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# "All the Flowers May Die, But the Thistles Will Live": Sex Trafficking Through the Eyes of a Police Officer-Researcher

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## Abstract

This article is a description of the research I conducted on the sex industry in Manitoba, Canada, from 2016-2017. I interviewed 61 people, of which six were political leaders, 23 were social workers, 24 were police officers, and eight were sex industry survivors. About half of the practitioners I interviewed are also sex industry survivors. As a veteran police officer with 35 years of law enforcement experience, my research journey was unique from conducting the interviews to reporting my findings. These are some of my experiences and the lessons I learned about gathering and sharing the stories of sex industry survivors while serving as a police officer.

## Keywords

Canada, Manitoba, police experience, sex industry, sexual exploitation, prostitution, police, victims, survivors, researcher experience, research, interviews

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## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the many participants who agree to take the time to be interviewed for this research. I thank the survivors for opening their hearts and exposing their compelling stories for the greater good of preventing people from being exploited and assisting others to escape the sex industry. I also acknowledge and appreciate the professionals, researchers, police, social workers, and NGO staff who work tirelessly for social justice. The opinions expressed in this article are my own and not the Winnipeg Police Service. Dignity thanks the following people for their time and expertise to review this article: Robert Jensen, professor emeritus, School of Journalism, University of Texas at Austin; and Joan Reid, associate professor criminology, University of South Florida at St. Petersburg. Dignity also thanks Jody Raphael, DePaul College of Law, Chicago, Illinois, for her time editing this article.

**“ALL THE FLOWERS MAY DIE, BUT THE THISTLES WILL LIVE”:  
SEX TRAFFICKING THROUGH THE EYES OF A  
POLICE OFFICER-RESEARCHER**

**Robert Christmas**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article is a description of the research I conducted on the sex industry in Manitoba, Canada, from 2016-2017. I interviewed 61 people, of which six were political leaders, 23 were social workers, 24 were police officers, and eight were sex industry survivors. About half of the practitioners I interviewed are also sex industry survivors. As a veteran police officer with 35 years of law enforcement experience, my research journey was unique from conducting the interviews to reporting my findings. These are some of my experiences and the lessons I learned about gathering and sharing the stories of sex industry survivors while serving as a police officer.

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**T**his article is a description of the research I conducted on the sex industry in Manitoba, Canada from 2016-2017. As a veteran police officer with 35 years of law enforcement experience, my research journey was unique from conducting the interviews to reporting my findings. These are some of my experiences and the lessons I learned about gathering and sharing the stories of sex industry survivors while serving as a police officer. The term “survivors,” used throughout this article, refers to victims of the sex industry. The opinions expressed here are the author’s own, and not the Winnipeg Police Service. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the identity of the survivors I interviewed.

**Why I Chose This Research**

Reflecting on my 35-year law enforcement career, the last 29 of which have been with the Winnipeg Police Service (WPS) in Canada, I realized that a good deal of it focused on trying to protect and serve vulnerable people. Several of my assignments were in units oriented to helping women and children who’ve fallen prey to the sex industry. My experiences, and the passion that grew from them, has made me acutely aware of the risks of victimization that many face in the community. I’ll never forget the day the body of a child my unit had been trying to save from being exploited- was found, murdered, and left by a dirt road on the outskirts of the City. It wasn’t the first time, and not the last, but in this case, we were actively doing everything we could to intervene, and she was just out of reach, seemingly fated to

end up dead no matter what our police team and social worker partners tried. We felt powerless, but never had a thought of giving up as there was a chance that we could help. We were fueled by the occasional success in other cases.

In the first half of my career, as a patrol constable and later as a sergeant, I had several uniform patrol assignments in Winnipeg's North End, where a lot of street level prostitution had historically been situated. During those times, I developed a passion for trying to protect young girls from exploitation, setting up enforcement projects, patrolling areas that were notorious for street level prostitution to deter sexual predators and talk to sex industry workers—and encouraging them to escape. Like minded colleagues and I would set up short term projects, picking up youth from the prostitution stroll and bringing them to child protective services—often only to see them out on the street hours later. Lacking a secure place or policy to hold them, social workers had the same frustration we police had over the lack of resources to help these youths.

Later in my career, as I moved into detective work, I developed investigative skills and started to think more about the system, and I learned to appreciate the need for multi-disciplinary collaboration with social workers and community-based organizations. For example, who is responsible for missing children? The police would say it is child welfare's responsibility and child welfare department would say it's the police. People would be lost between agencies. The fact is that police and the child welfare department could do much better working together. The police alone cannot do much without partnerships in other government sectors and the community.

When the first Integrated Child Exploitation Unit (ICE Unit) was established to investigate Internet based child exploitation, I was one of the first to join the effort. Manitoba's ICE Unit became a template for similar units that were later established across Canada. In that role, we saw how children were being sold, traded and exploited world-wide. My colleagues and I developed a passion for thwarting sexual exploitation and human trafficking. In those early days, I developed an aversion to the idea of people choosing prostitution as a legitimate career path—knowing that children and young women are exploited for child pornography, and groomed by the traffickers for the sex industry (Christmas, 2017).

