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# Easy to fall prey, so difficult to get out: One woman's fight to escape human trafficking

An insidious and indiscriminate crime with one in four victims under age 18, National Human Trafficking Awareness Day is Thursday in Canada

By **Rosie DiManno** Star Columnist

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There was, on the surface, no obvious reason for Nicole to become a victim of human trafficking.

She was 20 years old, from a good family, living with her parents in a small town, training to become an esthetician.

The fact she did fall into the trap of sexual bondage speaks to how indiscriminate and insidious the scourge of human trafficking can be. Her only vulnerability, if it can be described as such, was a longing for love. And that's a human condition.

Nicole met the wrong man. He groomed her, incrementally. Isolated her from family. Convinced her to take a job as a stripper, then pimped her out as a high-priced escort. Moved her to Toronto, with promises of a financially enriched future for them as a couple. Instead, secluded her in a basement apartment as she steadily sought numbing refuge in alcohol.

"My case is pretty much textbook," Nicole tells the Star. "I wasn't even aware that I had been trafficked until much later. At that time I just thought I'd been in a very abusive relationship that had gone in such a bad direction."

The "Romeo Effect," Nicole says, cultivated by a man almost a decade older.

"I can honestly say I fell in love with this person because of how wonderfully he treated me," says Nicole, who the Star has agreed not to identify. "Typically they take you on these beautiful dates and they lavish you with gifts and affection. I thought he was Mr. Dreamboat. Things started to change where the abusive language and behaviour became more and more prevalent.

"At the time it felt slow but I think it was pretty quick."

Human trafficking, which entered the Criminal Code in Canada in 2005, isn't necessarily how many people envision it from Hollywood movies such as "Taken." Or Eastern European and Asian women transported into western countries, often with the promise of legitimate jobs, their

passports then withheld, kept in sexual servitude. Although that, too, is true. According to Statistics Canada, one in four human trafficking incidents reported to police involve at least one other type of violation, mostly related to the sex trade. Between 2012 and 2022, there were 3,108 detected victims reported to police. One in four are under the age of 18.

A Uniform Crime Reporting Survey from the RCMP in 2016 showed that 94 per cent of human trafficking was domestic — made in Canada, with Canadian victims.

“The myth doesn’t just pertain to the general public, it’s also misimpression reflected in a lot of police officers,” says Det.-Const. Nick Randall, with the Human Trafficking Enforcement Team of the Toronto Police Service. “A lot of these traffickers are very smart, very cunning. What they’re able to do is find whatever vulnerability that these victims have and they exploit it, whether it’s a love relationship, whether it’s a drug or alcohol dependency, or a fear, vulnerability, where they impose dominance and fear to maintain control.”

The unit takes a proactive approach to encourage victims to come forward, with no statement demanded of them for the purpose of prosecution. “It’s 100 per cent under-reported. That’s one of the largest challenges that we have — the stigma of reporting, the fear of being re-victimized, the perception of law enforcement. It’s the worst time in their life and they’re having to explain it to a complete stranger.”

Broadly speaking, human trafficking falls into two categories, sex and labour, the latter preying on migrant workers with precarious immigration status that renders them vulnerable to exploitation.

Sexual trafficking is a gendered crime — 99 per cent of the victims are female.

Thursday is National Human Trafficking Awareness Day in Canada. Learning about the issue is being heavily promoted by the Winnipeg-based Joy Smith Foundation, a non-profit organization named for its founder. Smith was an MP in the Stephen Harper government who was instrumental in passing two amended laws to the Criminal Code in 2010.

“It’s actually far more prevalent than people realize,” says Janet Campbell, CEO of the foundation, which has documented more than 7,000 sex-trafficking cases. “This does take place in every community across our country. Oftentimes it’s playing out right in front of people and they don’t even recognize it. It’s an incredibly fast-growing criminal enterprise ... a growing crisis in our country.”

The trafficking, as Campbell — Smith’s daughter — explains, is commonly engineered through a new friendship or new romantic relationship. “Through that connection, they get pulled into different things and end up being trafficked, forced and manipulated. It’s a very heinous crime and one that sneaks up on people.

Youth are most susceptible and social media has rendered them soft prey. “Kids are easily manipulated and controlled and they’re definitely targeted. In this day and age, it plays out in all kinds of areas where youth are hanging out. Predators have unprecedented reach to access victims, whether that is at a local school or community centre or shopping mall or online.”

For Nicole — she’s become involved with the foundation as a speaker and activist — that susceptibility arose from a series of failed relationships and the charmer who came along. “He saw that in me, this need to be loved by a man. From the time I met him to six months into the relationship, I had gone from being an A student and working as a cocktail waitress, to working in

a strip club and going on lucrative dates with men I met working there. It was something he pressured me into doing. He presented as we were some kind of Bonnie and Clyde. We could make money and build our enterprise, buy a house together, build this amazing life. I guess I fell for it."

A high-end escort who charged \$1,000 an hour. Nicole is uncomfortable talking about money because she points out that young girls can be trafficked for \$20 blow jobs. At first there wasn't even sex involved, just dinner dates. But the road to perdition had no off-ramp, not for the next two years. "I hated it, I was suicidal. It gets to the point where you feel like you deserve the treatment you're receiving. There were times that I left him temporarily but he would find me and force me to come back."

Only when Nicole became pregnant did she find a compelling reason to take back control of her life, to flee and stay gone. She reached out to her parents for help. Many victims don't have that option.

"I had really good parents, a good upbringing. By all means, I shouldn't have ever been put in that position. But traffickers are very skilled at manipulation and they will target somebody's whose vulnerability they can exploit."

The grooming is both complex and simple. "You're in a state of mind where you aren't the same person. These people have a way of turning you into somebody that you're not. But it's so gradual that when you sit down to think about it ... if I sat down and thought about it too long, I hated the person that I'd become. I hated the things he made me do. It made me feel sick and disgusted with myself.

"But you're so in survival mode at that point. He moved me to Toronto to traffic so I no longer had the support or direct contact with my parents. He used the fear tactic of telling me if I ever left or if I didn't do what he said, that he would board up my parents' home and burn it down with them inside and make me watch."

So now, married, living again in a small town, teaching Sunday school, Nicole is driven to spread the word, the warning. "I'm not here to tell other people who may be wilfully working in the sex trade how they're supposed to feel. That's not what this is about. But the larger majority are in situations similar to what mine was. They've been coerced or manipulated. They may think that they're willing participants but they're not."

Traffickers, says Campbell, can rake in nearly \$300,000 per victim per year. The average age of a sex-trafficked person, she notes, is 13. As part of the foundation's intensified education campaign, it's pushing out information to teenagers via a Trafficking Signs Handbook for driving schools, because many teens seek out a driver's licence when they're immediately age-eligible.

"What we've seen is that this happens across all social, economical, ethnic communities. What we know from the work we do is so many of these cases go unreported. In that sense, it's under the public radar far more than it should be."

Nicole: "The foundation and the education changed my life. It's given me that final piece for my healing process, set me free from feeling that guilt and shame. Being able to release myself from feeling responsible for the amount of abuse that I endured was crucial.

"I'm passionate about spreading that message onward."