

Victim of hidden crime becomes advocate

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Connects sex-trafficking to missing native women

Disturbing Sex Trafficking Facts

23,500 endangered runaways reported in 2018

One in seven endangered runaways' likely victims of child sex trafficking

Average age of child sex trafficking victims: 15 years old

Child sex trafficking reported in all 50 U.S. States

**Source National Center for Missing & Exploited Children*

Kimberly Wahpepah has taken her response to a secret and personal violation, and turned it into a mission. Wahpepah, who was sexually assaulted when she was a child, has become a spokeswoman for human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and missing and murdered native women.

Wahpepah says these violation that occur in the shadows leave terrible marks on our society. She adds that these activities are kept concealed by attitudes, such as those she faced as a young girl.

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“My parents didn’t believe me at the time. They said I was making up stories,” she said, referring to her reported past abuse. “I keep seeking answers as to why this is happening.”

Wahpepah spoke about how her grandmother would tell her to not talk about these taboo subjects with other people, but she said that as a victim, she has to get the word out.

Originally from Manuelito, Wahpepah was raised both traditionally and as a Christian. But, she faced difficulties early in life, including being homeless, and overcame those challenges in recent years. It prompted her to think of ways of how she could help other folks living on the streets.

“What I’ve been through is how I’m trying to seek some type of answer to different situations in my life that will help others who are going through the same thing,” Wahpepah said. “I put it upon myself to do something about it.”

As part of her advocate work, Wahpepah was a spokesperson for Navajo Nation Missing Persons, where she first researched what human trafficking entails and learned what she could do to help with her own resources.

Wahpepah said getting entangled in sex trafficking is relatively easy. She studied the moves and describes it as something as simple as someone going up to a potential victim and asking if they want to perform sexual acts and get paid for it.

“That’s how easy it is to become a victim,” she said. “It’s as easy as [the perpetrator] saying, ‘Hey, you want to make some money?’”

Wahpepah said she spoke to several victims about why they got involved.

“When I started talking about it to people, they said they’re going through it for money, a place to stay, food to eat,” she said.

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Victims don't know what they're getting into, Wahpepah said. Perpetrators will often manipulate victims into staying with them and continuing to perform the acts, because they know the victims are in a vulnerable state, she added.

"The victim won't understand what their role is in the situation, until it is too late," she said.

Once the trafficker has either done what they wanted with the victim or thinks that the victim could pose a threat, they find a way to relocate the victim, Wahpepah said. This is how human trafficking comes into play, she said.

"Going through the trafficking, I see it on a daily basis," she said, referencing the women who are walking the streets.

Wahpepah added that she feels a connection to the potential victims on the street because she used to be in their situation. She said that those people look up to her, because she is doing something with her life to help others like her.

Wahpepah said she has recently started to talk about sex trafficking in McKinley County, especially in border towns such as Gallup and Farmington.

These two towns are also where Wahpepah experienced the dangers of human trafficking firsthand. She said that she survived a sex trafficking incident in Gallup in 2007, and that she was nearly abducted by an unidentified person in Farmington around 2008.

During her advocate work, Wahpepah spoke with the Gallup Police Department about stopping trafficking and bringing awareness about sex trafficking to the community. In particular, she talked about its connection to missing and murdered indigenous women.

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As for her current plans, Wahpepah said she has spoken with numerous elected officials about getting the issue heard at the highest levels of government in Washington, D.C.

One step along the road to getting the word out was speaking at the Gallup City Council's regular meeting April 23. During the meeting, Mayor Jackie McKinney presented a proclamation about supporting potential native victims.

"[Native women] experience a higher missing rate than any other ethnicity," McKinney said, adding that about one in every four or five native women experience this violence.

McKinney pointed out that May 5 has been proclaimed as a Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Native Women and Girls.

Dist. 3 Councilor Yogash Kumar agreed that human trafficking is a vital community issue.

"It's hard to figure out what people are actually doing, because we may not see the trafficking," he said.

Wahpepah said these covert crimes are difficult to see, and often the result of drug dealing and abuse. However, she said she has also encountered perpetrators who are authority figures in the community, but she refused to provide names.

"It's mostly business people, ones who have money. They get away with it," she said.

For more information about human trafficking, or to report an incident, visit <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/>

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