In a later assignment, as a team leader in the Child Abuse Unit, I supervised a specialized detective team investigating child abuse, child exploitation, Internet luring, child homicides and historical sexual assaults. Here I learned the nuances of sex and abuse investigations and how predators take advantage of people's weaknesses. I studied criminal profiling and major case management, and became a resource for police units investigating sex crimes, child abuse, domestic violence and child exploitation. The insights and sensitivity I gained in these work assignments later helped me understand the complexity of sex trafficking in my dissertation research (Christmas, 2017).

Eighteen years into my policing career, I also returned to university to complete my master's degree in public administration. I began to see more risks and opportunities for policing to impact serious social issues. The disappearances of 63 women from Vancouver in the 1990's, and the arrest of serial murderer Robert Pickton was all unfolding, sending shockwaves through the policing community across Canada (Cool, 2004). Justice Wally Oppal led the Commission of Inquiry into the serial killing of women involved in the sex industry. He found there were more than 100 women murdered around the time Pickton was operating, although

he was prosecuted for only a few (Oppal, 2012). Oppal found that Pickton could have been stopped earlier if information had been better shared between agencies in adjacent communities. I recognized these dynamics early on and identified the issue in the WPS where we had only a small staff assigned to missing person cases, like police agencies across Canada, and we had over 100 long-term “cold cases.”

The cold cases remain open forever until solved and need reinvestigation periodically, checking with family and witnesses to see if new information has come to light. Those families deserve to know their cases are being worked on. One thing I learned about cold cases is that the wounds remain open and raw, and people suffer more as time goes on. So, it is extremely tough on police officers, and harder on the families when we call them to say we have nothing to report, even after 10 years, or however long their loved one has been missing. I recall some very emotionally draining and challenging conversations with family members, and felt bad that I upset them by calling to ask about their loved ones. Sometimes detectives would be reluctant to call for that reason, and occasionally we would get a blast of frustration from folks, asking why we had seemingly not done more on their case. Now police agencies often have social workers assigned to maintain constant contact with the families of murder victims and missing persons, thus allowing the officers to focus more on the investigative aspect and less on keeping families informed.

From 2006-2010, I worked with my police colleagues to develop our WPS Missing Persons Unit, partnering with colleagues in social work to broaden the safety networks around high-risk youth; we focused on preventing the highest risk youth from becoming the next missing and murdered. For example, we started flagging youth with risk factors such as known involvement in the sex industry, and putting large amounts of resources into their safety plans and cases. Flash forward to 2016, Manitoba had a highly evolved and well-funded sexual exploitation strategy. The laws in Canada had changed, in part due to Supreme Court challenges that recognized that Canada’s laws around prostitution had previously viewed the sex industry as a nuisance rather than the serious exploitation and oppression of vulnerable people that it is. The Supreme Court of Canada quashed Canada’s nuisance prostitution laws, causing a rework of laws and strategies around the sex industry by 2014 (Christmas, 2017). In 2016 police and prosecutors in most places across Canada, including Manitoba, had long-ago stopped prosecuting people for prostitution, focusing only on deterring the purchasers and the traffickers. The changes in 2014 only confirmed and solidified the awareness that had grown in recent decades, that women and children in the sex industry are victims, rather than criminals or business people; they are exploited by organized criminals who profit from selling sex. Yet, despite these positive advances, young women were still being murdered and hurt in the sex industry. This was largely the reason I chose to focus my research on the current state of sex trafficking in Canada, and what could be improved.

My research focused on the exploitation of women and girls in the sex industry. While clearly boys and men are also victimized, the incidence is much lower and different in some ways. Eighty percent or more of sex industry survivors in Canada are female (Badgley, 1984; Cullen-DuPont, 2009; McIntyre, 2012; Smith, 2014). Moreover, 70 percent or more of sexually exploited youth/women in Manitoba have Indigenous ancestry (Cook & Courchene, 2006). A nation-wide study funded by the Canadian Women’s Foundation (2014) concluded that the number one risk factor to being exploited in the sex industry is being female. Some research has been done on sexual exploitation and trafficking of males and lesbian, gay bisexual,

queer, transgender, and two spirit (LGBTQ2S) people in the sex industry; however, it is a topic in its own right, and clearly an area for future research (McIntyre, 2012). I chose, therefore, to only focus my study on women and girls.

