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Santa Rosa human-trafficking survivor helps others overcome barriers

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FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT | September 1, 2018, 5:57PM



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At 33, Elizabeth Quiroz considers herself lucky to be alive. By the time she was 16, she was a victim of human trafficking on the streets of San Francisco, and arrested for armed robbery, the first of several incarcerations.

She survived 11 years on the streets, selling and using drugs, staying in “dope houses” and never daring to imagine a better life.

Today the Santa Rosa resident is a community advocate working to help those affected by addiction, incarceration and the terrors of human trafficking. She is a voice of compassion and understanding.

She’s so driven to move forward that she once burned off the “property of ...” tattoos on both her arms with a lit cigarette; she was high at the time and didn’t feel the pain.

A former boyfriend and trafficker who sold her for sex initially labeled her with the tattoos. Now, a large rose tattoo on one arm, and a rose and cross on the other conceal traces of those dark days.

Quiroz is apologetic for the actions that landed her behind bars — from meth sales to auto theft — and finally understands she was victimized by several men she loved and trusted, who coerced her into criminal activity and prostitution.

Rather than quietly walk away from her past and focus on her job, her college

studies and the responsibilities of co-parenting five children ages 7 to 17 with her husband as part of a blended family, Quiroz feels compelled to share her story and help others overcome seemingly impossible barriers to success.

"I feel like I've come a long way," Quiroz said, "and there's more to come."

Becoming an advocate

She serves on the Sonoma County Human Trafficking Task Force, is president of the Santa Rosa Junior College Second Chance Club for formerly incarcerated students and recently established a confidential support group for victims and survivors of human trafficking in Sonoma County. She leads the group with the support of Verity, a rape crisis, trauma and healing center based in Santa Rosa.

Quiroz also is establishing a nonprofit to provide housing in Sonoma County for victims and survivors of human trafficking, something she said is desperately needed. She's also working with multiple agencies to host a human trafficking awareness event next summer at San Francisco City Hall. She is in the process of earning a pardon.

Quiroz also works 32 hours a week as an Alcohol and Other Drug Studies counselor at a Santa Rosa drug treatment program called Turning Point.

She's taking 13 units at SRJC, where she's set to graduate this spring with associate of arts degrees in human services, social advocacy and behavioral sciences. Quiroz hopes to attend Sonoma State University next year as a sociology major and aspires to earn a master's degree in social work.

Looking forward to the future

Ultimately, she wants to be a parole officer. For now, though, the energetic mother wants to help raise awareness about human trafficking, an issue so deeply associated with shame that victims — and survivors — often won't discuss their backgrounds and experiences.

"I'm trying to bring awareness and talk about it," she said. "It's huge. It's been happening in San Francisco and Oakland for years. It's happening here, too, but it's a shameful thing."

As part of a national campaign, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors declared January Human Trafficking Awareness Month; local efforts ranged from a billboard campaign on buses to a panel discussion and screening of a documentary about the perils of human trafficking.

Quiroz has spoken publicly about overcoming human trafficking, reaching victims and policymakers alike.

She's addressed the County of Sonoma Commission on the Status of Women; the Petaluma Police Department; and John Burton Advocates for Youth, a San Francisco-based nonprofit dedicated to homeless youth and current and former foster children. She's been a guest on the Pocho Live Show on local radio station KBBF 89.1 FM and addressed a group of stakeholders in violence prevention in Santa Rosa, among other engagements and keynote addresses.

Janice Blalock, a member of the Sonoma County Human Trafficking Task Force and a commissioner and immediate past chairwoman of the Sonoma County Commission on the Status of Women, said she is inspired by Quiroz.

"She's not jaded and is so open and inspired by life to keep moving forward," Blalock said. "She really wants to make a difference, and it's very genuine. "She's a great part of our conversation and has so much energy."

'She's sort of our missing ingredient'

Quiroz brings a unique perspective to the task force, comprised mainly of law enforcement and service providers, said Blalock, who encouraged Quiroz to apply. "She's sort of our missing ingredient. She brings things full circle."

Most of all, Quiroz wants to reach other women who've been forced into human

trafficking. She understands their hopelessness and despair, but wants them to know there are people and programs available to help.

"I really want to encourage survivors and victims to share their stories. It's not talked about, but that's what I'm here to do," she said.

Her story is a tapestry of abuse, drug addiction, criminal activity and placing faith in people who took advantage of her naiveté. She grew up in San Francisco and Daly City in a troubled family, was physically abused, dropped out of high school as a sophomore, was a runaway and placed in foster care at 14.

Anxious for acceptance, she was 15 when she met a man 12 years her senior who convinced Quiroz he loved her. Before long, she was forced into human trafficking and drug sales and he eventually controlled her every action.

"I was so naive. I was so broken. He showed me love and I took that all in," she said. "I thank God for where I am today. There were times I tried to escape but he chased me down and beat me."

Even when her trafficker was incarcerated, he continued controlling her through a prison gang; he directed an imposing, intimidating woman to traffic Quiroz in his absence. Quiroz lived in fear, often high on meth and did as she was ordered.

Nick Lawrence, who manages the Foster and Kinship Care Education program and founded the Bear Cub Scholars program at SRJC, said Quiroz had to learn to trust herself again after being controlled by her traffickers.

"Liz and other people like her are taught that what they are being asked to do is love, and everybody needs love. The unlearning of that," he said, "is very painful."

He credits Quiroz for her courage to speak out.

"She's a remarkable person. She has embraced the fact life is hard," he said, and she accepts the poor decisions that led to her arrests. "She did what made sense at the time based on her situation and the need to survive," Lawrence said. "She's had a

very difficult start and was manipulated in ways lots of foster youth are manipulated.”

Quiroz has been one of his standout students at Bear Cub Scholars, one of three support programs for current and former foster youth attending SRJC. She was so successful applying for scholarships that Lawrence hired Quiroz to help her peers through the process.

“She’s kind of evidence the program works,” he said. “Liz has grown so much in the past four years.”

Quiroz spent years in and out of correctional facilities and had a series of abusive relationships. At 26 she gave birth to her son, who is now 7. She was living in a “dope house” at the time, arrested and sentenced to serve a total of 18 months in two counties.

During a phone call from her holding cell, she asked to speak to her son, who was just 3 months old. Hearing her voice, the baby “was crying and screaming,” Quiroz said. “That broke me. That made me human that day. That phone call, I felt so guilty, so broken.”

She decided to turn her life around. Quiroz served time in San Mateo County before facing a sentence in Sonoma County for stealing a car at a casino with her then-boyfriend. Without that case, she said, “I’d never (have) gotten out and gotten the help I needed.”

While incarcerated in Santa Rosa, Quiroz earned her GED high school equivalency and a certificate of completion from Starting Point, an in-custody drug and alcohol treatment program operated by the county.

‘My past isn’t my identity’

Upon her release, Quiroz embraced every program available to help her, including an addiction treatment program offered through Women’s Recovery Services in Santa Rosa. She’s been on a forward path ever since.

“My past isn’t my identity,” she said. “It’s important for me to be that hope for my family. I want to reach for the stars because I’ve never had that.”

She has been drug free for seven years, celebrated her fifth wedding anniversary, earned her driver’s license two years ago, maintains a 3.8 grade point average and somehow manages her many responsibilities.

It’s why she tells her story, again and again.

“We’re strong people because of what we’ve been through. Women (involved in human trafficking) are afraid to come forward and they’re ashamed for what happened,” Quiroz said. “You don’t have to live like that and be manipulated.”

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