

## **Barbara Amaya**

I grew up in Fairfax Virginia until the age of 12. After that, I finished my childhood years being brutally sex trafficked in the streets of Washington, D.C. and New York City.

I was sexually abused in my Virginia home in my childhood. My father worked for the Department of Defense. He was in the Army earlier and then after that he worked at the Pentagon. My Mom was a housewife, but she was an alcoholic and also mentally unstable. The first abuse I remember was when I was a young child, around the age of 7-8 years old – first by my father and then by my older brother and an uncle. I always wondered if my brother was influenced by my father’s behavior – if he saw what my father was doing to me and learned what to do from him. In any event after it happened, I ran away from home many times - the first time when I was 12 years old. The police were always catching me and bringing me back and my parents didn’t seem to know what to do with me, or even to care. I was skipping school and not attending classes. I wasn’t behaving well and felt isolated. I wasn’t answering teachers when they asked me questions, and I remember that other children in class were teasing me. I went through both the Juvenile Justice System and the Child Welfare Systems, and I remember the Detention Center labeling me as incorrigible. Eventually my parent’s rights were taken away.

I spent time in foster homes, in the Alexandria Virginia Detention Center, reform schools like Bon Air, in Richmond Virginia, and in hospital centers for children with problems. My mother was an alcoholic and in complete denial of the sexual abuse I suffered. I tried to tell her what was happening to me, but she couldn’t believe me or didn’t want to. So, I kept running away. I would go down to Washington, D.C., to DuPont Circle or Georgetown. Before long people began noticing me there.

After one stay at the Bon Air Reform School, I ran away and made my way back to D.C. A pretty, young woman approached me and began talking to me and showing an interest in me. She offered me a place to stay. I went back to her apartment. At that point in my young life, I knew if an adult offered me a place to stay, there would be a price to pay, which was normally sex. I was around 12 years old. She took me back to her apartment and told me I could stay there with her. She introduced me to her “boyfriend”, who was, in reality, her trafficker.

They quickly began to groom me for purposes of prostitution. I was in such need of love and care and had such low self-esteem at that point that I would have done anything they asked of me. She would take me out onto the street, the track to a restaurant on 14<sup>th</sup> Street & I Street, near Casino Royal which was a notorious strip club. Many military service men from D.C. and nearby Virginia and Maryland military bases would come to that club and others in the area looking for women, girls, and prostitutes. I realize now I was a child being raped by adults. There was a lot of violence and a lot of harm. I recall one time when I was caught by the authorities and returned to one of the facilities I was at and they examined me and found I had syphilis and treated me.

There were a lot of hotels and hourly rate motels in that area – there still are. She would approach the adult men and offer me and my young body to them for a price. She would say I was even younger than my 12 years of age. The men seemed to want the youngest girls possible.

She collected all the money from the men and gave it all to the trafficker. I never saw any of it. One day when I was close to turning 13 years old, the woman and her boyfriend trafficker sold me to another pimp trafficker from New York. His name was “Moses” (his real name was Leon Spears) and he took me to New York. He was a vicious man.

[Side note- The Akron Ohio police contacted me in 2012 and told me that that he had died in prison in Ohio where he had been incarcerated on drugs and weapons charges. When I saw the picture they sent me, I started to shake and quake –after all the years it brought back memories that were that bad].

After I was sold to Moses, he drove me to New York City. I was under his control and exploited for over a decade. He never called me by my name, only “Bitch,” or “Whore.” I was made to “work” the East Side and West Side of Manhattan with another of his victims (his main lady) named “Cindy.” He had many other victims over the time I was trafficked by him. Most of the time he had 5 – 10 “girls” at a time. All of us living separately in and out of various hotels and apartments.

He had a quota, an amount of money to be made every night. The number was high and very hard to make and if I didn’t have it, he would take out a wire coat hanger and whip and beat me mercilessly over and over again. I can still remember the first whipping. The pain was so intense it radiated through my entire body. The thin t-shirt I had on was no defense, and neither were my hands and arms. I tried to shield my face from his blows. He hit me repeatedly. I started to shake and cry uncontrollably, and my shirt was red from the blood. I prayed to God for help, but no one came to help me. I was all alone. I wanted to die. After that, I did whatever he wanted me to do for fear he would beat me again.

Moses made me walk the tracks around Times Square certain hotels – 57<sup>th</sup> & Ave of the Americas, The Plaza Hotel, and the Allerton. There were clubs, strip clubs, peep shows, and sex shows in the Times Square area that attracted men from all walks of life. U.S. military men on R & R were always there looking for sex. I remember that many of the military men in New York were from Fort Tilden

I got arrested many times because in those days the police were not focused on the traffickers/pimps or the buyers. They would just round all the girls up every day and put us in jail. Moses never bailed me out of jail. He didn’t want to spend the money. So, I would just sit in jail until they let me out. Finally, when I had been arrested so many times, and was what they called a “repeat offender,” they decided to put me in prison on Rikers Island.

