

Desiree Trail

I was born in Bedford, Virginia. My mother was a homemaker, and my father served in the Navy and the Air Force as a radar technician and later an electrician. Both my parents had problems. My father was an alcoholic and violent. My mother was an abused wife and then extremely abusive herself. My father physically abused my mother, my brother and sometimes me, but he was worst with my mother: he almost killed her a couple of times. I was put in foster care the first time when I was 18 months old, but then my parents were able to work out their problems and got us back. During that time, in addition to all the violence and abuse between and from my parents, I was molested when I was very young by an uncle on my mother's side. He would take me to a bedroom, molest me, take Polaroid pictures of me, and give me money to keep quiet. Maybe that is where I first associated money with sex.

When the violence continued, CPS came back and took us again when I was 6 years old. From then until I was 18, I was in and out of five foster care families. I tried several times to get back to my mother but each time she ended up being physically violent, including banging my head against the floor until I had a concussion. Most of the foster families were good to me and I thrived when I was with them, especially in school where I got good grades, met friends, joined after school groups, and learned a little bit about how normal functioning families work.

I graduated high school and even got a scholarship to college in Pennsylvania, but everything that had happened to me in life – all the violence, the molestation, the abandonment issues, started catching up with me. I didn't last more than a year at college. I bounced from home to home, friend to friend, couch surfing until I couldn't do it anymore. I decided to join the Air Force and aced the AFCAT but I couldn't make it through bootcamp. When the sergeants were screaming in my face, it triggered me – sent me back to my mother and father screaming and all those years of violence in my own family. I dropped out, worked odd jobs, cleaning houses, waitressing, whatever I could find.

Around the time I was 21 years old, things were bad, especially financially. I had no idea how I was going to survive. I met a bouncer at a local strip club and even though it didn't seem like it then, looking back I see that began my downward spiral into an underworld, an outlier life, and finally led to me being trafficked.

In Pennsylvania, I started dancing at the Club this bouncer I met worked in. It didn't take long for me to find out it was connected with the Mafia. They owned and ran most of the strip clubs at that time. But at first I didn't care. I was loving the money, loving the attention, and loving the access to drugs (mostly cocaine). It wasn't until later that I began to get squeezed by them. First the owner tricked those of us who were in college into a scam where he took our pay, supposedly to put it in an escrow account and hold it for us, but never gave it back. So, we were dancing but never being paid –

Then he forged my signature on a contract which said that I would work for them and not get paid. When I objected, they sent the housemother to talk to me and she confessed privately that they tricked me so when I wanted out, they threatened my alcoholic abusive boyfriend and

beat him up after he had put a gun to my head and said he would blow my head off if I didn't stop working in the Club.

The following day after that incident, they put me in a car and sent me to New Paltz, New York where they kept me in a hotel. They had a whole floor of girls there. That same boyfriend tried to rescue me, but they sent a group of thugs to his house and beat the hell of him and threatened him if he interfered. We had to do lap dances, private stripping, and also sell drugs and alcohol to the customers and their girlfriends. We couldn't go anywhere or do anything without their permission. It was strictly forbidden to try to work at any club that might be their competition – we belonged to them.

I was finally able to escape, because a friend at the Club smuggled me out the backdoor. Out I went into the night, and I went on the run. At that time, most of the clubs were affiliated with one or another of the five Mafia families. They ran drugs, gambling businesses, strip clubs and prostitution rings. I remember in one of the clubs, the manager called me into his office, and he had a giant – I mean giant – pile of cocaine on his desk. They had all kinds of bigwigs and famous people in those clubs too – movie producers, actors, politicians – I saw and heard it all, so I knew a lot and I had to be on the run if I wanted to survive. I also saw lots of military men in the 1720 Club on 17th Street in D.C., at the Crystal Palace, in Crystal City, at the Pussycat Lounge in Portsmouth, Virginia. Did they know what was happening inside these clubs? Did they know women were being held hostage and trafficked? Did they know they were part of the trafficking problem (demand for trafficking victims)? I doubt it, but they were still a part of the problem.

I only got away from the Mafia by becoming friends with a biker gang. There was a woman named Tattoo Sue who was a tattoo artist but also the Biker Mom of the Warlocks. I can't remember how I met her, but I told her what was happening, and she was able to exert pressure to get me free of my "contracts" with those other clubs. But in return I had to work in the Biker clubs and they had a circuit too. I was dancing, working in the private booths, doing everything I was doing in the Mafia clubs, but this time instead of bigwigs it was really scary biker club members with really dangerous criminals in them. I can't tell you how awful it was. I witnessed a murder during this time where an innocent man who was mistaken for someone who had insulted one of the gang members was killed. They shot him in the head. He called out my name "Sky, help me" but there was nothing I could do. He died on the way to the hospital. I was taken in for questioning. When I went to testify to the grand jury, the District Attorney had me in a room with one of the accomplices. He never said anything to me. He just made a gesture like he was slitting my throat and I knew my life was in danger too.

The Pagans and the Warlocks were both biker gangs that ran drugs for the Mafia in the 70s, 80s, 90s, and probably to this day. I probably wouldn't be alive except that a distant member of my family was a member of one of the gangs and at that time no relative of a motorcycle gang was to be harmed. He intervened and they took the hit off me.

