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## **Education on Sex Trafficking Key to Keeping Kids Safe**

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By Brenda Sawatzky, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

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Gabby is 13. She lives in a small town in southeast Manitoba with her mom, dad, and two siblings. Gabby plays on the school volleyball team, studies hard for tests, and enjoys youth group every Friday night.

But there's something new in Gabby's life and his name is Mac. Mac is a friend of a classmate, a cute 15-year-old boy with sandy hair and a silly sense of humour. Gabby accepted Mac's friend request on social media recently and they've been chatting discreetly online ever since.

Mac asks her to send candid photos of herself and says she's pretty, goofy, and fun-loving. Maybe she won't tell her parents or friends about Mac just yet. It feels good to have this secret.

While Gabby is, in fact, a fictitious character, everything about her story is all too familiar to people like Janet Campbell of the Joy Smith Foundation (JSF), a Winnipeg-based organization whose mandate is to put an end to human trafficking and support victims of the sex trade.

One of the ways they fund this effort is through the Joy in Action campaign, an annual walk, run, or bike fundraiser held in Bird's Hill Park. This year's event takes place on August 9.

"Our foundation is the only national and independent organization that's dedicated to human trafficking," Campbell says. "Our focus is entirely on human trafficking... which is when somebody is bought and sold. They are a slave and a commodity."

If you don't believe sex trafficking in Canada is alive and well, guess again. JSF says they have already helped more than 7,000 victims gain their freedom and take back their lives.

Victims are often vulnerable by virtue of their age. Thirteen is the average age that girls, and sometimes boys, are lured into the sex trade. Ninety-three percent of Canada's victims were born here.

A single victim can earn the trafficker upwards of \$280,000 annually, so it pays to use psychology, deceit, technology, and healthy doses of patience when it comes to luring and grooming victims.

### **Knowledge Is Key**

Knowledge is key when it comes to helping youth, parents, and teachers recognize predators and their tactics. For that reason, JSF provided informational workshops to more than 5,000 students in the past year.

“One of the things that I’ve heard from survivors over and over again, when they learn about the prevention work that we do, they say to me things like, ‘I wish I had been at one of your programs before this happened to me.’ They say, ‘We learn in school about drugs, or gangs, or online safety, but we don’t actually learn [about human trafficking].’”

For the JSF team, prevention instruction includes teaching youth about resilience and healthy relationships versus unhealthy ones. They create awareness about the dynamics of human trafficking and teach safe online practices to help students protect themselves.

Teachers and parent groups have likewise benefited from these workshops.

Prior to beginning a youth workshop, Campbell says that students are surveyed anonymously, allowing the organization to gather important information about their attitudes and beliefs as well as online behaviours. She says that most parents might be shocked to see just what the results reveal about their kids.

Following every presentation, Campbell says staff are approached by at least a few youth in private, wanting to share their stories.

The foundation is seeing the positive results of their prevention work.

“There was a time in our office where the calls coming in were more after something had happened and people had been victimized. We’re hearing more and more stories all the time now [where they say], ‘Hey, this was happening, but because we knew, this is what we were able to do.’”

Kids and parents need to understand that becoming a victim to sex trafficking is completely preventable when armed with the right tools.

### **Predators and Their Strategy**

When one thinks of human traffickers, the image of a middle-aged man tends to prevail. In many cases, this is true.

In many cases, though, the perpetrator may be as young as the victim themselves. Teens of all ages and gender are being lured into the trade with promises of money or other rewards if they connect these predators with their peers.

“Once a [perpetrator] identifies the person, they begin to build trust and a relationship and groom them by normalizing [improper things],” says Campbell. “Oftentimes victims don’t even identify as a victim. We have many cases where an individual looks at them as a boyfriend, but the boyfriend is requiring them to go out and provide sexual services and, if they don’t, there are threats.”

That’s what makes this crime so insidious, she says. These online relationships start off feeling safe and self-gratifying. With slow and steady patience, the groomer pulls the victim ever deeper down the rabbit hole, using false words of love and affection.

By the time the victim recognizes what’s happening, Campbell adds, they feel powerless to get out, whether it’s due to shame or fear.

“We have many cases where the victims lived at home all through their victimization... The trafficker [keeps them silent] by making them think that they’re going to get into trouble if anyone finds out. ‘If you don’t do what I say, I’m going to harm your family.’ So these young girls will do anything they can to conceal what is going on.”

Helping youth break free and heal from this deep trauma is the other half of what the team at JSF does.

## **How to Help**

JSF is working at building its team across the nation, but more people are needed—and these are paid positions, Campbell says.

At the same time, JSF is focussing on building a campus in rural Manitoba to act as both a safe space for survivors as well as a place of education and training.

“We are scaling our operation to be able to respond to the demand,” says Campbell. “Right now, we have ten times more work in a day than we can possibly get to.”

Campbell says there are countless ways people can get involved, either by accepting a position, volunteering their time, organizing fundraising events, or donating to the cause.

Right now, Joy in Action is an excellent way to participate.

“I love Joy in Action because it is a wonderful way to elevate the profile of this issue in the community in a way that’s fun and family friendly.”

Campbell says there'll be facepainting and food as well as a police car and fire truck for kids to touch.

She hopes the event will both raise needed funds and empower parents to educate their young kids on what stranger danger looks like in the twenty-first century.

But it's not just up to the parents, she adds. Entire communities need to get involved.

"I can tell you that the survivors that hear about Joy in Action are so gratified to know that the community cares because for many years they've felt like nobody was even paying any attention."

#### **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

To book a workshop, visit [info@joysmithfoundation.com](mailto:info@joysmithfoundation.com)

To learn more, visit: [www.joysmithfoundation.com](http://www.joysmithfoundation.com)