

Shelby Thompson

My name is Shelby Thompson, and I am a survivor of human trafficking. I want to share a little about myself and my story.

I was born and raised in Fayetteville, North Carolina (Cumberland County). I grew up in a very broken home. My father was verbally and physically abusive to my mother and was a drug addict for as long as I can remember, and still is to this day. My brother and I would overhear and see things that we shouldn't. My Mom was an EMT, and I idolized her. I watched her go through many hardships, abuse in the home, amongst other things. She worked shift after shift to take care of my brother and me. I knew I wanted to be as strong as she was when I grew up.

While I know both of my parents loved my brother and me, they did not know how to show it to us, which later ended up having a huge effect on my life. I found myself normalizing things I would see and went through growing up because that is what I was familiar with and surrounded by, in my home and the homes of those around us. I internalized some negative childhood experiences, and they would come to haunt me and play a role in my later exploitation.

Despite the challenges that I was faced with from an early age, I still managed to graduate from high school, get married, and have two beautiful daughters. Like my Mom, I became an EMT, and it was my passion. I loved helping people and saving lives. It was a way for me to look at others' situations and feel as though my life problems were not as bad. I had so many vulnerabilities from childhood and really wanted love and acceptance more than anything. I wanted to feel valued. I never felt that, and I really longed for it.

Unlike some stories of trafficking, I was an adult when I was trafficked. By the time I was 32, I found myself divorced, working, and raising my two kids. At times I would feel so alone. I wanted to find love, love like you see in the movies. While I was working as an EMT, a co-worker invited me to a cookout she was having, and I met a guy there. He was cute, funny, and really seemed to care about me and the things I would tell him. After spending some time with him I started to catch feelings for him. I remember thinking, "Jesus must have sent this man to me."

Then, after a couple of weeks of talking and hanging out, we were riding around, and he said that he had to go meet a friend. I never thought any further into it because we did this sort of thing all the time. We drove out from my house to Gillespie Street, also known as 301. We pulled up at a motel. Unsure of what was going on, but not suspecting anything other than him going to talk to his friend, he asked me to go inside with him, and I went. It turned out that he owed this guy money for drugs, and in this moment my whole life changed. I was the payment for his debt and any drugs from that moment forward that he wanted to purchase. The guy we met at the motel turned out to be a high-ranking gang member, and a big drug dealer in my town. I had no idea what human trafficking was before this day, but I learned real quick. It was later, after I exited the life, that I realized I was a victim. All I knew was that he kept me there by force and threats. He said, "If you don't do what we say and if you tell anyone one word outside of what we tell you, we are going to kill your daughters and you will watch us do it." And that's how it all began, and the moment I was forced to sell my body for sex, for others' sexual gratification.

In the beginning I was allowed to go home. I was allowed to work. My “boyfriend” even came to my house, where my mother and children were. Then, that came to a sudden stop. My family didn’t know what happened to me. It was like I just disappeared. My family and children thought I left them to be with a man and chose drugs over them. Rumors were everywhere and people made assumptions. The last shift I worked as an EMT was in October of 2019. For the next few months I was kept in that motel and beaten and raped over and over, posted on platforms advertising sexual encounters, degraded in so many ways that one can’t begin to imagine.

The men who trafficked me took videos and pictures of me and posted them on “Skipthegames.” Skipthegames is a sister platform to backpage.com. This was how they set up the sexual encounters. They forced me to use drugs – mostly crack cocaine and crystal meth – until I developed a dependency. The drugs were used as a control tactic. Eventually, I needed the drugs to function. To not think. To not feel. They knew this. I would find myself so high, and my body would get to the point where it would not function without it. This addiction took over very quickly.

I don’t remember the faces of any of the countless number of men who bought me. I do recall having conversations with a few of the “regulars.” It is sickening to say that some of these men were people in authoritative positions, men who were married, doctors, and yes, soldiers in the military. They would come by on the way to work, on the way home from work, some even after church. Fort Bragg is a military base in Cumberland County. It is home to the 82nd Airborne and Special Operations Force, the U.S. Army, and the U.S. Army Golden Knights. I remember some of the men coming to the motel room in military uniforms.

So many bad things happened to me during this time. There was so much violence – violence from my traffickers and violence from the men who purchased me. I have been hit in the head with pistols, I have been beaten with fists, choked, kicked in the stomach and face. Just about every sexual encounter was violent. I had my jaw broken, my eye socket ruptured, which now I cannot see well out of my right eye, my nose broke twice, and trauma to my ear drum. My teeth were broken and cracked from a beating by the trafficker, to the point it is hard for me to smile now. I have had a knife held to my throat while being raped by 3 men. I was drugged and forced into my trafficker’s Escalade, where I was raped by at least 7 men as part of a gang initiation, and then left naked in the parking lot of the motel. I had to pretend that I wanted these encounters with the buyers. I had to pretend like I liked it. I had to pretend to be who they made me into, but that was not me! At one point, I was so desperate to try to escape from this hell that I tried to commit suicide – I went into the bathroom and tried to hang myself with my trafficker’s belt. Unfortunately, I was unsuccessful because he came back into the room. After what he did to me, I wish I would have been successful in taking my life.* During this time, I was never allowed to seek medical attention.

