



Prostituted child leaves 'game' for good

By Jacque Wilson, CNN July 13, 2011

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Bea looks at the campus where she'll be attending college

She was 11 the first time it happened.

Her sister had left her at an ice-skating rink in a fit of teenage drama. When Bea finally made it home, the doors were locked. Her parents ignored her pleas to be let in. She had missed curfew -- those were the rules.

As temperatures dropped, the child started to wander toward downtown Atlanta alone. A car pulled up beside her. Did she need a place to stay? She nodded and climbed in. Minutes later they arrived at a motel.

"I didn't think I'd have to have sex with him. I just thought that this was a nice person doing a nice deed," Bea remembers. "My grandmother used to have a saying: 'There's nothing open at 12 in the morning but legs and liquor stores.' I realized this was true."

The next morning the stranger -- a man whose face she can't remember -- gave her \$30 and walked out. When she arrived home, all of her childhood possessions were in a garbage bag on the front porch.

It would be 12 years before she would feel worthy of love.

Throwaway children

It's an ugly story all too familiar to Lisa Williams, the founder of Living Water for Girls, a safe house in Georgia for prostituted children.

"I was a throwaway child," she says in a low voice. "At 12 years old I was on the street as well and I've had to do some things that normal people -- normal children -- should never have to do."

Miss Lisa, as everyone calls her, won't tell you how old she is, because in her world the only ages that matter are those under 18. Short and sturdy, she's a powerhouse of persuasion. She says "Capisce?" a lot, because she moves fast and talks faster, and wants to make sure you're keeping up.

She was a military officer at one time, and a shaved head and commanding presence remain from her days in uniform. The hairstyle is pure efficiency; a woman who's on the road 80+ hours a week doesn't have time for regular salon visits.

Miss Lisa met Bea when the young woman was 22. After several trips to jail and years on juvenile probation, Bea had joined Job Corps, a free education and training program designed to help young adults earn a GED. She had moved in with her aunt to get off the streets and was only taking johns when she needed the money. But it was Miss Lisa's visit that helped her leave what she calls the "lifestyle" or "game" for good.

Quite simply, Miss Lisa gave Bea the floor. She listened. It was the first time in Bea's life someone had shown that level of respect.

"Miss Lisa called me beautiful," she says. "I had never heard a woman call me that. ... It made me want to be beautiful."

So Bea signed a contract with Living Water for Girls. The house would pay for her college education if she agreed to be a mentor to other prostituted children, keep her grades up and attend counseling sessions at school.

It's rare to find a success story like Bea's, says Linda Watson, a member of the DeKalb County task force for runaway, homeless and sexually exploited youth who is also Bea's former probation officer.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, approximately 293,000 American youth are at risk of becoming victims of commercial sexual exploitation in the United States. And the average age of a girl entering the industry is 13.

In other words, it's happening in our backyards, to our children. That's hard for most Americans to grasp. Even Gayle King -- Oprah's best friend -- was in denial while corresponding for a possible story about Living Water, Miss Lisa says. "She said 'This is happening in America?' She was shocked."

Most of the children are runaways or throwaways. Their families tell them they don't belong. Their fathers or uncles or cousins