

I had the great opportunity to attend the Shared Hope Juvenile Sex Trafficking (JuST) Conference this year in New Orleans, LA. While this is not the first time I have attended the JuST conference, it is the first time I've had so many takeaways and key points that just needed to be shared with all of you.

This event aims to discuss juvenile sex trafficking from every angle. Shared Hope reported that 185 workshop applications were received with only room for 65 during the program. Each of these 65 sessions covered relevant issues in the fight for juvenile victims, with topics ranging from law enforcement operations to therapeutic interventions and everything in between. This year also brought the largest number of survivors as presenters and attendees. With that many survivors in attendance, everyone was guaranteed to walk away with quotes, information and stories that captured the need for caring action from all of us.

Here are some of my take-aways mostly captured from the voices of survivors:

- “My leaving isn’t a rescue, it’s an escape. I’m not rescued from my thoughts, fears, worries and future. I get to escape the current situation only.”
- Providing empathy first is important in all assessment and interviewing situations- answers can come when empathy is offered first
- Males don't know how to disclose
- The initiative to “help our boys in order to save our girls” is gaining traction and momentum with advocacy organizations
- The physical abuse that young people endure while being trafficked is unbelievable
- It's not up to the survivor to give us what we need to know- it's up to us to ask the right questions and build relationships
- Medical assessments that can happen while preserving dignity matters
- It takes survivor's years to heal-helping to develop resiliency to manage the small stuff matters
- Creating a space for survivors that is based on relationship, not fancy stuff-couches, clothes, or other material things
- “The word survivor can often remind someone of the crime and victimization, thriving is a better word to describe overcoming”
- For male victims, why is the focus on whether that youth will perpetrate on others or need LGBTQ services. For females, this is not discussed
- Opportunities to give power and control back to a young person while teaching them how to harness it, will yield greater results

This represents a small portion of the moments that captured me. While the whole event continues to empower everyone to keep moving forward, there is one population that has not yet been represented as a speaker. These are the family members that are being supported by our Task Force. The ones who don’t know what to do when their child is exploited or when their child runs away and is trafficked. These are the family members who don’t know where to turn or how to help their loved one. Next year, I hope to be there sharing their particular struggle and encouraging everyone to continue providing hope for those that feel hopeless.

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