Human Trafficking: What can be done?

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In the Fall of 2013, I sat in my church and heard for the first time a group speak about the human trafficking issue that plaques the city of Houston, Texas. At that time my focus had been working with women and children who had been abused because I am a survivor of Sexual and Domestic abuse. One of my goals of Safe Haven Counseling Center was to develop a nonprofit arm to open a shelter in the Pearland area of SE Texas which would provide shelter for those escaping abuse. What I heard in the fall of 2013 made me realized trafficked women and children are the epitome of sexual and domestic abuse. I knew something more had to be done. On March 1, 2014, Safe Haven Refuge was born and shortly after we had a 501(c)3 non-profit status with the IRS. My first focus was to visit the ladies being held captive in “brothels” that were masquerading as massage parlors and providing “happy endings” to those who would pay a little extra. I began to raise awareness at public events and create fundraisers. I read a news article in 2018 that Houston, Texas has more brothels than Starbucks Coffee Shops (Houston Chronical). By July of 2019, I and the current Board of Directors realized I would soon be providing counseling services for those who were captive. This created the possibility of a “dual relationship” (ACA, 2014). I transferred Safe Haven Refuge to another established 501(c)3 non-profit. This has resulted in Safe Haven Refuge becoming an International organization. Ministry continues in SE Texas and ministry has also expanded to Nepal and Somaliland. I continue to provide counseling in SE Texas and will soon visit the international locations.

**Life: Meaning and Commitment**

I have been asked many time “why I had interest in this kind of work?” The answer is part of the Safe Haven Refuge story. In 2001, I felt God was leading me into the counseling profession. I resisted because I knew He wanted me to work with those who had been abused. I felt completely inadequate because I was a survivor of abuse. But through Christ, God has given me the strength, guidance and training to be an effective counselor and to start and develop Safe Haven Refuge.

I dare not think I do this work alone. Social Justice work is a team effort. My first step when I founded Safe Haven Refuge was to create partnerships and learn from others who were already involved in Social Justice work the Houston area. Houston is a large area and there is much to be learned. My Board of Directors and I completed training under another established organization. We asked many questions on how they developed. We helped create a task group of organizations on the SE side of Houston to learn what was already being done. We did not want to repeat unnecessary steps but join processes already in place. We continue to support each other’s work.

I also learn from clients many of whom seek counseling for these needs that are related to or at least lead to trafficking. There have been times when teenage girls need to escape an addiction to sexting. I have had the opportunity to help them understand how valuable they are as young women. I can then share with them how sexting can the beginning steps to human trafficking.

I am able to help my students understand how they can gently educate clients without coming across as another annoying adult. I do not believe that I am the ultimate rescuer. I do not believe I will be the one who will end Human Trafficking in Houston. However, I do believe when I educate a client or a student I may start a snowball that at some point will make human trafficking a distant memory. My end goal is to educate and foster changes that will cause someone behind me to take the lead and continue to blaze the trail.

**Personal Privilege**

My personal privilege is that I am Caucasian and was privileged to be reared in an upper middle-class home. I am female and as a woman I do have some inequalities. Today, I am considered at poverty level. I am a single parent on food stamps. I am considered homeless by the state standards, although I chose to move into an RV because I do not own a home. I live paycheck to paycheck and thankfully my parents help with some of my son’s expenses. My ex-husband refuses to pay child support. It appears as though I have an abundance of personal privilege mainly because of the way I was raised. In reality, I live with little personal privilege, at least according to the world’s standards. This begs the question, is personal privilege in the eye of the beholder? Or what we make of it?

**Nature of Oppression**

The reason I chose to work with human trafficking, domestic violence, and sexual abuse is because I survived sexual abuse and domestic violence. In 1995-1996, I dated a guy in college. I met him at the BSU (Baptist Student Union) and got to know him on a mission trip. He did not respond well to me breaking up with him. In his Asian culture women are treated differently. They do not do as they please because they are less than men. He expressed his feelings by sexually assaulting me on campus. I chose silence for years and left the college.

Several years later, I was working at a women’s shelter and my ex-husband began controlling and abusing me while I was pregnant. My boss called me in to talk about it. I did the typical cover up and excused his behavior. I stayed with him longer than I should have. I finally had to leave. As a result of this experience, I can identify with many victims as they tell their stories.

On the other hand, I have had the opportunity to work with two abusers that were court ordered for therapy. Both knew my perspective, as I do not keep it a secret. We use the Domestic Violence Power and Control Wheel and speak frankly, but never in a way that would be unjust or abusive toward them. As we spoke we discovered they developed their abusive behaviors as a result of their homelives. Both cases had positive results. One has made remarkable changes and is having regular visits with his children without supervision. The second is making strong progress toward that end.

**Multiculturally Literate**

Part of living in Houston that I enjoy the most is the obvious large melting pot. We have all the different ethnicities and cultures. There are concerts happening every weekend celebrating a different culture or ethnicity. In my practice, the majority of clients are from a different culture or ethnicity than my own. I would estimate at least 30 to 40% are Hispanic/Mexican and an equal percent are African American. The remainder would be a mixture of Caucasian and Asian. When we visit the brothels, we find most of the ladies are Chinese, Korean, and Thai. We have been able to find Bibles in their languages. We are working on other materials in their language as well. They are learning English and some of our volunteers are teaching them basic English.

**Personal Social Justice Compass**

The moral compass that guides both my life and work is The Bible. I do not mean to sound placating, but I really believe if we don’t live by the Bible, we are missing the mark. Safe Haven Refuge is guided by biblical principles and we don’t deviate from God’s guidance. We don’t make apologies for that. As a counselor, I also live by the ACA code of ethics.

References

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