

# Myth Busters

By Karen Huser

Last fall Deacon Steve Przedpelski, executive director of the Franciscan Peacemakers, shared experiences from his outreach ministry of 25 years to members of Stop Trafficking Together in Lake County (STTLC). He, along with other advocates and experts who work with survivors, dispel ten common myths related to trafficking based on concrete examples and stories from the street.

## **Myth #1: Trafficking Does Not Happen Here**

*Believing this only empowers the traffickers and makes our children and our communities that much more vulnerable.* There have been trafficking cases reported in all 72 counties of Wisconsin so we are not immune. The recent arrest of a former KMHS principal is a painful reminder bad stuff can and does happen here.

Przedpelski questions when society will start focusing on itself. He is often invited to preach and give talks related to trafficking. When people realize the location of the Franciscan Peacemakers (3333 W. Lisbon Ave. in Milwaukee), the reaction he hears is, "It's those people." Yet, Przedpelski says, not a week goes by without him receiving a call from Waukesha County, Washington County, Fond Du Lac or Sheboygan. The caller is a mom who needs help finding her daughter. A retired Sheboygan detective told Przedpelski the demand is growing for younger and younger victims. The owners of strip clubs, who have ties to Milwaukee strip clubs and the closed strip clubs in Dodge County, are recruiting underage girls. "The city is a good place to hide everything in plain sight, but it is happening everywhere," the deacon says.

## **Myth #2: There Is Nothing I Can Do**

Perhaps the best advice Przedpelski shares with our group is to get to know survivors. There are three areas where his outreach ministry needs help. Volunteers are needed in the hospitality center and in the retail store, both located in Milwaukee's Walnut Hill neighborhood at 34<sup>th</sup> St. and Lisbon Ave. The hospitality center, with hours 8:30-11:30 am on Monday-Friday, has received more than 500 visits the first four months it has been open. Store hours are 9 am-1 pm on Tuesday-Saturday. The hospitality center offers free lunches to women who walk in so there is also a need for volunteers to keep the center stocked with sack lunches.

## **Myth #3: Prostitution Is a Choice**

"In my experience, I have never met a woman who said I am choosing to do this because this is what I want to do," says Przedpelski. During the 25 years he has offered an outreach ministry to women on the streets, the deacon has completed more than 1,200 assessments. He says there is an economic need, and the women do not feel like they have a choice. "There have always been drugs and alcohol involved...and a lot of violence," he adds.

The picture Przedpelski paints does not look much like Julia Roberts in the movie "Pretty Women," does it? Here's a spoiler—the picture does not improve with reality. And the cool person, the pimp, who is glamorized in modern day rap music, has been dropped from the vocabulary of most anti-trafficking advocates. That person is a trafficker, plain and simple. Let's continue to dissect this myth.

**You can make good money.** It's true. The trafficker makes very good money, but not the person being prostituted. If you believe this business is based on the pyramid sales model where the prostitute gets a cut of the profits, think again. To optimize his outreach, Przedpelski learned routines and habits and figured out where to be when. He says there is "a kernel of truth" that traffickers give their prostitutes money to live on. "I have been in a McDonald's in the general vicinity of Mitchell Field waiting for the time the trafficker will say you can go to McDonald's and get something. Take \$5," Przedpelski explains. "But, by in large, if you listen to any law enforcement officer, any victim, any survivor, they will tell you no, they don't get anything."

**Traffickers protect and keep their stable of prostitutes safe.** That's true, but not because the trafficker has the prostitute's best interest at heart. Trafficking is all about money. Traffickers make money by renting out the same bodies over and over. Drug dealers have to replenish inventory. Once the drug is sold, it's gone. Traffickers, on the other hand, do not have to replace their product unless someone gets hurt—or worse—and can no longer work. "They (traffickers) are going to protect the women because they don't want their product damaged," says Przedpelski.

That being said, some traffickers are not opposed to using violent tactics to manipulate and control. STTLC members have seen mug shots taken of victims who were arrested multiple times. The progression of abuse is evident.

**Prostitutes aren't forced to do anything.** Przedpelski shares the story of a doctor from an Asian country who was promised a job in the medical field if she came to the United States. She was told she would not work as a doctor until she met certain criteria. However, when she arrived in this country, she was forced into prostitution. There was no job in the medical field for her.

