

## Jerome Elam

Pregnant at seventeen, my mother married my biological father only to divorce three years later, as the love they once shared transformed into an intense and long-lasting hatred of each other. My father had returned from a three-year tour in the army serving overseas during the 1960's filled with anger. As time progressed, his rage became uncontrollable and my mother and I became its unwilling targets. At three years old, the divorce of my parents would send me down a path dark and filled with bottomless depravity where I would endure a hell that only a few have survived.

Following my parents' divorce, my mother and I were set adrift on a sea of dysfunction as our lives became a ship whose sails rose and fell according to my mother's addiction to chaos. At the age of five, my mother began a relationship with a man named Neale who began to molest me sexually and then use me for child pornography. I was an easy target for him, a child desperate for affection who longed for someone to come into my life and make me feel like I mattered, if only for a minute.

Neale inserted himself into our lives as he donned the facade of someone who would bring my fantasy of a stable loving family to fruition. In the end, it was all part of his devious plan to steal my innocence and trap me in a web of psychological blackmail that defied my very attempt at escape. I became a lost child cocooned by hopelessness as threats of violence against my mother guaranteed my silence. In order to avoid the reality of what was happening to me she turned to alcohol, as the bottom of a bottle became a mirror to reflect her distorted version of reality.

One day Neale introduced me to the pedophile ring he belonged to. My initiation into the "group" as they called themselves consisted of being beaten and raped by all ten members. The first time I was trafficked sexually, I was handcuffed to a truck-stop bathroom sink and raped and sodomized for the next six hours by a revolving door of perverted customers consumed by the depths of depravity.

The people who paid to ravage my innocence were pillars of society, doctors, lawyers and elected officials, both male and female. In hotel rooms, campers, and private residences, I became a slave to the twisted sexual desires of anyone who was willing to pay upwards of \$500.00 to use and exploit me as their darkest fantasies became realized. There were many times I was choked unconscious and bound, gagged and raped, as clients both filmed and took pictures of themselves using my fragile body to fulfill their evil desires.

I was trafficked in plain sight as I attended school and appeared to have a "normal life." I would be pulled out of school to be trafficked, and weekends and holidays were a never-ending nightmare when my innocence was sold ten to twelve times a day. The use of false identities completed with paperwork, including birth certificates, was standard practice. During "work hours," I was given a name and it was the only one that I was allowed to answer to. It was the only name we provided to clients and anyone we came in contact with, including emergency room doctors and especially law enforcement.

It would take seven years for me to escape the grip of those who sold me to the depths of perversion for profit. I would pay the ultimate price for my freedom, but through my sacrifice, I would discover a fire that rages within my soul to this day. At the age of twelve, I stood in my mother's rose garden, a bottle of sleeping pills in one hand and a bottle of vodka in the other. As the agents of my demise tumbled down my throat chased by the warmth of the vodka, I felt a sense of peace wash over me. I felt a peace I had never felt before. I had finally escaped the nightmare and I was no longer afraid.

Suddenly, I awoke in the emergency room to a group of wide-eyed doctors who had witnessed me depart this world for a total of three minutes. God, it seems, had other plans for me as I was placed under the supervision of the county and finally free of my nightmare. I sincerely believe it is through God's intervention that I am here today as a survivor of human trafficking and not a casualty. I stand here today not only as a survivor but as a living testament that there is always hope and a light inside all of us that no one can extinguish.

My life is a testament to recovery from child sex trafficking. The military saved my life. I enlisted in the United States Marine Corps at the age of seventeen. Through the experience of serving this country, I found a new beginning and embarked upon a journey that showed me the world. This opened my eyes to the strength of the human spirit. After completing eight years in the United States Marine Corps, I went back to school at the University of Florida, earning a Bachelor of Science degree and worked in Biotechnology. Motivated by the painful memories of the past, I found the inner strength to begin speaking about the abuse I endured.

Today, I am a fierce advocate for all children deprived of their voice. I speak and write on human trafficking. Staying true to values I learned in the Marine Corps, I advocate for a safe harbor for all, regardless of age, race, sex, or immigration status. I have struggled against many things in my life and I found a way to survive. Writing is my passion and it keeps me in touch with the wealth everyone holds deep inside their hearts and minds. I share my experiences in the hope that those suffering in silence will find the courage to speak out and share their voices. I have been blessed to find the healing force of God's unconditional love and discover the joy of having my own family, as well as to understand His purpose; for me is saving innocent children from predators.