



## Prostituted children find refuge in survivor's 'tough love'

By Jacque Wilson, CNN August 31, 2011  
Page 1 of 3



The 10-year-old was being charged with prostitution. She wore a detention jumpsuit. She had shackles binding her skinny ankles.

It was an image that Lisa Williams couldn't comprehend.

She read through the newspaper article. Nowhere did it mention the pimp who had sold this girl or the men who had bought her -- they weren't being charged. Williams stared at the child's photo in horror.

"It's as if [the law] was saying she woke up that morning and decided she wanted to be sold to 10 to 15 men," Williams said. "That just didn't make sense to me."

So, Williams got on the phone. She called friends in seven states and asked them to take out their checkbooks. To start, they sent money to a small safe house mentioned in the article. But the safe house could only take in so many children, and Williams realized she needed to do more.

"It was my God nudging me, saying 'What part of six beds east of the Mississippi did you not hear?'" Williams said. "That clearly was not enough."

Research on the number of children being prostituted in the United States is lacking, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. The DOJ estimates that 293,000 American youth are currently at risk of becoming victims of commercial sexual exploitation. The majority who are "at risk" are runaways or have been abandoned by their families. According to a study funded by the DOJ in 2001, approximately 55% of girls living on the street engage in formal prostitution.

As Williams looked at that photo in the newspaper, her blood boiled. But what she couldn't see in that moment was something her husband and friends recognized instantly. Williams wasn't just fighting for that 10-year-old, or the hundreds of thousands like her.

Williams was fighting for herself, for the girl she used to be. ***Nothing left to lose***

At 7 years old, Lisa knew she was dying. Her whole body hurt. The blood kept coming.

Lisa was scared to die, but if her time had come she would accept it. She had just one thing to do first. She rose from the bathroom floor and crept upstairs. She knelt beside her grandfather, who was resting on the living room couch.

Quickly, in one breath, Lisa tattled on an older relative. She told her grandfather that this man stood in her doorway at night and called to her. She said he shoved things inside her in his room in the basement. She said he threatened her to keep her mouth shut. And she had, for months.

But now Lisa had nothing left to lose. She had to tell someone to save her sisters. They were toddlers and slept in her bed. They wouldn't be able to protect themselves when she was gone.

Her grandfather slowly opened his eyes, walked to his gun cabinet and took out his .22. Then he gave the man 30 minutes to get out of the house.

That night, Lisa didn't die. ***Living Water for Girls***

In August 2008, Williams' nonprofit organization Circle of Friends purchased a three-story house on seven acres in Georgia. Less than two years later, Williams welcomed the first child through the doors of Living Water for Girls. The safe house provides a refuge from "the life-style," as Williams calls it, for up to 10 formerly prostituted girls at a time.

A wooden porch guides visitors to a handpainted sign at the front door: "Girls Only." The quiet of the neighborhood is almost unsettling to those used to noisy downtown streets and glaring gas station lights.

Inside, the serendipitous feeling is soothing. The Quest Room, where the staff greet visitors, has a stone fireplace and plush couches. The kitchen, with its sleek countertops and black saddle stools, could be on the cover of a home-and-garden magazine.

On nearly every wall in the house, colorful quotations contrast with neutral tones.

"If you are confident, you are beautiful."

Williams radiates trust. Not that she gives it easily. She's a



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