**It's easy money.** Based on the more than 1,200 assessments he has done, Przedpelski says there is nothing easy about it. Research on the life expectancy of someone caught up in "the life" or "the game" supports this. On average, victims do not survive more than seven years. If they are not able to escape, they will likely overdose on drugs/alcohol, commit suicide or die from disease, malnutrition or a violent act.

#### **Myth #4: 300,000 American Youth Are Lured into the Commercial Sex Trade Annually**

Doubtful—I've heard the real number is somewhere between 100,00 and 300,000. In another article I read the number is likely to be *more than* 300,000. So which is it? If I am a betting person, I will wager on the latter, but the truth is accurate statistics related to sex trafficking are very difficult, if not impossible, to compile when trying to expose a crime that is often hidden in plain sight. These figures are best guesses. No one really knows.

Przedpelski and board member of the Franciscan Peacemakers Debra Schneider both agree it is best to talk about experiences and not statistics. Schneider uses Theresa Flores, a survivor and nationally-acclaimed author of the book *The Slave Across the Street*, as one example why statistics do not tell the full story. Flores was trafficked as a high school student for almost two years. She was living at home and going to school. Flores did not self identify as a trafficking victim until she was well into her adult life, years after she managed to escape her traffickers. She was questioned by law enforcement during the two years, but there were no arrests. "Theresa is not counted as a trafficking victim," Schneider says. "So how do you do the numbers? I steer clear of stats and stick to stories."

Here are other reasons to be leery of statistics:

- Law enforcement may not identify the crime properly. It can be seen as a crime of prostitution, drug abuse, domestic violence, theft, etc., and reported as such.
- Law enforcement may identify a victim of sex trafficking, but the victim may refuse services so the case never gets reported.
- Even when an officer identifies a victim of sex trafficking and the victim is willing and able to work with law enforcement to further the case, there might not be a tracking system in place to properly record the crime as sex trafficking. If there isn't a box for sex trafficking, another box gets checked and the case is misclassified as prostitution or some other crime that is listed.

What about victims who never have contact with law enforcement? The nature of this business is built on deceit and control through emotional and physical abuse, and often times drug addiction. The traffickers are savvy and instill mistrust in law enforcement as a further means of entrapment. How are these victims accounted for in the statistics? Are they a percentage? Another guess?

It's not just law enforcement that is gathering the numbers either. There are other governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders collecting data. Collaboration between all of these groups needs to happen to avoid double counting and to link the data.

I agree with Przedpelski and Schneider. Let's stick with stories. Last week I was in a meeting with a local school superintendent to discuss available training related to trafficking. The superintendent shared early in the meeting that a high school student had recently been groomed and was intercepted just before being trafficked. As the meeting progressed, the superintendent questioned if educating high school students on trafficking is too late. "Shouldn't we be starting with the middle school students?"

*Does the number really matter?* We know it is happening here. We know it is underreported. Kudos to our local superintendent who recognizes the need to do something!

### **Myth #5: Pornography Is Not Related to Trafficking**

Actually, there is a direct link between pornography and trafficking. Before you throw up your hands and poo-hoo this, hear me out.

I realize many believe pornography is no big deal; it's practically a rite of passage. Perhaps we need look no further than the halftime show at the Super Bowl this past weekend to gauge society's acceptance. The media wrote rave reviews. But wait a minute—that's not pornography...or is it?

Pornography can be very subjective in the adult world. But let's remember, *families* watch the Super Bowl. Given that context, I hope you agree the halftime show was not appropriate family entertainment. I am grateful my sons are grown because they would have been glued to the Super Bowl as ten-year-old boys, and that halftime show would have created a very awkward family moment.

Dr. Jill Manning, who is the author of *Good Pictures Bad Pictures*, uses this definition with children who have a basic understanding of sex: Pornography is material specifically designed to arouse sexual feelings in people by depicting nudity, sexual behavior, or any type of sexual information. Based on the reactions of the bumbling commentators that followed the halftime show, I would argue the show achieved the desired effect to qualify.