Language is important when we talk about sexual exploitation and trafficking. An entire section of my dissertation is dedicated to a discussion around language. The definition of terms such as ‘sexual exploitation’, ‘human trafficking’, and ‘prostitution’ can differ depending on your outlook; for example, police officers, social workers, prosecutors, and the affected youth and their families all tend to hold slightly different definitions for these loaded terms. Also, it was important at the outset of my research to determine how people who are exploited in the sex industry should be referred to, in order to best respect their dignity and most accurately depict the phenomenon being examined. An insightful source of expertise for defining these terms is the group of participants I interviewed in my research, as they are in the sex industry field and are sensitive to the evolving discourse around the way that language is used. Therefore, their perspectives were given heavy weight in defining terms used in this thesis. Because of these inputs, I chose to avoid terms like “prostitution” and “sex trade” as they infer voluntariness and free choice that does not exist in many cases. The phenomenon is referred to as the “sex industry,” as that term rightly characterizes it as organized crime that exploits people for profit. Throughout my research, I settled on referring to people who are engaged in the sex industry, as well as those who have escaped it, as “survivors.”

### **The Research Process**

In my review of the existing literature I found that previous literature has often overlooked important voices, such as the police, prosecutors, law makers, and influential community leaders. I sought to broaden the scope to gain a fuller picture and understanding, and hopefully, some new solutions. Of the 61 participants I interviewed, six were political leaders, 23 were social workers, 24 were police officers, and eight were sex industry survivors. About half of the practitioners I interviewed are also sex industry survivors. A finding of my research was that high numbers of survivors later tend to dedicate their lives to working with other survivors who are still trying to escape the sex industry.

A methodological decision I had to make was whether to interview those who are actively engaged in selling sex or to restrict my study to survivors who are no longer involved in the industry. My decision was to only interview those who are not currently (to my knowledge) involved in the sex industry and only those who are over the age of consent (in Canada this is 18 years of age). Interviewing women who are active in the sex industry could put them in danger, as their traffickers are always close and capable of harming them. Additionally, my policing experience taught me that people who are entrenched in the sex industry are often reluctant to speak to authorities and people like researchers who might threaten their traffickers’ livelihoods. Participants were selected using a snowball method of referrals and selecting people who are known in the community for their work in the field. My position as a police officer aided the process, as it gave me access to people who were key in the field and could recommend people to interview. For example, police officers knew survivors who would talk to me and directed people to me. Also, I had access to police officers in several different agencies and they trusted me to speak openly, due to my role as a police officer.

Some people questioned if survivors would speak to a police officer, thinking they may fear prosecution or some other negative impact from admitting to crimes and possibly implicating others. I felt the opposite would be the case, and that people would be open with me because I bring an impartial perspective on the system and a mature view on social justice. In the end, people were in fact anxious to speak with me and I had more interviews than I could handle. I attribute this willingness and trust in part to my role as a police officer, and to the reputation I had built personally in the community for speaking truth to power and advocating on behalf of the vulnerable. I believe that most police officers working in these areas are of a similar ilk, and would be trusted and successful in similar research projects.

My research questions focused on several issues as follows: (1) what makes people vulnerable to being exploited and is there something we could do to reduce this phenomenon and prevent exploitation; (2) what could assist people to exit the sex industry; (3) what strategies have been effective and what should be done going forward; (4) what barriers and opportunities exist within and between organizations to improve service and collaboration; and (5) what effect do laws have and what should the police be doing? My intention, in taking a narrative, person-centered approach, was to capture the emotions and feelings of the people interviewed—along with their factual observations. No rewards were offered, and I was careful to create a comfortable and non-threatening environment for each interview. I utilized a semi-structured interview format, allowing participants to elaborate as they wished. Being a police officer, I went to extraordinary lengths to ensure that no-one felt compelled to participate, repeatedly reminding subjects that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time. I also went to lengths to ensure that people felt comfortable and trusting of the process, by meeting them at the place and time of their choosing, being careful to protect their privacy, and doing anything I could to put them at ease.

My research intended to gather people's subjective perceptions, with no pre-conceived assumptions about what they would say. Therefore, I used a grounded approach, with inductive analysis of the observations gathered the participants' narratives. The grounded approach means that the data was not gathered to test existing theories; rather, the themes flowed, inductively, from the data (Creswell, 2007; Charmaz, 2005; Glaser, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Patton (1980) wrote that grounded theory uses, "inductive analysis, which means patterns, themes and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to collection and analysis" (p. 306). My questions were open ended, allowing interviewees the opportunity to provide a story, offering rich subjective insights that could not be obtained in any other way (Senehi, 2009). I was careful to protect my participants' privacy, conducting the research within the ethical guidelines set out by my university's research ethics committee.

## **GATHERING THE STORIES**

I gathered and analyzed over 1,000 pages of transcripts from interviews I conducted. I found that the answers to most of the questions I asked were provided naturally in the form of short stories. For example, Ashley, a survivor, described her experience with the typical trafficked life.

**ASHLEY:** From a survivor's view, I was first victimized at the age of 15. I was groomed and coerced into entering the sex trade, and then to selling myself on Ellice and Home. All the money I made went to drugs. I was then introduced to an older man who pretended he was my boyfriend. He had me working out of an older girl's apartment who was out of town. I was advertised on the Internet and I would see many men a day there. He said he was keeping all the money and that I would get a car, my own condo, clothes. He bought me jewelry, but I didn't see any of the money.

