

Local

Human trafficking survivor speaks at GRADD office

✎ By Renee Beasley Jones Messenger-Inquirer

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When Summer Dickerson was 5 years old, a family member sexually abused her in a church basement.

Dickerson's mom was mentally ill, and her dad was hooked on drugs.

She describes her childhood as chaotic and physically abusive. Their family lived in shelters and ate out of dumpsters.

Dickerson grew up thinking all children were touched inappropriately by family and friends.

At school, her anger raged. She fought with classmates and once broke a teacher's jaw.

By age 14, Dickerson had dropped out of school and was selling drugs. Her life spiraled downward. She joined a gang and stripped in clubs.

She was later sucked into human trafficking by men who zeroed in on her pain. They sold Dickerson on internet advertising sites, such as Backstage and Craigslist.

"At a very young age, I had it in my head that this is all I was worth," she said of forced prostitution.

She spoke to a crowd of about 75 people Tuesday morning at Green River Area Development District's office. The 90-minute presentation was hosted by GRADD's Community Collaboration for Children.

Dickerson's speech — designed to be a wake-up call for rural communities — talked about years of abuse. She was locked in a wooden box, watched a fellow prostitute being shot and killed, and felt the pressure of a pistol barrel push against her temple.

Residents of rural Kentucky think human trafficking only happens in Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Chicago or Miami, she said. "I need you to understand this is happening in our communities."

A recent sting involved rural Kentucky farmers, Dickerson said.

Cheryl Peters, a GRADD accounting clerk, attended Dickerson's presentation and said it was an eye-opener.

"It's going on right here," Peters said of human trafficking. "You always think about big cities."

New Beginnings Sexual Assault and Support Services of Owensboro assisted 16 victims of human trafficking in its seven-county region last year, said Angie Sorrells, the nonprofit's community educator.

Twelve of those victims were from Daviess County.

Unfortunately, the number of regional cases has grown in recent years.

New Beginnings started tracking human trafficking numbers separately during the 2013-14 fiscal year. By comparison, there were only five cases that year, Sorrells said.

The National Human Trafficking Hotline keeps statistics on each state. In the decade between 2007 and 2017, the hotline received 1,890 calls from Kentucky residents and reported nearly 600 victims during that decade.

National statistics show that more than half of sex-trafficking cases involve minors. The average age range is from 11 to 14.

Earlier this year, the Kentucky legislature adopted Senate Resolution 149, aimed at curbing sex trafficking in Kentucky hotels and motels.

Sen. Alice Forgy Kerr, a Lexington Republican, said her goal with SR 149 was to educate people about the issue of child sex trafficking.

Dickerson, 39, quit trafficking about 10 years ago but stayed in the industry until four years ago. Since getting out altogether, she founded Women of the Well Ministry in Louisville, which provides transitional housing for victims of human trafficking.

Dickerson, the mother of 10 children and grandmother of two, has 60 tattoos. A large curled feather on her left arm reads: Stay Strong.

"I don't tell my story for people to feel sorry for me," Dickerson said. "I want people to understand. This isn't my ministry. It's everyone's ministry."

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For Help

National Human Trafficking Hotline 888-373-7888