Regardless of whether you think the halftime show classifies as soft porn, here's the real deal—large sporting events are notorious for attracting traffickers and pornography is used to groom and train many who are exploited. In fact, pornography can be the initial entrapment. The victim is forced or tricked into doing things in front of a camera that s/he would otherwise never do. Once that happens, the trafficker uses that material to control the victim by threatening to show family, friends and significant others. It becomes a downward spiral for the victim. Pornography is used as a way to further humiliate, control and sell the victims. Some victims are trafficked solely to produce pornography. Some victims are used in the increasingly popular live porn websites, where they are made to look like they are consenting and enjoying the forced acts and abuse. Traffickers have learned that running a virtual brothel often flies under the radar of law enforcement and can be more profitable than selling on the street. So yes, pornography is directly related to trafficking.

There is also a direct link between pornography and the buyer. According to Shared Hope International's report on the demand for sex trafficking, pornography is the main gateway to purchasing humans for commercial sex. Nearly all buyers use pornography. Studies have shown that viewing pornography to gratify oneself results in short-circuiting the sexual process and may create a drug-like addiction. Pornography trains the mind to expect sexual fulfillment on demand. To achieve the same high, the user may seek more and more explicit and violent content. As Victor Malarek writes in his book *The Johns*, "The message is clear: if prostitution is the main act, porn is the dress rehearsal."

Research also shows (see [PornHarmsResearch.com](http://PornHarmsResearch.com)) that pornography actually changes the brain and the user begins to believe, for example, it is normal to pay for sex and that some partners enjoy violent sex. The significant other or spouse does not typically want to participate in violent, painful and humiliating "porn sex" so the user may seek prostituted/trafficked individuals.

Often the abuser was once a victim. Przedpelski meets with about 20 men who have confided in him over the years. Some have raped women. Some have pornography issues. Some have sexually assaulted children. "I don't make excuses for anybody," the deacon says, "but I listen to these guys' stories and they are no different from the women's stories (of sexual abuse they have endured). We have a world that is becoming more and more narcissistic. Fewer and fewer people have had good teachers of intimacy and some have no understanding of intimacy at all. If you ask the average person what intimacy means, 85% will respond that it's sex."

Schneider worries that pornography has become an acceptable part of our culture. She believes many young couples today see nothing wrong with pornography.

However, when it comes to young children there is no disputing pornography is unhealthy. Exposure that prematurely awakens sexuality in children before they are developmentally ready to cope with sexual feelings is really a form of sexual abuse. In our current world of technology, most kids are exposed to pornography by the age of eleven. Pornography has been described as the "giant magnet" that confuses and repels children, but also draws them in.

No doubt there were plenty of confused children who were mesmerized during the halftime show. There were also many jaw-dropping adults. Why, when it is known that the Super Bowl attracts trafficking, would the choreography of the halftime show be so sexually charged? I have to believe the traffickers in Miami Gardens last weekend did even better than expected.

### **Myth #6: Victims Know They Are Being Trafficked**

Many of us have seen the Hollywood version of trafficking—bound, gagged, drugged and forced into the back of a semi filled with other kidnapped bodies. Chilling, but it's not typical of how it happens in our area. Here trafficking is often hidden in plain sight, and traffickers so skillfully manipulate their victims that most have no idea they are being trafficked.

Perhaps the best way to understand the grooming process, the way a trafficker lures in the victim, is by example. Rachel Thomas, survivor and lead author of the *Ending the Game* training, comes from a two-parent, loving and supportive, upper-middle-class family. She is derailed in college by a persuasive trafficker posing as an agent from a top modeling agency. He plies Thomas with compliments, telling her she is beautiful and has so much potential. In fact, he is willing to invest and jump start her career in modeling. Thomas, who is studying to become a teacher, has never even thought about becoming a model.

A female recruiter, about the same age as Thomas, has nothing but high praise for the trafficker. Thomas recognizes the recruiter from local billboard pictures. The trafficker acknowledges the college student's dream of becoming a teacher and maybe even opening her own school someday, but emphasizes that Thomas right now is in her prime for modeling. They convince Thomas to take advantage of this tremendous opportunity, which leads her down the path to hell. It takes less than a year for Thomas to land in the interrogation room at the Atlanta Police Department where she defends her trafficker.