Then I ended up moving from Winnipeg to Vancouver, and back to Winnipeg to an abusive dangerous predator, and then to Toronto where I was with a very controlling abusive predator who actually sold me. I was in jail and I had a surety, and I guess he had had enough of me so he essentially sold me to another predator who ended up being murdered. He was shot in the head after which I returned to Winnipeg.

Then when I came back to Winnipeg, I was trying to get help for my addictions and I had ended up getting a big settlement from a lawsuit I had in Vancouver. And I wasn't able to manage the money, and I felt so hopeless, so much guilt, and so much shame that I jumped off of the Maryland Bridge. I landed on the ice. I broke my back and my legs, and my feet were crushed. So, I spent six months in the hospital rehabilitating from that. And from then I still was entrenched in the sex trade. That's all I had known my whole teens and adult life. I had been brainwashed by these men into thinking that I needed them.

So, I had a son and I lost him to CFS. The turning point really wasn't for me until I was pregnant with my daughter.

Sitting at the kitchen table in her one-bedroom apartment, Ashley described her story matter-of-factly, as though she is used to telling it and, perhaps it was therapeutic to have yet one more person acknowledge what happened to her. As a father of three daughters, not much younger than she is, my heart sank hearing the tests that life had put Ashley through. As a police officer, it compelled me to work harder to prevent further victimization. It also forced me to reflect on how fragmented the system is, and how many missed opportunities there must have been for people to intervene; how many times had Ashley been in contact with police, social workers, medical professionals, hotel staff, and taxi drivers who could have done something for her while she was being trafficked?

One of the first issues I struggled with, as my interviews began, was the challenge of language around prostitution. As mentioned earlier, language is often oppressive and polarized, either inferring that all sex industry participants are without free will, or that they are all willing participants. Terms, such as "sex trade" infer that selling sex is a legitimate trade or occupation; my findings, at least in Manitoba, were that people are generally coerced into the sex industry, and it is not a trade or work choice that most people would make.

Ashley, one of the survivors I interviewed stressed that no girl or young woman looks in the mirror one day and states she now feels she wants to choose prostitution as a career.

**ASHLEY:** I think to me it's all the same really. In my opinion, "prostitution" is "sexual exploitation" and a form of violence against women. No child says, "When I grow up, I want to be a prostitute. I want to be in the sex trade." I was a victim



and like I didn't even identify—and this is what I think is a crucial point—I didn't identify as a victim because I didn't know what sex trafficking was. I didn't know what sexual exploitation was. I didn't know what grooming was. And think maybe if I'd known about those things.

Thinking about the language used in relation to sex trafficking helped me to define my own perspective on the issue, and as a police officer. I had at some points in my career fallen into the same trap that many police, prosecutors, and social workers do—viewing runaways and prostitutes as criminals rather than the victims of the circumstances they were born into. It is too easy to look at someone who is selling sex on the street as a “prostitute” and think they are simply making poor choices. When we open ourselves up to being more sensitive and understanding they come from poverty, abusive and dysfunctional family relationships, being manipulated by traffickers, and having to do this to survive—it sheds a different light on the matter.

Stories from survivors, about how they were targeted and groomed into the sex industry were compelling and gut wrenching. They also provided deep insights that only a survivor with lived experience could describe. Ashley describes how traffickers identify vulnerable people and exploit their weakness while manipulating them into the sex industry.

**ASHLEY:** I think the critical moment when I entered the sex trade was when I was 15. Like I had been bullied in school. I was vulnerable. I felt a need to belong and feel accepted. I had been going to community centers and spending time with friends. A couple of the girls and myself met some guys there, and they introduced us to crack. And we wanted more. And then that was the point where I was on the streets.

Ashley describes the starting point where she was vulnerable and a point at which someone might have intervened to help her avoid taking her life on a tragic trajectory. It made me wonder how many times, over the course of my career in policing, I had dealt with youth who are being sexually exploited and trafficked, and I didn't know it. The need for more education and training for police, social workers, medical staff, educators, and parents on how to recognize trafficking and do something to help them is critical.

Kaitlin, a survivor, describes her experience starting in the sex industry.

**KAITLIN:** The very first guy I remember—. We were standing on Higgins. And I remember I was asking [another girl], “How do I stand?” She told me, “Stick your head forward and your leg, and hold your hip.” And I remember I was doing that. And all of a sudden, this guy came driving by. I know he was Italian. he was this old Italian guy. And he told us to jump in. And she jumped in the front, and I jumped in the back. He goes, “How old is she?” And she was looking at him, and, I don't know, she was playing him, rubbing his leg. And she was like, “Why? What do you like?” He said, “How young is she?” And she told him I was 12. And he looked at me and said, “Is she bald?” She said, “Ya.” And he said, “Okay, ya, I'll take her.” Like I was a piece of lunchmeat or something. He asked her, “How much do you want?” She said, “Just give me \$80.” So, he gave her \$80. But she said, “I'm coming with you guys.” Cause I guess he thought she was gonna get out of the car. I was wondering—. I wondered if they knew each other? Like if he'd done this with her before, like with another younger girl? So, I remember we went to the Holiday Inn on McPhillips. It used to be there. And we went there. And he gave me \$240,

and he told me, “Don’t tell her.” He said, “Here, keep this to yourself.” And I remember like, you know, what happened in the hotel. And she was sitting outside in the hallway. And then after, he just dropped us off. I remember that it was gross. And I remember I didn’t like the way it made me feel after. And I remember that we ended up getting high and drinking. And that was the first guy, the very first John.

