

## Nissi's Story

As an 11-year-old, I was raped by my downstairs neighbor. He was arrested, prosecuted, and convicted. I testified against him but afterwards I couldn't live at home anymore, and the court put me in foster care. At first, I was in CRC (Chimney Rock Center) -it's a lot worse now than it was then – and I stayed there for a short term and eventually I was placed with my grandmother for a number of reasons. My mother was prostituting, and she was also on crack. They had a special name for crack addicts in prostitution back then - they were called "strawberries," so my mother's street name was "Strawberry-Strawberry."

When I was 14, I went to court (during that time, 14-year-olds were allowed to have a say in what happened to them), but the court wouldn't let me return to my mother unless I was emancipated so they assigned my grandmother SMC (Sole Managing Conservator). After 9 months of being returned home my grandmother passed away from breast cancer and I ended up living behind a Walmart in Houston. I was pretty smart – I kept up appearances, went to school, forged my grandmother's signature on school permission slips and papers, and couch surfed with friends when I needed a shower or meals. I got into a routine of staying as long as I could until I was either kicked out or my friends' families were laying down laws – "If you stay here any longer, you have to \_\_\_\_\_." After doing this for almost a year, I was exhausted. I got it in my head that maybe if I got pregnant, people would stop putting me out. By the time I had the baby, the father was incarcerated. One day, I took my baby to school and that was the beginning of my life in commercial sex. Someone called the Child Protective Services (CPS), and I went before a judge again.

The judge said that I could keep my freedom (not go back into state custody) if I could get my GED, get a job, and get stable housing. He didn't say how to do that – just that if I wanted to keep my baby, I needed to do that and that there would be a home visit by CPS to make sure I was capable of doing all this. Getting out of court I was desperate. I was only 15 years old, with a small child! How was I going to do all this? At the time I didn't realize it, but I look back now and realize that I was part of a process of adultification - a term used in psychology and sociology to describe the way some children – especially Black children - are treated by adults as being more mature than they are. The court should have taken me back into custody. Instead, they left me on my own. Of course, I couldn't find a job or get stable housing or take care of myself and my son. I was too young! But I tried.

I went to our local church, and I asked them for help. Their idea was to find a young person who seemed to be succeeding and match me with her as a mentor. They matched me up with a young woman in her 20s who seemed to be doing well. When I was talking with her, she told me that she had housing and a job, and I could do what she did.

It was only later that I found out what she did. The church who recommended her didn't know. They thought she had a legitimate job, but it turned out she was stripping at a bar. She said I could use her ID to get in and get a job there and that's how at 15 years old with a small baby I started working at a strip club. At first, I was living with her and her boyfriend for free and it allowed me a little breathing room, but then after a couple of months her boyfriend told me you can't get your baby back unless you give me \$200 a day (which is about \$700 today). So, then I was stripping for him – giving him

all the money I made. I had to do it because I was using their home for CPS when they had a “home study” – a look at the place you lived to ensure that it was stable – and I had to do that to keep my child. I didn’t want CPS to take my child away. Everything I did I did for my child. But I was upset, I felt like I was trapped, and I was looking for a way out – any way out.

At the Club I met another guy. It started with him sending me a drink. In the Club you can send a girl a drink and then she goes over to thank you for the drink and you can talk. I found this guy easy to talk to and I was young and innocent and I ended up telling him everything that had happened to me – from being homeless, going to court, trying to find a home and a job, and the way this girl’s boyfriend was taking advantage of me. I wanted to escape – but I couldn’t do it. He listened; he was understanding and reassured me that everything was going to be all right and that he was going to take care of me.

A short time later, he got into a huge fight at the Club with the guy who was taking my money and keeping my child away from me. He won the fight against the guy, and he did take me away from the strip club. He took me to his home, and for a very short time that was OK. He was my hero. All I could think about was how helpful, trustworthy, and kind this man is to rescue me and my child. CPS had to do a background check on him, and another home study of the house and then I moved in. But I shortly discovered that there were other women living in that house. At the time I didn’t put 2 and 2 together. I just started looking for a job – a real job with health insurance, and benefits, and everything, but again, I was young, and I couldn’t find anything.

A couple of months went by, and I started hearing that I was a problem in the house. Other girls were “earning” money, and it was going to pay for groceries and diapers, and things for me and my child and it created a rift in the house. He told me “Baby I can’t do this anymore – you have to pay your own way.” He was my boyfriend, and I thought he loved me, and I loved and trusted him, so when he told me to go with him, I did.