Thomas, who has endured every form of psychological, physical and sexual abuse at the hand of her trafficker, sits in the police station full of attitude, denial, anger and apathy. She is uncooperative and remains silent for hours when questioned. Thomas doesn't break her silence until one of her interviewers explains that her trafficker is looking at 30 years to life, and unless she wants to join him, she better start talking. "Damn! Thirty years to life! He wasn't that bad," are her first words. Every fiber in Thomas' being is telling her to defend her trafficker

How does that happen? It seems so counterintuitive. Many factors come into play. Unfortunately, in this case, Thomas knows some police officers are buyers, so she doesn't trust she will actually be protected. She fears retaliation. Thomas has been fed misinformation and lots of false promises. Thomas is also experiencing a trauma bond to her trafficker (which is very similar to the Stockholm Syndrome where the victim, in cases of kidnapping or hostage-taking, develops feelings of trust or affection toward the captor). The way in which the trauma bond develops is fairly methodical. In fact, there are many resources available online to instruct would-be traffickers. One common thread is to look for a weakness in the victim, and if a vulnerability cannot be found, the trafficker creates one.

"It's messy," says Przedpelski. "A lot of the women we work with engage in prostitution to support a drug habit. That has been a difficult thing to talk about because many people will view that in the same way they view domestic violence—if he's beating you, just leave. If you're using drugs, get off the drugs." It just doesn't work like that. "When I look back at women we were assessing 20 years ago, they were being trafficked at 10 years old...at 11 years old...at 12 years old by family members or acquaintances of the family. We didn't understand that. We didn't know," he says.

Fortunately, Przedpelski has become an expert at identifying trafficking cases, but much of society is still lagging. If society often can't identify trafficking, then how likely is it for victims to self identify? Przedpelski goes on to say that many of those children who were being trafficked were also being drugged by the family member or acquaintance who was selling. When the victims escaped as juveniles or young adults, they continued to use.

It is messy and troubling and misunderstood and underreported. Most victims do not initially realize they are being trafficked. It may take years to come to that realization. It may never happen.

### **Myth #7: Trafficking Victims Always Want to Be Rescued**

False. In fact, Przedpelski can testify that patience is a virtue when it comes to the work he does. It can take years before a victim is ready to leave the life. It may even feel like advocates are fighting harder for the victims than the victims are fighting for themselves...until you have a better understanding of what victims have endured and what they will have to overcome to truly leave.

There have been many meetings lately in preparation of the National Democratic Convention Milwaukee will be hosting in July. This event will most certainly attract more traffickers to our area. Advocates against trafficking, law enforcement and city, county and federal officials have been collaborating. There are valid concerns due to limited resources. In Waukesha County, much of the focus has been on hotels. However, in a recent meeting, Angela Mancuso, executive director of The Women's Center in Waukesha, challenges advocates to think beyond hotels—what about rescuing victims from exclusive parties along Milwaukee's Lakeshore or elsewhere in the city? "We are talking about training hotel staff," Mancuso points out, "but what are we doing about Airbnb locations and up-scale private parties or just house parties? There is potential for significant sexual violence away from the hotels, too."

The scope is huge and as a compassionate, trained professional, Mancuso realizes rescuing all victims is not going to happen outside of her fantasy. "Just because we want to rescue a victim, doesn't mean the victim wants to be rescued," she cautions. "It could be too dangerous for the victim at that moment." Mancuso is emphatic that reporting procedures and next steps have to be well thought out so as not to cause unintended consequences for the victim.

Victims definitely may fear their traffickers and remain loyal and obedient because of coercive threats. But coercion can present itself in other ways that can go undetected. Victims may suffer from a mental disorder called Identity Disturbance. This was touched on in the previous myth. If victims do not self identify, then why would they want to be rescued? In their minds, they are not being trafficked. They have been programmed to believe they are living a choice, and their trafficker is actually their protector.

As a victim begins to survive and thrive in the life, says Thomas, s/he disassociates and takes on a new identity. Core beliefs shift. The change is internal. The victim may suffer from addiction issues, nightmares, eating disorders, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, (PTSD), etc., but these are all symptoms. Thomas prescribes focusing on coercion resilience—understanding how the change in core beliefs happens and then working to undo and uproot those beliefs. It is not an easy process, but necessary to avoid recidivism.