In Kaitlin’s case the traffickers recognized and took advantage of a vulnerable child knowing she had no familial support and would be susceptible to substance abuse. They took advantage and got her addicted to crack cocaine, which can happen very quickly- within a few doses. They made her feel like she belonged, gave her promises of money, and made her feel ashamed, ensuring she quickly became entrenched in the sex industry sub-culture.

Again, hearing these stories made me ponder how many times in my policing career I had squandered opportunities to intervene with a child being exploited. As a father of four, I felt sad hearing these stories as it could happen to anyone’s child, and who would be there to intervene or to help? It is even more disturbing, realizing how many times across all of Canada the system has failed youth who are caught up in the sex industry.

Grace, another survivor, also describes how critical it is for social workers, teachers, parents, and police officers to be trained and aware of indicators of sexual exploitation. She describes being vulnerable and then suddenly being sexually exploited.

**GRACE:** OK, so I was raped at age of 11. And it caused me to be erratic, and I started drinking a lot. My Mom was unable to cope with that and so placed me in the care of Child and Family Services (CFS) under a voluntary placement agreement (VPA) in hopes that I would change focus and go back to being how I was prior to that rape that I experienced. I was really young. I didn’t know what to do. I had nobody to talk to about it.

Rape wasn’t something that was even in my mind to understand or comprehend. And my Mom didn’t have the supports. And I didn’t have any knowledge about where to go and how to get help. It was just very shaming and dirty.

So, I was placed into a short-term group home. And I was angry. And it didn’t matter who tried to help me and support me, I was mad. And it just kind of spiraled out of control. I was living in a group home just up on Margaret and Salter over by Kildonan Park. And there was another youth there who AWOL’ed, so unplanned absences. It started off as very harmless. Like we were hanging out downtown, drinking Stone Cold two-litre beers, right?

At this point I’m 12, and then there was this about 16-year-old youth. I can’t even recall her name, but I remember what she looks like. We were standing on the corner of Ellice and Spence right by the University. There is a restaurant right there on the corner. And she was like, “I’ll be right back, guys.” And she hopped in a car, and then came back with \$80. I was like, “How do you do that?” And she said, “Oh, you just go with them and have sex.” And so, I thought at that point, “I’ve already been promiscuous and abusing substances so I didn’t have any care.” So, I jumped in the next car that came.

And then it just kind of escalated for years until I was really badly beaten by a young adolescent female who was pregnant. So, I guess, from the age of 12 to 15, I was exploited in street work. So, standing on the corner of Ellice/Toronto was a major kiddy corner for me. I had frequent johns that I kind of kept when I moved back to my parents' house. But that slowly kind of fizzles off because then I was at an age when I could get a job.

I was very motivated. Like I went back to school. But I mean I still suffered addictions. And maybe I wasn't being exploited, but I still exchanged sex and like, I mean, when it's your job you develop—. It wasn't a job. I've got to stop saying that because I was so young. But you do, for a source of money, you get talented with that, right?

Then when you move back to a community where everybody has rumours or knows, sometimes you are subjected to sexual violence because that's what you used to do. And so, it took a long time for me in my community.

Grace describes a theme that raised by many of the survivors I interviewed, that no one understood what she was going through and, therefore, no one intervened to help her. Here again, I cannot see a way to understand the perspective and experiences of people like Grace, without the context and meaning of her story in a narrative form. I learned from hearing these stories not to judge a child by the way she is acting, but rather to seek a deeper understanding of the causes of their behavioral problems.

Reflecting back on my days running the Missing Persons Unit, I now realized, as I conducted this research, more directly why those youth fight against being helped. My colleagues were all beat up, from trying to help young girls who didn't want help. We had a sense, at the time, of how strong the culture of the sex industry is, causing youth to hate authority, and being manipulated by traffickers, but conducting this research really made me realize just how deep those feelings go. Police officers and social workers need to know this when they are trying to help youth who are entrenched in the psychological grips of the sex industry culture, and seemingly don't want help. Grace, a survivor, described the trauma she endured in the sex industry and how she didn't want to leave because she was so entrenched in that culture.

