had to have the police there whenever your child had been raped or assaulted. "My bad. I'm sorry. This is the first time this has happened to our family."

And this whole entire time, we're sitting about this far, and about right here where this screen is, my daughter's missing person's poster is right here. And never once did she stop to make the connection. Even when I pointed to her -- because I was so exasperated, and as a nurse, I was trying to be courteous, I was trying to extend professional courtesy, when I wanted to say, "You are being an ass. Can you please have somebody else come in who is a human?" Even when I pointed at the poster and said, "That's her. This is what we've been through for the last eight days." At that point, she was really just exasperated with me, got up and said, "Well, I'll go see. Come here. Sit in the hallway." And that's where they tried to start doing the sexual assault exam, was also in the hallway. Our emergency room visit was horrific. It felt like a perpetuation of the victimization. And the lesson that I've taken away from that is that we as healthcare providers, first responders and community are really ill-equipped to... deal with the survivors of this crime.

So what does that mean for you here today? I don't know what your major is, but I can guarantee that there's something within your major that you can use to make an impact on this crime, to do something about it. If it's nothing more than learning about it, what it is, the facts of the crime, and that the girls that are apprehended and arrested -- and some of them convicted for this, when

the pimps and the johns walk free? I'm telling you what: this is one sick, twisted society when we arrest the victim, and they end up with the criminal record, and the perpetrators walk scot-free. Do something about that. That's what I beg of all of you: do something within your own field. If you're a healthcare provider like I am, I went through the training to become a sexual assault forensic examiner myself, because I thought, "I can do that." And if it means that there's a victim that can have that compassionate care, then I'm willing to do that. But I'm also an advocate in speaking out to raise awareness, because it does happen. People think that it doesn't happen here, that it only happens overseas. That's not the case in this room, which I'm very happy to see.

Other things that you can do within your community, if you're on a jury, how important it is for you to understand the language and the terminology so that when you're in a court of law, and you're shown an ad here where a girl's being advertised on Craig's List, and if you have no idea that the code, the cryptic that they're using to advertise them -- instead of "150 dollars an hour," they might put "150 HH." That's a half an hour. Or "250 for an H." If you don't know that, then that just looks like gibberish to you, and that's what they're using in the court of laws to get these perpetrators off the hook. "Well, you can't look at that and say that they were advertising her for sale for sex. Where's the money? We don't see any of that." So that's what you can do as, even if it's just a juror, that you can go there equipped with knowledge and understanding that this is a crime, that these victims are being exploited.

And Chris is right. Some of them don't even realize that they are, because they've led an entire life -- all they've known is abuse, and that love means, "It has to hurt me physically or emotionally or mentally, and that's all I know of love." And if that's all you know, it's not a far stretch to being homeless and thinking, "Okay, well, I was beat and raped at home, so what's the difference of being beat and raped on the street?" So understanding the facts about the crime, equipping yourself with knowledge, and then finding something that you can do within your own little sphere of influence, and do it. Please.

I beg of the men: don't be a pimp. Don't be a john. Those pornographic websites with women doing explicit things, that's somebody's daughter. I guarantee that that's someone who either is currently being exploited or has been exploited. You need to think about pornography differently and understand what that looks like for the girl that you're seeing in that picture.

And continue to find ways to do something to fight this, because it is something that is going to take the village to fight. What that also looked like for me, I had friends that supported me, throughout the whole process when my daughter was missing, and through the time after, the years after she was recovered. Really feeling like I needed to do more. As I started to learn more about organizations that are out there doing wonderful things for these survivors. And we thought, "There's got to be something more that we can do." So as a group, we sat around my friend's kitchen table, and we thought, "What can we do?" There are quite a few of our ladies in our group, Run for Courage. They like to run. They do that because they enjoy it. I think that's weird. I could only run from here to there maybe if I was being chased, and then that would be it. It would be all over with. But they do. And I can help to speak out and raise awareness.

So what we do is we put on 5 and 10K runs. And everything that we make goes to support organizations that are helping survivors directly, or for services that help to prevent having

victims from being victimized to begin with. And we go through a rigorous vetting process of those that we donate to, because I want to make sure that we are not giving a cent to organizations or people that are going to further exploit children. And that's very important to me. So this is one of the things that we did, and this is how Run for Courage was birthed. And I'd encourage you to go to our website, find out everything about us, what we're doing, when our next race is. It would be great to see a Chico State team at our Folsom race. Or you have a big enough response, we can get a race going here. We'd love to do that, because there are many organizations that are doing wonderful things, and all they need is the money to continue to do what it is that they're doing.

I mean, people like Chris. I mean, goodness gracious. He's totally underplayed how awesome he is. The things that he's doing in the Sacramento area and leading the way to fight this, he's doing amazing things. And there are other organizations in the heart of Sacramento that are also working with this exploited population that-- really, it's down to dollars and cents, so that they can continue to provide the services that are so necessary for these girls. So that's all I have for you today.

I do want to thank you, even though some of you are here because you have to be. You may have to be here, but you don't have to listen. So if you did, I thank you for that. And I just want to leave you with an encouragement to join with us in the fight, and find whatever it is that you can do to make an impact. And then do that. Do it zealously, and encourage all your friends to join in it with you. Thank you.

[Applause]