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No one is immune to human trafficking; Region 7 equity groups host impactful awareness day

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Across Canada, February 22 is designated as National Human Trafficking Awareness Day; a day dedicated to bringing awareness to the widespread epidemic of modern-day slavery. To do just that, Region 7's equity members along with the Thunder Bay District Area Council hosted a presentation and panel discussion in Thunder Bay and members from across the province attended in person and virtually. Though human trafficking is often seen as an international problem, it is prominent in our communities and likely happening within one kilometre of any individual's current location.

The Criminal Code of Canada, Section 279.01 (1) defines the Trafficking in persons as "Every person who recruits, transports, transfers, receives, holds, conceals or harbours a person, or exercises control, direction or influence over the movements of a person, for the purpose of exploiting them or facilitating their exploitation is guilty of an indictable offence and liable."

With unwavering authenticity and courage, Alexandria Cockerell shared her harrowing story and described how seemingly "normal" events in her life led her to be a victim of human trafficking. Despite insurmountable adversity, Shaw ultimately severed ties with her trafficker. Her best advice for preventing victimization is to be "well-rounded and find love and worth from within." Today, Cockerell imparts her

lived experience in a variety of settings, including schools to bring awareness and challenge myths regarding human trafficking.

Joy Smith Foundation

In 2011, Joy Smith, a teacher for 23 years, founded the Joy Smith Foundation to combat human trafficking. The Foundation “started in her home and has grown into a three-generational organization, fighting human trafficking,” according to www.joysmithfoundation.com. “Today, Joy continues to advocate and raise awareness for this important issue across Canada and around the world, and is widely recognized as a trailblazer in leading the fight to end human trafficking.”

Janet Campbell, Joy’s daughter and President/CEO of the organization, showed an eye-opening presentation titled “Hidden in Plain Sight: Human Trafficking in Canada.” It presented the Foundation’s three pillars: Education, Collaboration and Healing; highlighting that survivors inspire the work. Campbell explained there are two main veins of human trafficking: sex trafficking and forced labour. In both instances, a vulnerability is ultimately exploited leading the individual into a situation in which they are no longer able to leave.

Tips for safety

In today’s current climate, online spaces have become an ideal environment for predators to lure victims of sex trafficking. Campbell urged people to be aware of grooming tactics and shared valuable tips for using online spaces safely.

Tip # 1 – Teach awareness, not just rules

- “If you wouldn’t say it to a parent or teacher, don’t send it.”

Tip # 2 – Keep communication open

- Kids who feel safe talking to adults are less likely to be harmed

Tip # 3 – Teach them to trust their instincts

- If a situation makes your gut feel weird, this is your brain warning you to walk away

Tip # 4 – Use privacy settings together

- Settings are often reset after updates, go through them together

Tip # 5 – Delay full access

- Brain development continues into early adulthood, restrict access to social media

Campbell emphatically affirmed “education is our greatest weapon.” For more information, please visit www.traffickingsigns.ca and www.traffickingreport.ca.

Beware common misconceptions

Following Campbell’s presentation, a panel discussion expertly led a fulsome and comprehensive conversation that was insightful, informative and impactful. Cockerell and Campbell were joined by Cindy Paypompee, Chair of the Thunder Bay Coalition Against Human Trafficking, Aliina Reccia, Ontario Provincial Police Anti-Human Trafficking Unit, and Tiffany Boisvert, Thunder Bay Crown Attorney. Common misconceptions were emphasized, such as human trafficking is not necessarily a girl in chains being thrown in a trunk or being moved across borders. Throughout, it was learned that no one is immune to the persuasive powers of a perpetrator and how important it is to ask the hard questions, meeting a victim where they’re at. Furthermore, for human trafficking cases to proceed through the justice system, there must be an element of exploitation and turn to local authorities when you see or hear something suspicious.

Participants were left with several ways one can help in the fight against human trafficking including leading with curiosity, continuing to grow in understanding, doing something actionable, paying attention and not only identifying needs, but addressing them, as well as listening to your intuition.

In closing, members were imparted with wisdom by Cockerell, “awareness without action is just an observation.”