

A Village For One: Uniting The Community To End Child Sex Trafficking

BY: BROOKE PERRY

A Christmas tree, an encouraging word, someone to help them with a homework assignment, a chance to even go to school to be assigned homework...all seemingly insignificant happenings that we assume most children experience.



Let's consider some other seemingly insignificant events. A car window rolling down, the nod of a head, a question to a young girl making her feel loved, a young relationship budding...

The reality for the young girls and boys who are victims of sex trafficking in Portland and the nearby surrounding areas, is that none of these scenarios listed above are insignificant. Most of them haven't experienced anything from the first list, and would give almost anything to have even one of those things in their life over what they actually live through on a daily basis. For these same children, yes let me reiterate a thousand times over that these are children, the second set of seemingly insignificant experiences are moments that sent their lives into a spiral of abuse and slavery that they could have never anticipated.

The average age for a child involved in sex trafficking is 13. There are literally hundreds of children in our own backyard who are falling victim to this exploitation



every single year. They are made to believe that these men, their pimps, love them and want to be with them. Their desire to be loved and feel that they belong; that they are special, draw them in to a life and a relationship that is a trap into a horrific lifestyle. Manipulated, abused and frightened, they feel like there is no one who will ever care about them enough to come save them. They begin to believe escape is only a dream not worth having. A Christmas tree seems like a fairy tale, someone to smile at you without it being inappropriate is a distant memory, if it's a memory at all. The things that other children complain about such as school and homework and their parent's rules are things that these kids who are being trafficked would give anything to trade their lives for. All of these things are far from being insignificant.

Such stories can be overwhelming, and I am simply scratching the surface of the statistics, stories and situations that exist out there. Many times I feel "seemingly insignificant". I hear stories about children's lives like the ones I just briefly mentioned, and think, "That's awful! Anyone would say so! But what can I do?"

If I've been able to prove anything in the short time I've had your attention it's that things that we deem insignificant can in fact become moments of incredible significance in a life. This is exactly the gamble that Austin Burres and Cassie Eichenberger, Tualatin High School graduates, took. They realized that no matter how insufficient they felt, they couldn't sit around and not do anything any longer. With a vision and a passion for these kids they have set out to begin building a village for these young lives to have a place where they feel loved, protected, and can get the help they need physically, mentally and relationally.

A Village for One is still in their fundraising stage but it is hundreds of miles down the road in vision, passion and direction. Both Cassie and Austin have multiple degrees ranging from a Masters in social work to a doctoral candidate in psychology. But more than the letters after their names, they have these kids' stories written on their heart. They have taken calls in the middle of the night when a girl has run away from her pimp, and have to helplessly wait and hear that she ended up going back to him because she didn't have anywhere else to go that could support

her healing process. They fight endlessly and tirelessly to spread the vision of The Village and to fundraise for both money and awareness within our city. This is already built in their minds, and I have never met two more passionate and dedicated people who fight for human rights.

I recently sat down with Cassie and Austin to hear more about their vision and cause. I expected a lot of statistics and heart wrenching stories to make me want to be involved, and honestly I wouldn't have minded that one bit. There is incredible power in knowledge. However, what I got instead was a glimpse deeper into these girl's hearts when they immediately started describing things such as what the house would look like. How the home would be decorated for Christmas. The kind of summer camps and vacations they would get sponsored for the kids. The sporting events and plays that they would get to go see their kids be a part of. Seemingly insignificant...and yet all things that could change a young heart forever.

Just like us.

Do you feel insignificant to make a change? Then you are exactly who can make the biggest difference. Never underestimate your ability to contribute to the bigger picture and put a stop to this. Step out like Austin and Cassie are doing. Step out with them! Can you talk to other people about this problem? Spreading awareness is one of the greatest ways we can help! Or visit www.avillageforone.org to find out all of the different ways you can get involved including sponsoring a table at the October 2013 banquet and auction, or donating auction items.

Most importantly, may we all take a cue from Austin and Cassie and step out however we can to make this world a better place. These kids deserve what you have to give, no matter how insignificant it may seem. Let's create some meaning for these precious lives and come alongside two incredibly dedicated women at the same time!

Brooke Perry serves as Secretary on the board of A Village for One. She is a Senior at Portland State University (PSU) and has a long-term goal of being a house parent when the home is built. This organization is working hard to get the word out about the high prevalence of sex trafficking in our area, and what is happening to combat it. A Village For One has recently been nominated for the Epoch Award.



A Village For One



Austin Burres and Cassie Eichenberger

FACTS:

- When all 50 States were graded on whether they bring justice to domestic victims of sex trafficking Oregon received a 'D' grade relaying that perpetrators are relatively safe against prosecution in our state (Oregonian, 2012).

- "The results of the FBI's Operation Cross Country III, a nationwide anti-trafficking sting, indicate that the Portland metro area is the second worst hot spot in the nation for commercial sex trafficking. Keith Bickford, head of the federal human trafficking taskforce in Oregon, reports that in Portland alone, he encounters 3-5 child victims of commercial trafficking each week – easily over 200 victims a year (Oregon Anti-Crime Alliance: Human Trafficking Alliance, 2012)."

- The average age of entry in domestic sex trafficking is 12-13 years of age (Oregon Anti-Crime Alliance: Human Trafficking Alliance, 2012)