**<http://downtowndevil.com/2014/06/05/58495/phoenix-human-sex-trafficking-super-bowl/>**

**Finding strength within: a look at Phoenix's efforts to help sex-trafficking victims**

Savannah Sanders was vulnerable from the beginning, making her susceptible to sex trafficking.

“I started experiencing abuse at a very young age and people in my family and the community were not educated enough to understand the signs and symptoms,” she said. “Because they experienced their own abuses in their lives, they attributed that to how I was acting out as normal behavior, which clouded their judgment and stopped them from being able to intervene when they could have.”

Sanders fell into drug addiction, homelessness and the sex trade at the age of 16.

“Every time I tried to get help or get on the right track, because of the situations I was in and my vulnerabilities, I was an easy target every single time,” Sanders said.

She was in a constant cycle of having periods of normalcy and opportunities for growth, then vulnerability and despair. She would pull herself back up only to fall back once again.

Ten years later Sanders is standing tall as a survivor of sex trafficking, an advocate, a program fellow of Training and Resources United to Stop Trafficking (TRUST), a mom, a wife, a member of ASU’s graduating class of 2014 from the School of Social Work and so much more.

**TRUST and the Polaris Project**

“It is a horrific experience for anybody who goes through it, but you are in survival mode at that point, and I think it is more important to understand prevention, intervention and stopping people from ever getting to that point,” Sanders said.

Sanders has been working on building new protocols for the Polaris Project’s national hotline. Polaris Project is an organization that fights human trafficking and modern-day slavery in the United States and globally.

In February there were two regions in Arizona responding to calls and only a handful of people responding for the entire state. Sanders has broken Arizona into 13 regions, with a response team in each region. Twenty-six different service providers within each region can be utilized by the response team or advocates meeting or contacted by victims.

“Utilizing service providers that already exist within Arizona that can be trained so that they can identify with trafficking victims is much more effective,” Sanders said.

Once she trains service providers she can identify what the priorities are in the community, focus on building needed resources and monitor where the calls are coming from.

TRUST has been working hard this year to build awareness of the hotline for everyone: male, female, people younger and older than 18, transgender, documented, undocumented, and sex- and labor-trafficking victims. The goal is for everyone to use one central number. Sanders is also creating an Arizona survivors council focused on leadership and expertise so their voices are heard in initiatives and policies.

Along with her TRUST projects, Sanders has accepted a job offer as the program manager for a new safe house in Prescott for victims of trafficking who are minors. She will be working with a business manager to help build her consulting and speaking business on top of a book deal to be published next year about her life and the topics of intervention and prevention.

Others like Sanders are involved with Phoenix’s efforts to combat sex trafficking through charities, nonprofit organizations, advocacy groups, government and law enforcement.

**Phoenix Police Department**

Commander Jim Gallagher of the Phoenix Police Department has more than 18 years with the force. He is a member of Gov. Jan Brewer’s Task Force on Human Trafficking in addition to his responsibilities with the city.

Gallagher left the Phoenix Vice Unit in September of last year.

“At that time we had recovered 27 juvenile victims, through the rest of the year I think we had up to 40 juvenile victims, and we are the only vice unit in the state working full time on this,” he said.

The Phoenix Police Department provides training and support to other agencies around the Valley and partners with the FBI on the issue.

“Unfortunately in this economic environment everybody is suffering. Our staffing is going to go down, but the expectations for us are still high. We are trying to cobble together the best response that we can, and we are pretty happy with the results that we have had, but we wish we could do more,” Gallagher said.

He said there is no way to “quantify” the sex-trafficking issue. He feels that when you talk about the cost of the issue, personal cost outweighs economic cost.

“I don’t think you can put an economic cost on exploitation and forced rape and childhood victimization,” Gallagher said. “I think the cost is when you look at these people and what they have lost in their life, they’ll never get it back.”

A great deal of public attention has been drawn to the issue because of coverage surrounding the 2015 Super Bowl, which will be held in the Valley, but Gallagher thinks “the focus on the Super Bowl serves to demean the victimization that happens every other day, when we don’t have the Super Bowl.”

He said that the increase of activity during the Super Bowl will be there, but it won’t be so significant as to “run us off the charts.”

Gallagher feels that Phoenix has its resources in line better than any other community in the country, but there is always more work to do, including changing the mindset of the state about prostitution. He said Arizona House Bill 2454, which was recently signed into law by Brewer, is a step in the right direction. The bill increases the penalty for “pimps” who solicit underage children and establishes defense for those charged with prostitution that are victims of forced sexual servitude.

Sanders said the bill was pushed for several years and people are finally jumping on board.

“It’s the first piece of legislation that we are actually getting through. I think it’s going to lay the foundation for us to get other bills through and really start to see change in the community and start seeing victims as victims instead of criminals with choices,” she said.

**DIGNITY program**

Catholic Charities Community Services of Phoenix serves women 18 or older who have been arrested for prostitution through the Developing Individual Growth and New Independence Through Yourself (DIGNITY) program. Both the diversion and residential programs offer women services like education, treatment, support and job placement. If a woman completes the diversion program her charges will be dismissed.