The Women's Center, founded in 1977, is a free, full-service provider in Waukesha County for trafficking survivors. The Center offers emergency shelter and a 24-hour hotline, legal advocacy services and family counseling for those affected by domestic violence, sexual assault, substance abuse and mental health issues. There is also a transitional living program, which includes employment counseling and life-skills development.

In Milwaukee, Clare Community offers a two-year residential program through the Franciscan Peacemakers. This program provides healing of the mind, spirit and body. Residents must commit to further their education and be employed through Gifts for the Journey where they learn how to make bath and beauty products and sell the products at farmer's markets and parishes. Upon completion, the residents have collected enough finances and skills to begin a new life independent of Clare Community. However, the healing process is a life-long journey.

"Coercion can be so subtle, many do not know it is happening. It leads to confusion, hopelessness guilt and doubt," Thomas says. "The journey to create a new best self is challenging."

### **Myth #8: Most Traffickers Shop for Victims at Malls**

It's true traffickers hang out where they are most likely to find prey. That place, today, is typically online. Being home by curfew no longer means your child is necessarily home safe.

That's not to say a trafficker will never approach a victim at a mall. In fact, I once saw an interview where an incarcerated trafficker was being asked how he finds his victims. The trafficker said if he sees a girl at a mall who is a few steps behind her group, he will approach and pay her a compliment. He'll say she has very pretty eyes, for example. If the girl looks at him and says, "thank you," he will leave her alone. If she looks down and says, "No, I don't," that's his victim.

Now imagine how much easier it is for the trafficker to connect online where s/he can be anybody. Our children communicate with friends through social media. Unfortunately, it is not just friends who see the communication. There are predators online who notice children feeling misunderstood, unhappy and angry—all fairly common adolescent feelings, depending on the day, right? But when these feelings are expressed online, the door opens just a crack and the great pretender appears full of empathy and understanding. If the conversation continues, the door opens wider and wider until eventually the predator steps inside. This is online grooming in a nutshell.

We have to impress upon our children that online conversations are public. If our children need to share personal information that they wouldn't want the entire world (or maybe even just a parent) to know, then pick up the phone and call a trusted friend—don't share online. Never assume a person in a chat room or an online gamer is who s/he says. Also, instruct your kids to delete friend requests from people they do not know. Keep an open dialog about the values and dangers of social media. Let your children know you will periodically check friend lists and online activity as a safety precaution. An excellent parent resource is *Common Sense Media*, which is available if you go to the Resources tab at <https://StopTraffickingTLC.com>. Also, check out *Bark Parental Control App*.

So that's the version of stranger danger on the internet, but what if a friend—or someone your child knows—asks for an inappropriate picture online? One Arrowhead High School mother says it happens more often than most parents realize, and it's not just the "bad" kids that are participating. The mother made this discovery one morning while driving her 16-year-old daughter to school. Her teenage daughter received a request for nudes while they were in the car together. Here is what she learned that morning.

The first request starts with a "booty" picture in leggings and then progresses to a picture of the girl in her bra, which is analogous to wearing a swimsuit, and then the stakes get higher and higher. The requests for these kind of pictures started in eighth grade for her daughter. The teenager tells her mom she gauges whether a guy is nice based on if he has requested nudes yet, and estimates about 80 percent of the boys request nudes.

Deb Reuland, with the Catholic Community of Waukesha and board member of the Franciscan Peacemakers, points to her friend's recent mother-daughter conversation as reason enough to target more training toward our youth and parents. Not only can there be legal repercussions—a conviction in juvenile court for possessing or viewing child pornography can result in a fine up to \$10,000 and/or up to 3 ½ years in custody—sometimes these pictures get shared and are forever in cyberspace. As a result, kids get teased, bullied, manipulated and/or worse. If the pictures fall into the wrong hands, they can be used as a grooming tool for sex trafficking.

