An Interview About Surviving Human Trafficking: Margeaux Gray

Margeaux Gray was a victim of human trafficking when she was a young girl. She was sexually abused by a close and trusted adult man, and at age 5, Margeaux was sold for profit into child sex trafficking. Trafficked by a trusted adult who used physical, sexual, and psychological abuse to maintain control over Margeaux, she found it nearly impossible to seek help. Today, Margeaux is a survivor of human trafficking who shares her story of healing and how she copes with the lingering effects of her experience. She also explains how others can support human trafficking victims.

Q: It can't be easy to share your experiences. What has it been like speaking out as a survivor of trafficking?

A: It's not easy sharing my experiences. I use my past experiences of injustice (child abuse and child sex trafficking) to help bring justice to others. I speak out so that other victims and survivors know that they are not alone. There is help, and there is hope. I want them to know that they are valuable and what was done to them does not define them or their worth. Victims and survivors are not voiceless; however, they are often not heard. I also speak out because I have a passion to help improve victim services in the health care and social service fields.

Q: Will you tell us a little bit about your relationship with the man who trafficked you and why it was so hard to break free?

A: The man who trafficked me was a close and trusted adult in my life. He was a part of my daily life. He had the responsibility to care for me. I was a child and had no choice but to trust him. He was a master manipulator. I became very close to him and feared him at the same time. Starting at a very young age he conditioned me through the use of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse to gain and maintain control over me. This is exactly why it was so hard to break free.

Q: Will you share with us some of the emotional and physical effects you've experienced as a result of your trauma?

A: The effects of trauma can show up in many ways. I live with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); a visual impairment; peripheral neuropathy (non diabetic), which is a weakness or numbness that affects all of my limbs and stomach region; and gastroparesis, a condition that affects my digestion, to name a few. All of these are a direct result of the trauma I experienced. These effects are certainly challenging, but I refuse to let them stop me from being my best self and living my life. They are hurdles, and I work with them so that they do not define my life.

Q: After you first escaped, how did you cope?
A: Even though I was physically free after I escaped, I was enslaved by the post-traumatic effects of my trauma. I felt like I was in a psychological prison. Initially, I didn't cope in a healthy way. I felt a tremendous amount of shame and guilt. I had an eating disorder and used self-harm to cope. Thankfully, over time and through my work in therapy, I recovered from both of those forms of coping. I have also come to realize that the shame and guilt are not mine to own. They belong to those who committed the crime against me.

Q: Will you tell us about your path toward recovery and what's helped you?

A: I wanted to survive my trauma but never could have dreamed that I'd be where I am today. My path forward started off very rocky. It took a life-changing turn after entering therapy with a therapist who practiced trauma-informed care. Trauma-informed care uses a framework that encompasses understanding, recognizing, and responding to the effects of all types of trauma. My therapist asked me, "What's happened to you?" rather than, "What's wrong with you?" We work together as a team, which creates an empowering therapeutic partnership. Also, meeting other survivors of abuse and human trafficking has been very helpful. That peer network of friendship and support has helped me immensely on my path toward healing.

Q: After someone hears you speak, what do you hope they learn?

A: If it is a victim or survivor of abuse or human trafficking that hears me speak or reads an interview, such as this one, I want them to know that there is help and hope to overcome and thrive past their trauma. If it is anyone else, I want them to leave with a greater understanding of what trauma is, how it can affect a human being, and how using a holistic trauma-informed approach can positively change a life — just like it has mine. I want them to understand that they too can make a difference. I also want people to learn that a victim or survivor of human trafficking is not to be defined by their trauma.

Q: What's your advice for other survivors who may not want to reach out for help?

A: I fully understand not wanting to or being afraid to reach out for help. I was terrified, and it took me a long time until I did. But I'm grateful I did. My advice to other survivors is that help is here when you are ready. In the meantime, know that you do not deserve what is being done to you. Abuse is not love. You are valuable. Your trauma does not define your worth or who you are as a person. I believe in your strength and courage, and there are many others who do as well.

Q: What more can be done to support survivors of trafficking?

A: Help empower survivors by supporting survivor leaders and survivor lead organizations such as Mentari USA. Health care and social service providers can help by getting trained to help identify, treat, and respond appropriately to potential victims of human trafficking. I would recommend the Stop. Observe. Ask. Respond (SOAR) to Human Trafficking training. I'm thankful to have been a part of the Technical Working Group 2016 that helped design this training. I'd also recommend becoming a part of the HEAL Human Trafficking network.
Q: What do you think women and girls don't know about trafficking that they should know?

A: I think it's very important for women and girls to know that trafficking, pimping, hustling, et cetera does not equal success or love. Also, a trafficker doesn't look like what media or society stereotypes them to be. For example, a trafficker can be a boyfriend, a friend, a family member, or a job recruiter. Human trafficking, both labor and sex trafficking, is a form of oppression — unjust treatment, control, distress. If you ever find yourself or someone you know being exploited or trafficked, you can call the National Human Trafficking Resource Center at 1-888-373-7888, or text "Help" or "Info" to 233733 (BeFree).

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to share?

A: Today I'm an artist, advocate, and public speaker. I am an executive committee member of the National Survivor Network and executive board member of Mentari USA. I advocate against all forms of abuse by mentoring at-risk youth, speaking to the public, and consulting with various organizations and providers on the need for improvement of victim services in the health care and social service fields. I also use my talent as an artist to convey the beauty and value of individuals who are often overlooked in today's society. Among them are victims of abuse, human trafficking, and those with disabilities. To learn more about my work, you can visit my website at MargeauxGray.com.

Visit the Administration for Children and Families website to learn more about human trafficking.

If you think you have come in contact with a victim of human trafficking, or if you are a victim, call the National Human Trafficking Resource Center hotline at 1-888-373-7888.

The statements and opinions in this interview are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office on Women's Health.

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