**GRACE:** It started out to have food and clothes because I was in Child and Family Services. But the more you have to perform those, the more you work—no its not work—the more that you are abused, the harder the pain. So, it started with crack, and then it went to meth, right? So, it's like you can't—when you are that age—you need to be able to kind of provide your way so maybe I would show up to a flop house, I guess you would call it, where like a whole bunch of kids hang out with money. But I'd show up with drugs, and they would be like I was taken care of and fed and clothed because there was a group of us.

There was one time this fucking asshole—sorry, pardon my language—he was going to save me, and he took me—I was maybe 13 maybe 14—and he took me to St. James off the street. And he's, like, "Oh, let's get better, blah, blah, blah." And then it was like three weeks later. I got sober for three weeks. Then he asked me to go and work. So, I went and worked, and I made about \$300 and I got groceries.

But I don't want to do that sober. So, a couple of days after that I headed back to our core of Winnipeg and, ya, it's mostly for drugs to survive, right?

Grace mentioned how post-traumatic stress has impacted her. The survivors I interviewed all described their intersectional challenges, explaining how difficult it is to escape the street, and the compulsion to self-medicate, developing substance abuse problems as a direct result of the psychological trauma of forced prostitution. I learned that people need to be looked at and supported as a whole being, not only defined as a trafficked person.

The research was demoralizing, because one wants to be open and sensitive to the stories you are hearing, but at the same time—when you form a bond and value the dignity of the person you are interviewing, it opens you up for emotional injuries. The added perspective of being a police officer, who has seen so much violence and victimization, I believe, can make one even more vulnerable. Being compassionate is a double-edged sword in this way, as being sensitive requires exposing yourself to emotional hurt. Some of the stories, like Paige, who was trafficked all over Canada for over 20 years, continue to resonate for me—two years after the interview. Paige described the critical events that finally led to her opportunity to escape the sex industry.

**PAIGE:** When we talk about this, I always think, “What’s personal to me? What happened for me? How did I get out?” I said, and different times, “it was the police that saved my life.” Had I not been scooped and my warrant be put out there for arrest in other provinces, I may have died where I was. I was brought back on a warrant. I was a witness in a murder trial, and I really believe my life was spared. But, for me, I didn’t do anything.

People came to me. It was almost, like, I am a believer. I believe there is a force greater than myself and I really believe that when I was escorted back from [—] to Winnipeg and east to [—], I had no-where to go. So, I went to 180 Henry. And it was there at 180 Henry—. I had charges on me out of [—]. I was there and met [—] at Booth Center. And that began the healing journey for me. It got me into the prostitution diversion program. So, I didn’t even know where I was going. I really did not even know what kind of camp I was going to, because another girl was going. From that camp I was introduced to so many different programs here in Winnipeg, such as TERF, Dream Catchers, Sage House, all of these programs. And they were all little stepping stones for me.

Paige describes the various programs she participated in as stepping-stones, emphasizing those critical events that motivated her to change her life. It was inspiring for me to think that people who have hit rock bottom can repeatedly climb out of depression, substance abuse and trauma and go on to be productive and fulfilled beings.

Some people just become spent, after years of abuse and injuries, often damaged by severe substance abuse; they become unsellable. Kaitlin describes, in the following passage from her interview, how she progressed from the street to ‘working’ indoors, and then eventually regressed back to survival sex when traffickers were no longer able to sell her.

**KAITLIN:** My sons went and lived with my Mom. She took care of them. She got clean. So, she had my sons.

The prostitution, I kept going, I think after I was 17, 18. I was slowly doing it off the street. I was working in massage parlors. I met a guy who picked me up off the street, and he said, "You don't have to do this on the street anymore." I guess I had a fat lip because I was getting beat up, you know, from bad dates and stuff like that. And he said, "You need somewhere safe to make some money and that." And I said, "Ya." And he owned a massage parlour on Logan at McPhillips. And I worked there until I was 19, and then I went back on the street.

I remember he fired me because my addiction got so bad, and I wasn't taking care of myself. Nobody wanted me anymore so I went back on the street.

Kaitlin's story is like many in that she self-medicated with street drugs to placate the negative feelings caused by selling herself in the sex industry. Here again, the degree of compassion the researcher allows to open up- is directly proportional to the pain of receiving the story. It is like opening a wound so more salt can pour in; but, the alternative of being stoic and taking the story without feeling would be an affront to the interviewees' dignity, taking without feeling. Police and social workers need to be aware of these dynamics in order to be more empathetic and sensitive to the victims they interview.

The research also drove home for me, how frail the human condition is. Elizabeth describes how some survivors experience relapses, even decades after leaving forced prostitution, highlighting the reality that the survivor is always in jeopardy of a relapse and falling back into life of addictions and selling sex on the street.

**ELIZABETH:** I'm experiential, identify as experiential today, even though I exited over 20 years ago. I'm still experiential. I'm no further away from that curb than any of the other women that are out there. Just because it's been 20 years—. The triggers are still real for me today. The work that I do is extremely rewarding, but it's also hugely triggering. And anytime financial insecurity hits, stinky thinking does too. Yeah, it's easy to go back to that frame of thinking.