Wendy Smith, founder of the Washington County Anti-Trafficking Advocates (WCATA) and board member of the Franciscan Peacemakers, speaks frequently about social media. She says parents must remain vigilant and involved. A calculator icon, for example, does not always take you to a calculator. It could be a vault for hidden pictures. Click on icons frequently to confirm how applications are being used. But more importantly, Smith says, build an open relationship with the young technology users in your household. Talk about social media and your concerns regularly. Encourage your kids to consult with you about anything online that makes them uncomfortable. When it comes to sexting, there are two Golden Rules. "Don't ask. Don't send," Smith says.

The Arrowhead mother should be commended. She engaged in the conversation with her daughter. What she heard was difficult and shocking. The daughter gets a gold star, too, for being so open and honest with her mother. No doubt, the discussion between these two will continue.

### **Myth #9: If We Build the Wall, We Solve Trafficking in this Country**

Regardless of your political views, the wall will not eliminate trafficking in this country. It is not as simple as bricks and mortar.

"There is a lot of trafficking happening at the border. A lot of labor trafficking...a lot of sex trafficking...all kinds of crap. I keep hearing these people made their choices," Przedpelski says. "There may have been a free choice to begin the journey, but nothing has been free in their desperation since."

These immigrants are fleeing war zones, gang violence, sexual abuse and other unfathomable living conditions. They are the victims. Blaming the victim does not stop trafficking; it helps to perpetuate the crime. Of course, there are traffickers who will prey on the vulnerabilities of immigrants. That's what traffickers do. When immigrants are being trafficked across our borders, there is a well-established network of organized crime in our country that is facilitating this. Remember, big money is involved. Erecting a wall will not keep out what is already here.

You can imagine my surprise when I was distributing flyers for our Theresa Flores event last March, and a number of people commented how urgent it is that we get the wall built when they saw the topic was about trafficking *in our community*. Say what? Flores is not an immigrant. She is an American citizen—a white woman—who was trafficked as a high school student out of her home in an upper-middle-class suburb of Detroit.

“The immigrant issue is starting to surface in presentations,” Przedpelski says. “It’s challenging because my sense is there is a group of people who look at everything first through the lens of their political ideology. I’m not sure they ever get to the Gospel.”

There is a progressive movement among advocacy groups in Wisconsin to stop trafficking. The foundation is based on simple economics—remove demand and there is no need for supply.

In 2017, Wisconsin did increase the penalty for repeat offenders convicted of patronizing a prostitute. If the buyer has two prior convictions, the penalty increases from a Class A misdemeanor to a Class I felony. Three strikes and you’re out? Seems more like baseball. If our State Senate is truly committed to being “tough on crime” as Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald recently shared with me, then here is an opportunity. More buyer arrests and public notoriety may also help curb the demand.

### **Myth #10: The Safe Harbor Bill Incentivizes Child Prostitution**

Not possible since, by federal definition, there is no such thing as child prostitution. Sadly, there are children who are being prostituted, which makes them sexually abused children—not prostitutes.

Safe Harbor addresses the discrepancy in our criminal justice system. Under federal law, a child under the age of 18 engaging in sex with an adult is NOT a perpetrator of a crime, but rather a victim of sexual exploitation. Force, fraud or coercion do not have to be proven when a minor is sold for commercial sex. The child is a trafficking victim. However, in some states (including Wisconsin), these children are still being charged with prostitution.

The proposed Safe Harbor Bill provided immunity for minors so they could not be prosecuted for prostitution and/or related offenses. “There are at least 35 states that have passed some form of Safe Harbor, but they are all very, very different,” says Rachel Monaco-Wilcox, founder and executive director of LOTUS Legal Clinic. Since 2013, LOTUS Legal Clinic has offered free services to trafficking victims.

The amended version of Safe Harbor that the Wisconsin Senate passed “took a fairly progressive state law and returned us to status quo,” says Monaco-Wilcox. The amendment basically states a youth under 18 will not be convicted of prostitution if there is proof the victim is being trafficked. Monaco-Wilcox says the amendment is problematic for two reasons.

“Many youth are in a situation where they are not willing to identify as a victim of trafficking. They are under the coercive threats of their trafficker or they simply believe in a different pattern—the trafficker is their boyfriend, their protector,” Monaco-Wilcox explains. “We are missing a whole subset of victims that we should be identifying even if they don’t.”