“If a woman gets arrested for prostitution and goes to the diversion program instead of jail, it saves the city money, it saves her from having to go to jail and gives her support and education,” said Erica Reed, program manager of DIGNITY’s residential program.

Women are referred to the program through jail visits, outreach, word of mouth and lawyers. The six-month program has three stages, and when a patient completes a stage, she is given more liberties.

“The main goals are to maintain a full-time job, go back to school, to stay sober, work through their prostitution history and to get back into that communal environment they maybe never had before,” Reed said.

“We just changed the program to six months because we are finding our population is getting younger and younger, and when you’re 20 years old you’re not really thinking you want to stay in this house for a whole year, that’s really hard, and we weren’t getting people who could stick it out,” Reed said. “Our vision is if you can see the six months down the line you’re more likely to hang in there a little longer.”

Reed says the program is unique because a lot of the staff are survivors themselves, and they have a survivor mentorship program so the clients feel like they have someone who can relate to their stories.

Tina Smithee, outreach worker and case coordinator, is one of DIGNITY’s survivor staff members.

“When the girls come in here, the seed is planted. They know that there is a different way to live and it is really awesome to see that light come on, when they are understanding what they are here for,” she said. “It is a new experience for them because they don’t know how to live any other way, they have lived this way their whole lives.”

The hardest part of the job for Smithee is seeing the women who have left the program back out on the streets while she is doing outreach work in prevalent areas for prostitution. Smithee does outreach two nights a week to talk about the program and give the women food, water, health kits, socks, blankets, and a handbook about the DIGNITY program.

Reed said that awareness of the issue is growing every day and it is great that everyone working with the issue is getting on the same page.

“The traffickers and the pimps are organized and smart and they know how to make millions of dollars, so if we are not as organized in communication with each other, even more than they are, then they are going to win,” she said.

**SAFE Action Project**

While Catholic Charities works directly with survivors and intervention, the SAFE Action Project, a hospitality-training program funded by grants through the O’Connor House charity, educates the tourism industry about commercial sexual exploitation of children in order to increase awareness and action in the statewide lodging industry. Since Kimberly Klein was hired in July 2013 as the program manager, her priorities have been building partnerships with associations, rebranding, strategic planning and developing a curriculum for training the hospitality partners.

Those project partners are the Arizona Lodging and Tourism Association, the Asian American Hotel Owners Association, the Department of Homeland Security and the Salvation Army. SAFE also works with TRUST, Phoenix Regional Sports Commission and the Arizona Coalition to End Sexual and Domestic Violence.

According to Klein, there are 1,400 lodging properties in Arizona, and the project’s partners cover 900 of those properties, with the Arizona Lodging and Tourism Association covering 21 percent and the Asian American Hotel Owners Association covering 40 percent. In March and April, the project trained five hotels here in the Valley, including two Hilton properties, Talking Stick Resort, Casino Arizona and Hotel Valley Ho.

SAFE develops curriculum and materials to train those at the management level in several hotel departments. All training documents are in English and Spanish.

The plan is that the employees will use what they have learned to report warning signs to the proper authorities on the property or law enforcement.

“At the beginning there was a general misunderstanding about what human trafficking is and whether it is happening here in Arizona,” Klein said. “Initially there was some shock.”

As for the Super Bowl, Klein says they don’t want to overhype one event, and instead look at the large scheme of things while promoting safe tourism. She hopes there will be a “saturation of training across the hospitality industry,” to the point where it is known that Phoenix is not a welcome environment for the illegal practices of traffickers.

“We know that underage sex trafficking is happening today and it will be happening a year from now after the Super Bowl comes and leaves,” she said.

A month and a half ago Klein was able to speak with Luis CdeBaca, ambassador-at-large for the State Department’s Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. He told her the hospitality industry is most affected by the business of human trafficking and no other city is tackling this issue in the same, collaborative way as Phoenix.

Sanders said Phoenix has made progress, but many cities in Arizona still need training on the issue. It is necessary for cities to sit down as a community, assess the needs and then work to fill those gaps.

**Finding strength within**

Sanders has made progress in her own life, overcoming her vulnerabilities and creating a life full of opportunities, growth and success, but said many have the wrong idea about what her success is.

A husband and kids does not fully define Sanders’ successes. For Sanders, “It is the fact that my kids have stability, that we raise them the way we do, that I go to school and that I have an open, honest relationship with my husband.”

Sanders said her husband has been portrayed as “coming in and marrying me and saving me,” but that gives people the wrong idea.

“Victims are looking for a guy to save them and take them away from the all the stuff they are going through instead of having the idea that they can be their own person and be empowered in who they are,” she said. “I was super fortunate to meet somebody who loved me exactly for who I was and where I was at that time. I don’t want people to think a guy is going to save you, but it is that first person coming into your life and showing you unconditional love and supporting that will help, but we need to find that within ourselves, too.”