

<https://www.ctvnews.ca/vancouver/article/you-run-off-their-desperation-ex-pimp-regrets-his-past-now-tries-to-educate-against-human-trafficking/>

'You run off their desperation:' Ex-pimp regrets his past, now tries to educate against human trafficking

By: Michele Brunoro
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Warning: This story may be disturbing to some readers

He is a former sex trafficker.

His crimes, committed during an era when there were red light districts in major Canadian cities.

It was a time when women were sold for sex on street corners, before the selling moved online.

"It's a lot different than it used to be, for sure. Back then (around 1990), it was miles of strolls and every turf had a pimp running it," said the ex-trafficker who we are only identifying as Donnie for the safety of his family.

"We were running streets out of Calgary, Winnipeg and Regina," he recalled.

Manipulation, violence, shame

Donnie said back then, and still today, traffickers use manipulation to lure vulnerable victims.

"Girls don't wake up in the morning and say, 'This is what I want to do for a living,' so you run off their desperation," he said.

"The pimps will often use that as a strategy. Someone that's unhappy or feels entrapped or feels rebellion against their parents. And they'll say, 'Look, we'll offer you a safe haven,'" Donnie explained.

Nineteen-years-old at the time, he said violence was all around him.

"The guy that trained me, he beat up his girlfriend the first night he met her and that's how he broke her into submission," said Donnie.

He said the shame the women felt at the exploitation back then is the same shame they feel today.

“The first customer you’ve had, you feel a sense of, you’ve lost your dignity. And it’s a pivoting point there if the girls continue or not,” he said.

Motivated by money, profiting from exploitation

Sue Brown, with Justice for Girls, said that traffickers use that shame to further control and manipulate women to keep them working. She said it’s all part of the grooming process that traffickers profit from.

“At the end of the day, human trafficking is a financial crime as much as it is a horrific, violent and sexual crime,” Brown said.

Money was Donnie’s motivator.

“I was desperate for cash,” he said, explaining that he trafficked three women in total over the course of about a year before finally finding his way out of a very dark and desperate lifestyle.

And what he felt then was regret.

“For a long time, I thought I deserved death. Who am I? I don’t deserve to live,” he recalled.

Efforts to educate

But he said he has since found and apologized to many of his victims, including his former girlfriend.

He said he’s changed his life’s purpose. He tries to educate people about the dangers of human trafficking and help those who have already gone down that path.

“I’ve made it my journey, even as I get older, to open up a safe house,” he said.

“If I can save a person from this tragic lifestyle, then I feel that I’ve redeemed myself in some way,” he continued.

Meanwhile, the Joy Smith Foundation has been working to open a campus for trafficking survivors that will combine a learning centre with residences.

“There’s nothing like this in Canada. In fact, we’ve worked around the world, and it would be very unique internationally,” said the foundation’s Janet Campbell.

She said the campus, expected to open in 2027, will be located just outside of Winnipeg but will help women from across Canada.

“What makes it unique is it combines the learning centre with residences for survivors. And it is really designed to connect the community and those supporting and serving survivors in the healing journey with survivors going through that process,” she explained.

‘See something, say something’

Trafficked women are often moved from city to city and in places like B.C., more work is being done to identify victims.

“We recognize human trafficking is one of the fastest-growing crimes in Canada,” said Allyssa Smith, spokesperson for Vancouver International Airport.

“And as a port of entry, as a first and last destination for so many people, we really understand the important role that we play in helping curb and manage this crime that is happening in Canada,” she said.

At the airport, which is part of the Human Trafficking Prevention Network in B.C., the majority of workers have been trained to be watchful.

“We have a real culture of ‘see something, say something’ at the airport. People are looking for travellers who aren’t in care and control of their own documentation, or who aren’t necessarily able to articulate their travel plans for their itinerary,” Smith said, adding that there are also signs placed in strategic locations at the airport to educate passengers.

“Within our security programming, we now have a role specifically dedicated for the oversight of our #NotInMyCity partnership and our work with human trafficking,” she explained.

[#NotInMyCity](#) raises awareness and works to take action to disrupt human trafficking.

There were seven human trafficking investigations launched at the airport in 2024.

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