I remember being so scared because of the stories I’d heard about Rikers. For the first time, I took the guard aside and said, “I’m not really 18, I’m only a minor.” After that, someone in the system took action: They found my parents and called them to come get me. But there must have been corruption in the system too because while I was in the waiting room waiting for my parents, Moses showed up and took me. Someone had alerted him that I was getting out of Rikers. He beat me within an inch of my life. I realize now thinking about it that he always hit me or hurt me to get me to do what he wanted me to do. Around that time, after Moses beat me so horribly, I was given drugs – heroin – to numb the physical and mental pain I was in. I was

introduced to heroin by another girl out on the track. She took me up to Harlem to get it. At first it was anytime I could do to numb the pain but in short time, I began using heroin daily and then I was addicted.

With all the beatings and violence and abuse, I got hardened, but somewhere inside me I was able to protect a small little place – a place that loves life, loves animals, and years later, when I had left New York, and I told someone what happened to me – they couldn't believe it. They kept saying “You don't seem like all that happened to you. You don't seem like a victim.”

Well, it did happen. I just had some kind of survival mechanism to keep me going. Now I look back and I think that God must have kept me alive through all of this for some reason. I survived so much – jumping in and out of cars of violent men, crazy serial killers, and being run by violent pimps.

During the time I was trafficked I was ill, had serious injuries, or drug overdoses. I had STDs such as chlamydia and herpes. Moses never cared – I don't ever remember him taking me to a doctor or hospital, but I went on occasions that were life threatening – when I had been violently raped or beaten, or when I overdosed. I remember being very ill at times and I could have died on several occasions. Today I have a lot of health problems – cancer, high blood pressure, diabetes, PTSD, depression, feet and back problems, I am also an earlier uterine cancer survivor and had a complete hysterectomy, and I believe the fact that I was trafficked and exposed to so many different men is directly related to how I got HPV and uterine cancer. People don't think about this, but dental problems are serious for trafficking victims and survivors. My teeth are a mess from over 30 years of neglect while I was on the streets. Health care issues follow victims around for years, even decades after they're rescued or out of the life.

Sometimes I used condoms, but sometimes I didn't – I wasn't able to control the situation. I'm smart – street smart – but I only had a 6<sup>th</sup> grade formal education. I left school when I was 12 years old. Over the years, I was able to return to school, finished high school and college and was able to obtain my degrees.

When I finally got out – after some 15 years on the street – I was in my mid-twenties. I tried to put my life together as best as I could. I went back to school, found work, got married, tried to have a child and found out I was unable to do so. I had to have surgery to repair the damage done to my young body, then I was able to have one child.

Eventually, I applied for and finally landed a real job in a federal government agency. I was so excited, so happy to finally be working a real job in mainstream society and I showed up every day on time and worked overtime and did everything in my job description and more. But then one day about a month into the work, my boss pulled me into her office and said, “What's this?” and showed me my arrest record. My fingerprints had been taken when I applied for the job.

She had the fingerprint results and though I tried to explain to her that I was only a kid when I was trafficked and what had happened to me, she didn't want to hear it. She just said, “We will have to part ways.” I remember I wept for days and I couldn't tell anyone why I lost my job – everyone was wondering what had happened.

Then in 2012, I heard something on TV about human trafficking, and I realized I'd been a victim. "I thought hey that's me – I'm a trafficking victim." I had never thought that before or even realized it before.

It's been a long road I've traveled to understand and make sense of everything that happened to me. I returned to New York in 2013 to have my arrest record vacated. I also worked towards a similar bill in Washington, D.C.

I also worked to pass a similar law in Virginia so that women and child victims who have been trafficked into prostitution don't have criminal records following them around everywhere. Those records make it impossible to have any kind of good life. They interfere with getting an apartment, buying a house, getting credit, getting a job. You can see why it is so important.

I've thought about this a lot since I escaped: why am I still alive?

How did I make it through all those years of violence and abuse and rape – all those years of drug addiction? And I believe there is a spiritual reason for it. I believe this because even during all those years on the streets with the most vicious pimps and violent customers, I somehow managed to keep a part of myself private and pure and whole. That part is my soul, I'm sure of it. And that pureness – that soul – has emerged – to guide me as to how to help in this fight.

I have published two books, one an award-winning memoir, *Nobody's Girl: A Memoir of Lost Innocence, Modern Day Slavery and Transformation*, that chronicles my time growing up while being trafficked on the streets of New York, the second book, *The Destiny of Zoe Carpenter*, is a graphic novel aimed at educating young students about human trafficking. Today I'm working on my third book. I speak nationally and internationally sharing my story and my trainings. I have lent my expert testimony in multiple venues across the United States in hopes of bringing help, health, and prevention to others so that they never have to experience what I have.

All I want to do is make a difference.