**Survivors of human trafficking take the lead on teaching about “modern day slavery”**

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Published On: October 3rd, 2018

Link: <https://oaklandnorth.net/2018/10/03/survivors-of-human-trafficking-take-the-lead-on-teaching-about-modern-day-slavery/>

Jazmyn Brown stood in front of a group of people sitting on folding chairs in the middle of Regina’s Door, a small vintage dress shop in downtown Oakland, and began a workshop entitled “Human Trafficking 101.” It was the first in a series of free survivor-led trainings organized by[Survivors Healing, Advising and Dedicated to Empowerment (SHADE Movement)](https://www.shademovement.org/) to educate Oaklanders about human trafficking in their community. Human trafficking includes labor and commercial sex where the workers aren’t willing participants, either through force, fraud, or coercion.

Early on, a participant raised her hand, asking whether the conversation would be about international or domestic trafficking. Brown said that while human trafficking might look different in the United States than other parts of the world, the problem she defined as “modern day slavery” is real and extensive in Oakland and Alameda County. Brown knows this, she said, because she is a local survivor of human trafficking, recruited as a foster child when a couple of men invited her to smoke weed in their car and wouldn’t let her leave.

Brown said she was trafficked for years until she became pregnant and decided that she wanted to stop and get help. She sought services from [Motivating, Inspiring, Supporting & Serving Sexually Exploited Youth (MISSSEY)](http://misssey.org/), a group that supports and advocates for young victims of sex trafficking. She eventually began working for MISSSEY, later becoming a service provider and educator. Brown said her background helps her be a more effective educator. “I’m able to draw on experiences that might be helpful for the audience to know that happened to me, as well as experiences that I’ve encountered with working with other survivors,” Brown said.

SHADE Movement was founded by human trafficking expert and survivor of child sexual exploitation Sarai Smith-Mazariegos, who is also a co-founder of MISSSEY, to help survivors develop leadership skills, support each other through peer counseling, and educate others in their community about trafficking. Anyone 18 or older who identifies as a survivor of sexual exploitation or sex trafficking can become a member, and eventually an advocate and trainer. Smith-Mazariegos said she hopes that SHADE Movement advocates can begin to take leadership in the social services industries that respond to human trafficking, which she feels are dominated by people who haven’t experienced life as a trafficking victim, and who she feels see survivors as people living with trauma and without anything to contribute to policy conversations. “In this movement, we are only seen as survivors which hinders us from moving different places and becoming a director in a program. Folks only see us as survivors and so they only see the trauma. They don’t see how smart and amazing we are,” Smith-Mazariegos said. “You have this stigma on you that will never go away.”

Their new series of workshops, called the “Resilient Project,” is SHADE Movement’s first free series open to the public. It includes trainings on understanding the role family members and romantic partners sometimes play in trafficking, examining how sex buyers create demand, and pointing the way to resources for those who want to support human trafficking survivors.

At the first workshop at Regina’s Door, Brown went over basic information about sex and labor trafficking, clarifying misconceptions and occasionally offering anecdotes from her own experience, both as a survivor and a worker at DreamCatcher Youth Services, a shelter in Oakland for homeless young people.

Brown said that not all trafficked people are coerced into it by strangers or with physical violence. Some people are intimidated into sex work by people close to them, or after responding to ads promising modeling, acting or dancing work. Brown said that traffickers often hang out outside of foster homes, preying on young people without strong family relationships who want love and affection. Labor traffickers often withhold immigration and work documents from their victims to force them to do exploitative work.

Brown also said that many different kinds of men buy sex—she said that when she was being trafficked in 2009, one of her buyers was running for political office and paid her extra money to not reveal his identity. One of Brown’s slides emphasized that while sex buyers might be able to justify their acts as a business transaction, sex within human trafficking is rape. “In trafficking, the john performs the sex act with an unwilling victim, but subcontracts the intimidation and violence to another man, the pimp,” the slide read.

Brown took special care to encourage people to use language that is respectful to survivors and does not criminalize them. “I do not like the word ‘prostitute’ at all. I feel like it is a term that implies a willing participant in sexual abuse. I prefer the word ‘survivor,’ ‘victim,’” Brown said. “I prefer the word ‘trafficker’ over ‘pimp,’ because it’s a more accurate description of what those individuals are doing.”

Regina’s Door typically operates as a vintage boutique store, selling dresses, but during the workshop most of the dresses were on a rack, pushed in the corner. Regina Evans, the store’s eponymous owner, sees abolitionist work against human trafficking, such as hosting this series of workshops, to be directly connected to the history of the cloth she sells. “Who do you think picked the cotton?” Evans asked.