I used to start my story by saying I was 21 years old and I left a relationship. I was violently raped. And then I started working in the sex trade. But over the last few years, I started recognizing the fact that I was groomed for the sex trade long before that, and I actually turned my first trick when I was 18. And I had been primed for it for a number of years prior.

And just the people that I associated with and people that I considered to be normal everyday people were folks that were either in a place of exploitation or drug dealing or some kind of criminal activity. But at that point in my life, I thought it was normal life.

Elizabeth's insight has significant implications for developing resilience training for survivors. They need effective responses for when they feel triggered, to avoid relapse. Many survivor/practitioners work in support roles assisting others to escape the sex industry. Agencies employing experiential survivors should have resources in place for their support. Therefore, experiential people play a critical role supporting other survivors.

Paige made a lot of interesting points about her work with sex industry survivors. She says having "lived the experience" she knows what it was like to stand on

a corner selling sex, and being able to relate to the value that she brings to helping others. Here's how Paige describes working with survivors.

**PAIGE:** I come to the table working in the field, here with sexually exploited women and transgendered females, as a result of lived experiences of my own. With a past of addiction, which my addiction took me down to the point of being homeless, I often say that when I got well or began to get well, I was almost emotionless—and no place to go. And that was pretty much the way it was for me. So, having lived experience was knowing what it was like to stand on a corner, if you will, jump in a stranger's car only with one thought in mind and that is to pay in cash to supply a habit.

Looking back now, I also see those periods in my life where I was able to pull it together. It took a number of times but I was able to go back to school. And able to maintain and get my grade ten. And then I did the GED and got my grade 12. And jumped back in and took a nursing program. And was able to work as a nurse for a little while, and was able to maintain sobriety on my own.

I wasn't happy, but I was sober. So, I had successful periods, but I would always end up back up there somehow. So even back then I always knew I wanted to work with women. I did not realize then I would be involved in the sex trade. I still feel it is women who are involved in the sex trade that I am involved with. But I feel that I would be there for any women with pain. I know who I am, wanting to help people, yeah.

Paige was able to even go through nursing school and stay sober for many years, yet she was not happy. Her story, as with all of them, is visceral and impactful. Listening to how people like Paige have dealt with the trauma of being exposed to so much violence and trauma, and supporting others to overcome their challenges, I could not help but feel at once inspired and also sad at realizing the pain that so many people have to go through in life.

One survivor, Paige, described how a safe house could be set up, built on the successful model of a one-stop shop that exists in Las Vegas, Nevada.

**PAIGE:** It would be a house of women who are wanting to get well and I believe that the women would run the house and would need to manage. But I don't think it needs to be staffed. I think the women would need to be accountable to one another because they're all adults. We would bring them; we would start off with two women and then in a month or two or three. I'm not sure how it would work.

We would bring in two more and the two older ones would be accountable and if say that third person ends up smoking crack in the bathroom, she's not going to be walking because they're all going to want to be clean so she's going to have to do a report and do a time out. And maybe she could then just be able to live there and there would be karma.

Where I get this from is there's a house down in Nevada called Thistle Farms<sup>1</sup> and it's definitely worth checking it out. This woman who started out, and she's brought tons of women through there, it's a home and they all live together. Thistle Farms is what it's called, they made body products and everything now and they sell it

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: Thistle Farm is located in Tennessee (<https://thistlefarms.org/>).

online and all the stuff is what keeps the house running. It's all made from the thistle plant, and if you study a thistle it is one of the strongest plants there are, and down in Nevada I think it is. Or wherever it was, it says "down on track let's go over here down by the railroad tracks here.

Even though it's dirty, it's heavy in weeds you might see some thistles. All the flowers might die, the grass might die but the thistle will live. That explains women." It's a home and after they do a couple years there then they go off into the plant and they work or they go off on their own and they build their lives.

Paige suggests that a similar type of safe house could be created and run by the survivors, with seniors mentoring the younger women. Thistle Farms is a large manufacturing company run by sex industry survivors who are employed to produce body care products. This model seems to have great promise for survivors anywhere in the world to gain purpose and self-sufficiency.

It seems very clear from my research that the solutions can be found within the community; the people who are most affected should know what needs fixing. This finding connects with the lessons from peace-building scholars such as John Paul Lederach (1995, 2005), who emphasize that the answers to deep-rooted problems in the community are often understood and resolved by people in the grassroots who understand the nuances of local culture. This resonates for me, as it relates to the importance of the experiential people's insights. There is something potent and undeniable in the power of their insights, maybe because they are directly involved and impacted by whatever flows from the research. I know their stories affected me in a deep way—inspiring me to make sure some social good comes from the courage they had to share their stories.