The other problem with the amendment is that it allows for a diversion agreement, which basically holds the charge open until the victim completes some type of program at which time the charge is dropped. “It creates that carrot and stick situation,” Monaco-Wilcox says. “Law enforcement can use its discretion to extract information from youth.” The victim can be told, “You are going to provide us with testimony. You are going to provide us with your cell phone. If you don’t cooperate, you are going to jail. You are going to have a criminal record. You are going to be diverted into the criminal justice system.”

Monaco-Wilcox is concerned law enforcement and prosecutors may not use their discretion wisely. “As we have seen across the country, sometimes those judgments are very discriminatory. We might have youth of color or youth who are undocumented or youth of the LGBTQ group who are really being handed the short end of the stick. It creates a class of worthy victims,” she cautions.

There is much speculation as to why the Wisconsin Senate passed an amended Safe Harbor Bill this past session—especially since Safe Harbor had passed the Senate unchanged previously. Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald thinks the Senate was influenced by a conservative radio talk show that aired in Milwaukee just prior to the Senate vote. The misinformed radio host told his audience the Safe Harbor Bill would legalize child prostitution. Fitzgerald says there is a movement in the Senate to crack down on crime. He feels the combination led to the amendment.

As far as the radio program, Monaco-Wilcox had not heard the show, but comments, “I can only see it as way to further fan the flames of political posturing. No one who works with youth would give credence to the possibility that anyone under 18 would voluntarily sell themselves for sex as a legitimate story. It doesn’t compute.”

The Assembly did not act on the amended bill and so Safe Harbor again did not pass in Wisconsin. Monaco-Wilcox agrees with the Assembly decision to let the amended bill die. “All it would have done is allowed legislators to give themselves a free pass and pat themselves on the back as if they had done something positive when, in fact, they did just the opposite.”

If we can’t make the legislative change to align our state laws with federal law, Monaco-Wilcox believes there is only one option left. “We have to reach directly into the hearts and minds of prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges and guardians ad litem. It’s going to be incredibly slow, but those efforts are already well underway. We just need more people speaking into the right ears.”

Let’s revisit Myth #2.

### **Myth #2: There Is Nothing I Can Do**

False. You can continue to educate yourself and share with others. Let them know:

- Trafficking *does* happen here—it’s been reported in all 72 counties of Wisconsin.
- Prostitution may be disguised as a choice through force, fraud and coercion, but it seldom is a choice.
- Survivor and advocate stories are more reliable than statistics—be selective and respectful.
- There is a direct link between pornography and sex trafficking.
- A victim often times does not self identify.
- A victim may not want to be rescued—to do so before the victim is ready can result in unintended harm to the victim and/or recidivism.
- Most traffickers meet and groom their victims online.
- Solving immigration issues will not stop trafficking. We all have vulnerabilities and can be exploited. However, reducing demand by enforcing stricter laws and publicly humiliating buyers reduces the need for supply.
- Passing the unamended Safe Harbor Bill aligns Wisconsin law with federal law. It does NOT legalize child prostitution because, legally, child prostitution does not exist—that child is sexually abused.

Write your legislators. It matters. Recognize what trafficking looks like in our country. If you only see trafficking at the borders, your community is left unchecked and you are completely blindsided by stories like the recent arrest of the school superintendent from Altoona, charged with sex trafficking of a minor and making child pornography. It matters. Monitor your children’s online activity and talk regularly about social media concerns. It matters. If you see something that doesn’t look legitimate, say something—call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888. It matters. If a loved one is struggling with pornography issues, call The Village support group at 414-519-8086. It matters. Stop victimizing the victim. It matters. Don’t use statistics that can be easily refuted. It matters. Know trafficking does happen here—don’t allow it to continue by thinking there is nothing you can do. You matter.

*Karen Huser is a freelance writer and member of Stop Trafficking Together in Lake Country (STTLC). She began writing “Myth Busters” this past January as a way to spread more awareness and perhaps prevent someone from being trafficked. For more information, check out STTLC’s website at <https://StopTraffickingTLC.com>. You can also follow us on Twitter @STTLCWI or email us at [StopTraffickingTLC@gmail.com](mailto:StopTraffickingTLC@gmail.com).*