For Evans, there is a lineage between slavery in the early history of the United States and those who are forced into sex and labor by human traffickers today. In one corner of the store, Evans has a quote from a play she wrote called America America, about how sex trafficking is a continuation of slavery: “THE SPIRIT OF MASSA HAS JUST MORPHED INTO THE SOUL OF A PIMP.”

The dozen attendees were especially engaged when conversation turned to the distinction between sex trafficking and sex work. Brown said that sex work is only defined as trafficking when a third-party is profiting from the exchange, or when the person being paid for sex is a minor. Brown also mentioned being in conversation with some people who advocate for their right to engage in sex work consensually. But Brown and some attendees agreed that many survivors of sex trafficking continue to engage in sex work on their own after leaving their traffickers, because it’s the only way they know how to survive financially. “I realize there are different opinions, but my personal take on it is that engaging in sex for money is never an ideal situation for anybody,” Brown said.

Another spirited conversation came up over men’s role in trafficking—as victims, traffickers and buyers. Brown said that young men who engage in trafficking are often victims of sexual abuse and learn trafficking behavior from previous generations of men. She believes that while all traffickers should be held accountable for their actions, she sees a need for more compassion and support for young men to prevent them from ever pursuing trafficking.

“The culture that is defining what masculinity looks like is a problem. It’s an issue. It’s requiring young men to feel like they need to be dominant in order to look like men. It’s requiring young women to feel like their only value is in their physical appearance,” Brown said. “Identifying how we can undo that in our culture is the first step to preventing this issue from continuing to happen in the future.”

While the training was almost exclusively attended by women, Brown says that some of her most encouraging experiences teaching workshops have been when men attended and engaged in conversation about how to support survivors. “I’m always pleasantly surprised when they’re asking more questions, when they have positive feedback and contributions to add to the conversation,” Brown said.

In a conversation about punishment for sex buyers, Pamela Erickson, a staffer for Oakland Councilmember Abel Guillén (District 2), mentioned legislation that Guillén had proposed to the city council to arrest sex buyers and tow their cars. The bill had received criticism from sex worker groups like US PROStitutes Collective, which released a statement saying it would make sex work more dangerous.

A similar city effort called Operation Beat Feet ran from 1997 to 2007 and allowed Oakland police to tow cars belonging to sex buyers and suspected drug dealers, but was discontinued after legal challenges. In 2012, residents, city officials and police [began the “Dear John” campaign](https://oaklandnorth.net/2012/10/11/dear-john-oakland-residents-are-sending-your-license-plate-number-to-the-cops/), in which residents reported to the police the license numbers of cars belonging to sex buyers; police would then send the car’s owner a letter warning them that buying sex is illegal and not acceptable to neighborhood residents.

Erickson attended this training to learn more about the problems facing victims of sex trafficking. “I did learn a lot about who’s at risk for being trafficked and involved in providing resources. I guess the next step is: How can we do more to prevent sex trafficking in the first place, and to help survivors, and to educate the public about the extent of the problem?” Erickson said.

Nicole Ozene, a social work master’s student at Cal State East Bay, said she was trying to learn how to better recognize the signs that young people she works with are being trafficked, such as decreased school attendance. As an Oakland native, Ozene said she is especially aware that foster youth are at risk for sexual exploitation. “As social workers it’s something that we all should be educated on and aware about, because it’s happening in our communities. It’s happening with our children,” Ozene said.

Elizabeth Quiroz, a survivor of human trafficking who does advocacy work in Sonoma, said she was inspired by the workshop. Quiroz said she appreciated that the workshop covered a practice Brown called “Romeo pimping,” in which traffickers first seduce victims as romantic partners before trafficking them for sex. “I always was ashamed, and I always thought of myself as a prostitute,” said Quiroz, who said the practice described mirrored her own experience. “But now that I know this, I’m educating myself. That’s not what happened. I was a victim. Now I’m a survivor.”

Quiroz said her own experience was also reflected in a part of the workshop that she didn’t expect—the section on labor trafficking. She remembered when her trafficker had left her to take care of a woman who promised to pay her, but never did, which Brown said was an example of labor trafficking.

After the workshop was over, as Brown hauled each of the fold-up chairs out of Regina’s Door into her compact Kia, she said she’s happy to do this work. “It’s not really work to me,” Brown said. “I enjoy helping people who are survivors of any trauma, and I enjoy educating people on how to further support survivors.”

There are four more free workshops in the SHADE Movement’s [Resilient Project series](https://communityhttrainings.brownpapertickets.com/) on Saturday mornings in October and November at Regina’s Door.

This story has been updated on October 4th to include more accurate terminology.