There were three guys trafficking me. One was a big-time drug dealer, he had multiple girls over the years. One of them was pregnant when I met her, and we would turn tricks together and get high together. She sort-of trained me. Another had been working as a housekeeper at the motel and they began trafficking her too. It felt as though escaping these guys was impossible. The threats of them killing my kids were what haunted me and made me submit to everything I was told.

I finally escaped when my trafficker made a mistake. He accidentally dropped his phone on the bed when he went to the room next door to be with another girl that he was grooming at the time. I had a chance to make one call and I called my Dad. Even though we did not have the best relationship, I

knew he only lived two minutes away and I knew that that was my best chance to escape. And when he heard what was happening to me, he did come and was able to get me away. When he arrived at the motel, he and my trafficker got into an altercation, but in the end, he was able to rescue me.

It was a long way back for me after that. I had to go to rehab – and it took several stays to get clean. I can tell you now that I'm 2 years clean and I'm really proud of that. I still to this day have PTSD, nightmares, flashbacks, insomnia. My family had thought that I had run away and gotten into drugs. I lost custody of my youngest daughter to her biological father, and I still haven't been able to repair that relationship. My oldest has battled so much and lost more than anyone in my opinion. It is difficult to explain to people that I did not choose this. I did not ask for this to happen to me and for my children to suffer like they did. If people only understood a portion of what human trafficking really is and how it intertwines with violence, threats, intimidation, coercion, drugs and mental health, maybe they would not blame me for things I did not have control over. My brother is in the military, and he has literally shunned me. He just doesn't get what happened and he doesn't want to be associated with me anymore.

Before I was trafficked, I thought of the military as a strong force for peace and security and I believed they were here to protect our country. After I was trafficked, and still at times to this day, I'm sorry to say, when I think of the military, I get fearful and anxious and many other negative emotions. How could men who are in an authoritative position, who are here to bring peace and security to those in our country, be a contributing factor in the exploitation, use, and abuse of women and girls?

My life was completely shattered. It's hard for people to understand what happened to me, and I don't want to burden people with the thoughts of what all I have went through. I lost my job; I lost my family; I lost my life as I had known it. I lost myself!

Meanwhile, the guy who was my "boyfriend" was charged with 14 counts but took a plea down to 7 charges. The human trafficking charges were dropped down to "promoting prostitution," which makes it sound like I was prostituting on my own free will. He spent 213 days in prison and then 30 months supervised probation. It hardly affected his life: when he got out of prison, he was able to resume his life just where he left it. The drug dealer, my other trafficker, has not yet been charged.

I was broken physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually and it has been a long journey back. I can never be an EMT again. The hospital that I was employed at oversees almost all hospitals and ambulance service in this region, I would never attempt to get this job back. Plus, I am too fearful of what I had already encountered to chance it. For many months afterward I was in such a dark place. I continued to use drugs to mask the pain I was feeling and to not think about the uncountable number of men that did who-knows-what with me, the pain I caused my family, and how dirty I felt, no matter how much I showered and tried to get clean. Due to a lack of trust in people in general, I felt as though I was facing the world alone.

My detective gave me a number to contact, which I refused to do in the beginning. I thought to myself I cannot trust this person; I don't even know this person. My traffickers had me brainwashed to think that no one would ever believe me and trust me. I would be wasting my time trying to convince someone. Finally, I got to the point I was desperate for help, and I did reach out. I thank God for placing this person in my life. My mentor became my best friend and the family I had longed for. She worked with a local nonprofit during the time I was seeking assistance, which unfortunately, later had to close

its doors. My mentor then founded an amazing organization and I have been blessed with the Operations Manager position.

My mentor was there for me and loved me when I couldn't love myself. She taught me to lean on God's understanding and not my own. She led me to God, and I was able to restore my faith. She was the first person to ever believe in me and give me a chance. Not once did she judge me or leave my side. She is now family, and I am so blessed to have her in my life and walk this journey of restoration with me.

I now have a platform where I document my journey while raising awareness to human trafficking, drug addiction and recovery, and mental health related issues. It is called Restored Faith, and housed under Gate Beautiful, a non-profit organization in North Carolina. Our mission is to use community outreach to raise awareness about human trafficking, build networks with survivors and members in the community, and reduce the vulnerabilities that can lead to someone being trafficked. You can read about us at: RestoredFaithNC.org.**

* If you or someone you know is in crisis or having thoughts of suicide, please contact the confidential National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (all Americans)

Call: 988 or 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

For TTY users: Use your preferred relay service or dial 711 then 988.

Visit: <https://988lifeline.org/>

Chat: Text with a Crisis Line responder – Send a text message to 838255

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