He took me to a hotel room and gave me the key card and took out a gun and sat down and told me to get in the room and not to come out until I had his money. So now I really was being trafficked. There was truly force, fraud, and coercion, because I was frightened for me and for my child. After just a little of this, I convinced him to let me go back to the strip club, because there, if I did get sold, at least there were cameras, and lots of people, and less chance that something bad would happen to me because most of the buyers were “company men” – i.e., businessmen using corporate cards. This was a pretty high-end place, making a lot of money. You know Anna Nicole Smith? I was working with friends of her at the Club she originally worked at – called G-Gs Cabaret. There was a backroom, called the Champagne Room which is where the commercial sex took place. In a way it was labor trafficking and sex trafficking because I was dancing, stripping, selling drinks, and being sold for sex. I was known first as “Cash” and then as “Ginger” (my club name) and my brand was high end businessmen. A lot of people were involved. There was the House Mother – she prepares everything for you – gets you gum, cigarettes, make-up, shoes, stockings, whatever you need to “do your job,” there were the waitresses – they bring you drinks and food, but also watch out for sting operations and make sure that if there are any you’re warned in time not to be caught.

The instant my boyfriend took me to that hotel room, he stopped being my boyfriend and became something else – my pimp, my trafficker I see now – but back then he was kind of a business manager. He would say “You got this” or “You can do this,” and also set up sales.

Five long years I did this – from the time I was 15 until I was 20, and my young son went from infancy to toddler to almost four years old being raised in this. I also had another child during this time. If you did it without a condom, you got paid more, so I got pregnant once by a buyer when I was 16 and had my second child when I was 17. I can’t even explain the intricacies that made the court complicit in this trafficking – they never did catch on to what was going on. When I got pregnant the second time, they did another lawsuit and background check. My pimp was 12 years older than I was and had a criminal record since I was six years old, but back then the family court didn’t talk to the criminal court and still doesn’t. The court decided that since I had another child, I could stay out of court custody, but they never found a way to protect me and lift me out of the trafficking situation.

I was trying to figure out how to get out from under all this. I got another job at a lingerie shop in the nearby Mall, but they were all connected to the strip club. Girls would come over to buy costumes and lingerie for work and so I was actually working one more job connected to commercial sex. So, I was essentially working 24/7 in the sex industry.

But every day, on my way to the shop, I passed a set of military recruiter stations in the Mall, and I could see the young guys lined up to talk to the recruiters. There was one recruiter, Rhys Tyler, who would see me every morning early going from the club to the shop and I was dressed like someone who was selling sex - but I also looked exhausted and beat up and he would call out to me and say, “Come join the military.” And I would always say “The military don’t want me.” But he was persistent! And never seemed to be judging me or putting me down or catcalling like other guys. For months this went on and one morning when I passed him, he was in his dress whites, and he saw me – my pimp had just beat me badly and I had a black eye. And he said, “Yo! Is today the day?” And I looked at him and said, “Yes today’s the day.” And he said, “OK as soon as I get back from this event, we’re gonna do it.” And he did. He helped me prepare, fought for me, and he helped me qualify. I had to have 8 waivers. I had too many dependents for a single girl, too many piercings (I had piercings in my eyebrows, ears, nose, and several other places I won’t mention). I only had my GED and not a high school diploma; I didn’t have all my identification papers. But he helped me get all that together and sent me to take the test. They tried to reject me at the test site, but he came over and told them, “She’s going to take the test and she’s going to pass the test.” And I did.

I went into the military police. I wish I could say that everything was perfect from then on, but it wasn’t. Did the military change my life? It was more yes than no. Three days before I was supposed to leave for boot camp, my pimp found out I was joining, and he sent a gang to jump me and beat me up pretty badly. I was forced into a marriage with my trafficker before boot camp; he used my children to coerce me into marrying him. I tried to set aside my money from the military in a separate bank account, with my father-in-law’s name on the account only for my kids, but he let his son (my trafficker) onto the account. I finally got out of that situation by using my signing bonus, which I had tucked away,

and secretly setting up my own apartment, furnishing it, and when everything was done, disappearing to it with my children.

I served in the military for 8 years. But even in the military it was difficult.

I do have some ideas about how the military can change some of this. For starters, anyone who has been involved in commercial sex before joining the military should have an immediate referral to FAP and there should be special programs to help us. I'm pretty sure there are plenty of young people like me who have gone through this hell before joining the military and we need to help them recover. It's part of making them the best soldiers they can be. Also, if the military were more aware of what is happening in its ranks, they could develop liaisons and ombudsman – places where people could go to report abuse of this type.

Today I'm committed to combating human trafficking. I have an NGO called "Nissi's Network Inc.," headquartered in Houston Texas to fight for justice for survivors and to stop trafficking. I work at the local, state, national, and international level and have done several trainings for the U.S. Department of Defense.