

## ***Not Alone: Working Together in the Fight Against Human Trafficking***

### **Who does trafficking affect?**

**Toni McKinley:** You know it's amazing what happens when someone tells you they love you and they care about you—how much you're willing to put up with, how much abuse you're willing to go through, when you feel like you're being loved.

I was vulnerable to trafficking just simply because I was a young child. As a child, my trafficker was a member of my family that I cared about and I loved and I wanted love from as far as a child should get love.

As a teenager, a lot of that anger from that just developed into anger. I was a rebellious kid and so I was constantly out there on the streets and eventually after about a year of constantly leaving and running away is when I met a trafficker who I didn't know was a trafficker but that vulnerability of just not having a real secure home and support in my home is what left me vulnerable again to being trafficked as a teenager.

And then after graduating from high school, I had to leave where I was living at the age of 18 and exactly that day that left me vulnerable again to a man who I really, really trusted because of his position in the community. He was a retired police officer and he was active in his church. So, it was really heartbreaking for me and feeling very stuck again and when it's a retired police officer who do you reach out for help you know, when you're seeing something like that.

You know, when you're in this situation you blame yourself. How could I have not recognized this, how could I have not seen this after everything that I've been through? And so it makes you feel really stupid, it makes you feel a lot of shame and when you feel shame, people want to hide. Right, it's embarrassment. So you just kind of hide back and it makes it even worse because you can't find your way out.

They had pictures of me around the city as a missing child. An old boyfriend actually came and showed up at this person's house and realized that I was there. I just dumped out everything that was happening to me and he's the one that helped me get out. I don't know how much longer I could have been there for a very long time and I swore from then on I would never trust anyone again.

## Bullock Texas State History Museum

It took me over a decade to realize what human trafficking is and that it happened to me and the biggest reason for that is because the term 'human trafficking' didn't even exist in my world. And that's why I think education's really important because it's either going to protect kids and help them be knowledgeable in what trafficking is so they can recognize it before it happens or it's going to help people who are already stuck in it realize that it's not your fault and you can get out and there's people out there who actually understand.

I'll never forget the first time someone told me "I didn't know I could get out of this if it wasn't for Toni." And it just hit me how important this is is that I can be an example that you are not who these traffickers are telling you you are. You are so much more and you can be whatever you want to be.