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Safe Haven: From Victim To Survivor

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Thousands of vulnerable young girls are being sold for sex in communities across our country, including the Rochester area.

Creating a place to help them has become a life's mission for a teacher and social worker in the southern tier.

Deborah Kuehner, founder of The Potter's Hands Foundation, wants to create a residential home, a safe haven, where victims can get the counseling and structure they need to become survivors. The only other home like it in New York State is in New York City.

Kuehner says, "From the very beginning I've had this dream of the home itself being beautiful. That's what gets me excited. To know that they can go from a place that is so dark to a place that they can be alive for the first time in their life."

Amber, who grew up in Rochester, has already made that journey from victim to survivor. For eight months, several years ago, Amber's life was lived in minivans and hotel rooms. Growing up around drugs in Rochester, she became addicted to heroin and crack, making her vulnerable to the man who began selling her for sex, and paying her with drugs.

Amber, who asked us not to use her last name, says, "I knew a lot of young girls out there were under age. And they were from suburbs. Webster, Irondequoit."

According to the FBI, in July of 2014 there were 168 young girls rescued from sex trafficking nationwide. And of that 168, 112 had not even been reported missing. There are many different kinds of horror stories, but they all begin with a vulnerable victim. Some are already addicted, making them easy prey for a trafficker who supplies them with drugs. Others are running away from abusive homes. Some are illegal immigrants.

Deborah Kuehner, during a visit to a safe house in Kentucky, learned of a young blind girl who was raped repeatedly by her father. When she became pregnant he pushed her down a set of stairs and stomped on her to terminate the pregnancy. Then, he began to sell his daughter to other men to fund his drug habit. She has since been rescued, received treatment, and is about to graduate as valedictorian of her class.

Amber says she escaped from her captors several times, only to find she had nowhere else to go.

"I felt like I was the walking dead," she says. " Just going through the motions. Doing what I need to do. Getting high to forget about what I just did."

It was stories like Amber's that inspired Deb Kuehner to start The Potter's Hands Foundation.

Kuehner says, "As I sit here talking to you I feel myself fighting back tears when I think of the work that we will be able to do.

Work that will include addiction recovery, custom academic programs, and counseling from professionals for a variety of challenges, including Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, which is common in trafficking victims.

"We can't fix it for every girl or boy who's been trafficked," Kuener says. "But if we can make a difference for one or twelve - hopefully this is just the beginning of what we're able to do."

Amber is now going to college - and using art to help continue her healing. She's just finished one painting that shows figures of young women, and the words "NOT FOR SALE" across the canvas. She is donating the painting so it can be auctioned off to raise money for The Potter's Hands Foundation.

Amber says her journey to recovery would have been much easier if there had been a place where she could find the different kinds of help and support she needed all under one roof.

"As sad as all that stuff was," she says, "today I'm a survivor. I'm not a victim."

Land near Elmira has been donated for The Potter's hands Foundation safe house. It's location will be kept secret to protect the girls who live there from the people who once trafficked them. Plans for the house itself have been drawn, but ground won't be broken until more money is raised. \$460,000 dollars has been raised so far. Another \$553,000 is needed to reach the Foundation's goal.

For more information about the project, and the crime of sex trafficking, visit [www.thepottershandsfoundation.org](http://www.thepottershandsfoundation.org)

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