### **The Impact of Story Gathering on the Researcher**

One day, after completing an interview, it felt surreal, my senses were numb and at the same time I had this visceral tightness in my gut as I slowly walked out to the car. It was my third interview that day, two of which were with survivors who had been trafficked and exploited for many years in Canada's sex industry. I sat and stared at the steering wheel, and after several minutes I realized I'd forgotten to turn the car on—despite it being -30 degrees Celsius. Realizing the impact of the story I had just heard, I said to myself: "I don't want to do more than one interview per day from now on; the mental toll is too much." I also felt that I was responsible for potentially creating a triggering experience for the people I am interviewing, and that I was being trusted with some of their deepest, embarrassing, and emotionally sensitive feelings. This all made me feel like I was doing something meaningful, but that I had better do some public good with it. Even now, as I write this article, I feel that this is powerful information and that perhaps it might help someone to understand and hopefully take some positive action, because someone trusted me to carry their story forward and do some good with it.

On another occasion, one of my participants, Andrea, and I stared at each other in silence as she caught her breath and wiped tears from her eyes. I tried to respect the silence and not interrupt her flow of ideas, and I realized I had teared up as well. Wiping the moisture from my face, I recall I felt that we were sharing a moment of deep reflection on the systemic violence that so many people struggle with. Andrea is a survivor of many years of trafficking, and now works to help people escape the sex industry. She talked about love and humanity, and the value of each

person she worked with. It affected me deeply as I could feel her emotional attachment and care for the people she works with. Again, I felt compelled to do something substantial with this gift of insight that people had entrusted me with and do something to shed light on the seriousness of this problem.

At the outset, I believe I expected to obtain a lot of information and then determine which themes were most prominent. What changed by the end was the deep respect I felt for each individual, for their strength and dignity they all had, in various forms. I was also struck, in the end, by the similarities in the experiences that each survivor had—but individually; each person has their own journey, their own strengths and vulnerabilities, and their own story.

## **DISCUSSION AND LESSONS LEARNED**

Throughout the process of conducting my research, I made some significant observations about the process and dynamics of a police officer doing this type of research. Can a police officer tell these stories? Initially, some people questioned my methodology, and whether survivors would be open to talking with a police officer about their experiences, as they relate to the organized crime of human trafficking. My thought, and a finding of the research, was that people would be more open because many trust police officers to seek the truth, advocate for the underdog, and speak truth to power. In my case, I also had a strong reputation in the community, and this also, I believe, played a role in people speaking openly with me. My sense, in the end, is that the issue is more about trust than professional affiliation. No one wants to be studied like an organism. I believe people want to speak and share with others who they feel are compassionate and respectful of human dignity. So, in that sense, a police officer can tell the story if he (she) is trusted and respectful. In my case, I was open and transparent with participants, advising them that I hoped to use their stories, and the research, to affect some social good. I reinforced in every participant, that they were contributing to some social good, and I believe this went a long way towards gaining cooperation and trust.

Through this research I learned to respect the voice of others. For example, as I was anxious to share my research findings. I accepted an invitation to do a presentation on my research at a professional association meeting. Posters went up and social media invitations went out. As it happens, the association I was presenting for had access to a pub and that is where they planned the meeting. I accepted, not caring where the meeting was held—and thinking I'm happy to share this important information anywhere. Then I received a call from a respected community leader. They said they had concerns, and some people in the community of survivors had concerns over this event being held in a pub.

This community leader, who is highly respected and I also respect, suggested that I first present my research findings for the survivors, alone, with an Indigenous elder present, so the survivors could be the first to hear the findings, and so they could 'walk with me' as I roll out the research findings. I was moved, and graciously took them up on the offer, cancelling the previously planned meeting. An elder led the meeting with prayers and words of wisdom, smudging, and I presented ceremonial tobacco as a gesture of respect. The process felt respectful and I learned a lesson about being cognizant about what I am doing with the stories gathered. I often said to myself during the research that the stories that are being shared are precious and that I have a responsibility to do some good with them. One must respect the dignity of the survivors, as well as the good intentions and



work of the practitioners. In my case, those included police officers and other professionals who are not always used to participating in research and telling their stories.

Police officers working in child abuse, sex crimes, Internet-based exploitation, and other vulnerable persons areas have unique experiences; a view to human nature that many of us would prefer to avoid. Officers have often commented to me that they do not think they could work in counter-exploitation or child abuse, because they have kids of their own and they feel they could not handle it. I have always said: “Yes you could- you just need to take the disgust and anger and turn that energy into motivation to work hard, make good cases and help the victims.” The same goes for research in these difficult spaces. I want to acknowledge all the people who work in this area of research, investigation and advocacy for social justice. Great responsibility comes with the gift of stories that people share, especially when the stories are about the anguish that people have experienced in environments like the sex industry. One of the deepest, most heartfelt stories I gathered was from Paige, who’d been trafficked for much of her adult life. She shared that many survivors of the sex industry are resilient beyond belief; this feels tragic and also inspiring, and reminds us that we are not case studies or organisms to be studied, but, rather, we are human beings with dignity and we all have our own story.

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