I moved to Pennsylvania and tried to straighten out my life. I got a regular job working at a research company, doing interviews and polls on the phone. I found a room with an old

friend who was not into anything bad, but I couldn't manage it. This was when free-basing and crack cocaine were in vogue.

That led me back to being trafficked, this time by my drug dealers. I became so addicted I was willing to do anything to get my next hit. I had two dealers and they started pimping me out to their friends – not out on the streets but in apartments. I was literally being sold for drugs. During this time there was so much violence. I was beaten, punched, kicked, raped, threatened with weapons. I used the drugs to numb me. In fact, most of the time, I was so strung out I didn't know what was happening to me.

During that time there was a man I met named Kendall Francois who hung around the clubs who posed as a photographer, and we exchanged numbers as he offered to hire me as a model. One night I was feeling sick and just wanted to get home. This guy offered me a ride. I turned him down after a warning from a friend. Shortly after that, he was arrested – he turned out to be a serial killer who had killed 8 women in prostitution in the area. By the grace of God, I escaped that.

Shortly after that I found out I was pregnant with my first child. I was headed to have an abortion but ended up in a Catholic hospital. They did a sonogram to confirm I was pregnant, and I saw the baby and heard his heartbeat and that was it for me. I decided to have the baby. Gabriel was born in 1999. I stayed clean after learning I was pregnant. I took good care of him when he was born, and I was happy. Then I relapsed when Gabriel was a year old and I got arrested. Gabriel went to foster care when he was 13 months old, and a year after, the same family adopted him. I didn't see him again until 18 years later.

After my arrest, they took my parental rights away. I lost my son, my housing, my freedom. You can't imagine the grief, the self-loathing, self-hatred, and sense of failure. I was lost. I spiraled down into a place I can't even describe. I couldn't deal with my counselor in rehab pushing me to talk about what had happened. I couldn't bear to talk about it or think about losing my child.

I was picked up on the street after running away from rehab (and violating probation) by a drug dealer who called himself Big D. He was a high-level dealer, and a leader in a street gang. He got me really high and then said, "Since you're out on street anyway, you can make a lot of money." It was an awful kind of survival sex – he sent me out to make enough to pay for my drugs and pay for the hotel room he had me in. We were living in every seedy hotel on the Northside of Richmond. When I got strung out, he would say "You need to get back out there now." Mostly I tried just to sell his drugs, not to be sold for sex. I tried to find blue-collar guys who just want to get high on the weekend, but it just didn't work that way. Big D gave me to a female recruiter name "Diva," and she would force me to do all sorts of things. She was extremely physically abusive – she hit me and beat me. She also used threats and intimidation to get what she wanted. She used to threaten me with arrest, as I was on the run from probation, and she knew it – or she would send other drug dealers to threaten me. I didn't want to go back to jail. I didn't want to be on the wrong side of the law again, so I just told myself, "this is how to survive, this is what I have to do to stay out of jail, this is my life now."

Shortly after that, I was brutally raped at knife point the guy was using a butcher knife which he held to my throat while he raped and sodomized me. He told me he would kill me if I told anyone and left saying laughingly, “Wasn’t that fun...” I was reeling from the rape, and I had finally gotten a diagnosis of PTSD. I knew I wanted to have Michael, but I also knew I couldn’t raise him. I made arrangements with another friend of mine to raise him after he was born, until I was ready and had my own home.

By this time, I had all sorts of charges on my record but all of them nonviolent – drug paraphernalia charges (not drugs themselves), theft, one prostitution-related charge. Then I was picked up in a prostitution sting. About that time, I realized I was pregnant again. Because of the previous charges, the judge gave me 10 years in prison with 7 suspended sentences. 10 years! even though there was just paraphernalia, they classified it as a drug charge, and all my charges were nonviolent. I had Michael, my second child, in a nearby hospital, gave him to my friends, and went to prison. I did 4 years in prison and then was transferred to probation and then went into a Christian halfway house.

In 2008 I got pregnant again. When Ariel was born, I kept thinking about the absurdities of the system – how here were these kingpin drug dealers – never getting arrested, never going to prison, never being punished, and here is little old me – never had a drug charge, only non-violent charges of drug paraphernalia and prostitution and now I had federal marshals looking for me for violating probation. I was physically and mentally sick, but I didn’t want to go back to prison again.

I met a pastor of a church who told me, “I’ll help you. You have to start coming to church and you have to get into some support groups.” He got me a room to stay in. I went to parenting classes, stayed clean, got off probation, and began my life as I know it today. A friend helped me get SSI and housing and other assistance. For the first time in almost 40 years, I got the system to work for me instead of against me.

Around 2012, I met some survivors on Facebook and when I heard their stories, I realized that is what happened to me. I looked at the way the system targeted me while the traffickers got away scot-free and the buyers in got John’s School and got their record wiped clean.

A few years ago, I got involved in local politics, and then I started talking about what happened to me. I joined the Virginia Coalition Against Human Trafficking and began speaking at conferences and events. In the last couple of years, I testified in the Virginia legislature as Virginia began to draft and pass new laws against human trafficking. Many of these laws focus on the crime of human trafficking, which is fine, but most states still have few services for victims and survivors. We need shelters, services, training, and awareness for first responders, trauma informed care, medical assistance, legal assistance, help getting our records expunged. I have gone back to school, and I am intent on earning a college degree. I’m busy and hopeful for the future, for myself and other survivors.