

Mel's Story — A Survivor Composite Story

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Content warning: Child sexual abuse, sexual violence, substance use, partner violence, trafficking in commercial sex

So when you've heard one survivor's story, you've heard one survivor's story, and there are as many ways trafficking happens as there are times when someone chooses to traffic another human. But when survivors show up in your care they bring their stories with them, and their stories impact both what their health needs are AND how they prioritize what they need in any moment. So I'd like to start by spending a few minutes to tell you a composite story of someone we'll call Mel. Survivors aren't all girls and women -- we find the survivors we're looking for a lot of the times -- but Mel is. And she could look like anyone, so go ahead and give her a face in your mind -- one that looks a lot like someone you know and love.

Mel never knew her dad and her mom had a substance use disorder, and Mel has foggy memories of confusing and scary "alone time" with her mom's dealer when she was a kid. She was also sexually abused by a neighbor for a while, but they only lived in that neighborhood for a year or so.*

By the time Mel was a teenager, she was in foster care. She ran away every now and then. When she was 16, though, she was gone for a while. She stayed with an older friend she'd met the year before, who lived with her boyfriend. She couldn't get a real job to pay rent but her friend said she'd been doing sex work to pay her share. Her friend made it sound easy, so Mel let her friend's boyfriend set up dates for her like he did for a few other girls who lived with them, and she was already experienced at "checking out" during sex so she could just get it over with. But eventually she started to get more and more angry that they were taking all her money from all her dates. "Go make your own damn money," she told them one night after she'd been living with them for a while. They had a big fight, and things got violent between Mel and her friend, and she had to move out.*

When Mel was 21, she'd actually been doing a little better, trying to get her life back on track, starting to dream for the first time in a long time about her future. She got into community college and was taking classes while working as a waitress in a local restaurant. It was long hours, and they kept her just under "full time" to avoid giving benefits, she didn't have health insurance. Her boss was a jerk, and she frequently found herself struggling to know how to stick up for herself when her boss or her customers would treat her badly -- it was hard to know how to advocate for yourself without getting overwhelmed and angry and acting out. It was hard to keep up with schoolwork while working as much as she was. She knew one way she could make money, and even though it wasn't something she was thrilled to do, she started posting a few ads online, screening clients as best she could, and setting up her own dates. And it worked. She quit her restaurant job and paid her way through college doing sex work. She had a few close calls with clients and a few health scares about STIs. There was at least one time when a client did things she hadn't consented to; she was scared to report it to law enforcement, but she did go to the doctor for medical care afterward. She didn't tell her doctor she was a sex worker, though. She was scared of being judged or reported, and didn't really have a lot of trust in systems. She graduated when she was 24, got a new job, and quit sex work. She was really proud of herself and her resourcefulness. She had turned her past into something that benefited HER for a change.*

But relationships were hard. She wasn't really sure what love was or how trust worked, and she felt like she was always drawn to guys who weren't good for her. So it surprised even her when she ended up in a relationship with a guy who seemed to have it together. For a while, he took care of her, treated her well, supported her through some down times when she was feeling depressed. Sometimes he'd offer her drugs; eventually it got to a point where they were using frequently together. They were using often enough, that it took her a while to notice some of the unhealthy patterns starting to emerge -- he'd be nice, then cruel, and his explosive temper got harder and harder to navigate. When he'd get mad, he called her a whore to upset her. He started asking her to pay him back for the drugs she was using, and when her substance use outgrew her income, they had a fight. "Don't act like you don't know how to make money," he said, "you're just a whore anyway." When she begged him to not ask her to do that again, to go back into sex work, he beat her violently, shoved her into a wall, and strangled her until she was sure she was going to die. After that, she mostly quit arguing. She did what he asked; he set up her dates, and on the nights that she made enough money, he was nice enough. But other nights were rough. Really rough. And she wasn't sure how to get out of this relationship without him coming after her, especially after she went to the doctor for an STI and found out she was pregnant with a child she worried might be his.*