

Transcript for Podcast 3 (Part 1 of 2)

Speaking Out! Human Trafficking Survivors and Individuals with Disabilities Discuss their Lived Experiences with Services

MARGARET: We would like to advise our listeners that this podcast discusses topics that include human trafficking, sexual assault, and domestic violence. Though we do not discuss graphic details, listener discretion is advised.

Greetings, and welcome to the Trafficking of Youth with Disabilities Education and Outreach Project podcast. Thank you for joining us. The purpose of this podcast is to raise awareness about the reality of trafficking of youth with disabilities. We talk about what trafficking is, risk factors for youth with disabilities, and how providers and the disability community can support survivors. This podcast was produced and organized by the International Organization for Adolescents and the National Human Trafficking and Disabilities Working Group. I am your host, Margaret Potkay, project consultant with IOFA.

Welcome to podcast three, part one, Speaking Out: Human Trafficking Survivors and Individuals with Disabilities Discuss Their Lived Experience and Interactions with Services. We learned from podcast one that human trafficking in the United States is a

crime that happens in all areas across the country. Our guests discussed with us what youth trafficking looks like, how it impacts youth, and specifically how youth with disabilities are targeted and trafficked in our communities. In podcast number two, we spoke to expert professionals from across the country who work with youth on how professional youth services providers can identify youth survivors of trafficking, and how to provide appropriate accessible services for them.

We know that trafficking survivors receive services from a variety of social services organizations to meet varied and complex needs. Today, we'll be speaking with youth survivors of trafficking about their lived experiences, and their take on human trafficking and the services they have received. In part two of the podcast, we'll be chatting with self-advocates with disabilities about their experiences seeking and obtaining services.

So today, we are speaking with Erica, with the goal of better understanding how we can serve survivors of human trafficking and learn from their valued experiences. These individuals would like to share their own life experiences surrounding what happened to them in trafficking situations. We know that all youth sex trafficking situations are different, and they can happen to boys, girls, transgender youth from all backgrounds, races, ethnicities, LGBTQ, and socioeconomic statuses.

The individuals we will speak with were all trafficked here in the United States. All have received extensive therapy and counseling, and feel comfortable talking about their trafficking situation. They have support of their counselors and case managers in sharing their experience. The purpose of the interview is to bring awareness to providers who may come into contact with youth who are at risk of being trafficked, and to understand better how to reach and serve potential trafficking victims.

So welcome to podcast three, part one. Welcome our guest, Erica. We'd like to get to know you a little bit better. Can you introduce yourself to the audience and share whatever you feel comfortable with?

ERICA: So hello, my name is Erica. I'm from Vermont. I'm going to be 43. I have Marfan syndrome. I was diagnosed when I was three with Marfan's. It's a genetic disorder that affects your skeletal connective tissues. I was actually given the prognosis that I wouldn't live past the age of nine. So congratulations to me, I'm now 43.

I work for, with a disability rights organization. I work actively with survivors of domestic sexual violence and human trafficking of people with disabilities. I am currently serving on several boards that protect people with disabilities. I am very active in local government. I'm also just active in just my community, and

making sure that nobody has to really live through the same things that I lived through. And just speaking out against human trafficking as a whole. And I'm just really excited to be here today.

MARGARET: Yeah, thank you for joining us. Thank you for sharing your experience so that we, the audience, the community, so that we can provide insight, information, and services to survivors. So thank you. I would love to know a little bit about your experience growing up with Marfan's, and if there were any memories that you could feel comfortable sharing that were defining to your childhood or adolescence.

ERICA: Absolutely. So again, I grew up here in Vermont. I don't know if people know where Vermont is. It's two hours from the Canadian border. We're a very small state. So again, I have Marfan's. Some people might be googling that now as they're hearing about it. Back in school, very little was known about it. People didn't know how to react to it, especially teachers.

I give some credit to people that really looked into it, but I was-- I want to say some defining moments of my childhood was the fact that my mother didn't really want or know how to deal with a child with a disability, let alone a child that wasn't going to live very long. And I don't-- this really hard to explain or some people to understand, that my mother also had her own demons. And I

learned later in life that she was also abused as a child. I did not learn that actually until this year.

But what was hard for her is that, because of her own demons and not dealing with her own issues, is that she also had a lot of codependency issues and alcoholism. And faced with knowing that a child had a disability and knowing that a child was not going to live very long, her ideas were that love was physical, and that if nobody loved her physically and intimately, then she wasn't loved as a person. The things for her were that some of the people that she brought into the household were extremely not nice. And they had ideas that sleeping with a child were a good idea. And she allowed this a lot. And they often paid her, whether it was through alcohol, money. And that child was me.

And one of the things that really was interesting in my school was I would act up a lot. And a lot of the teachers overlooked that as, oh, that was this child with a disability. She's just acting out because she's special, so to speak, quote unquote, and that's just the way things are. Sometimes I would come to school with bruises, fat lips, cuts. And it would just circle down to the fact that I had a disability, I was clumsy. My mother could hide things.

I don't think I mentioned that my parents were divorced. My father also had Marfan syndrome. My parents were divorced, and so my mother could also hide things. You know, she was just

playing outside and was roughhousing. My father didn't really know how to handle a child, let alone a female child. And he would just say, oh, OK, my mother must know what's right, and would just believe her.

So those were a lot of things that I remember in living when my mother, was just being really scared at night, not knowing who was going to be in my bedroom, and trying to hide. And there were a lot of nights I wouldn't sleep. I'd sleep in school. And it was just-- it was horrific. And I still have sometimes night terrors because of it.

MARGARET: Well, thank you for the courage to share this experience. And I would like to ask, considering what you did share, if you consider yourself a survivor of trafficking.

ERICA: I want to say yes and no. The term survivor, to me, is somebody that's able to get on with their life. And this is always going to be a part of my life. I guess I've survived what happened to me, but to me, it's always going to be a part of who I am. I am always going to be fearful of people touching me, and not knowing why they are touching me. It took me a very long time-- I've been married for almost 20 years, and sometimes I'm still waiting for my husband, who is very, very caring and very, very supportive, to hurt me.

So you're constantly, constantly living in that fear of who's in your bedroom. You're constantly living in the fear of having your back to an exit because you don't know who's coming in. You're still waking up and almost seeing a boogeyman. So surviving-- yeah, you're surviving, but that's what you're doing, is you're surviving. You're surviving the horrors of what happened to you.

So sometimes I struggle with that. You know, yes, this happened in my childhood, but it's still hard because sometimes you'll see flashes, or you'll see glimmers of it. And there are also bits and pieces I don't remember. And I'm almost fearful of why is it my brain doesn't remember all of it. Why was it so bad that my brain doesn't want me to remember it.

MARGARET: Right. And taking that experience as a child is something, you know, when we process things at a younger age, we don't have necessarily the tools to understand. And even then, at that point of time, was there even speaking of any trafficking? I don't know if that was even something that was defined in those early times.

ERICA: Well, no, there wasn't. And also, I'm going to say again I was a child with a disability, and I was in special education classes. So back then, when you were in special education classes-- and I've even heard tell today-- that you're not even taught good touch and bad touch. So I didn't even know what was happening to me was a good thing or bad thing.

I didn't know there were private parts. I didn't know, you know, what you're taught now, you know, what's under your bathing suit is not to be touched by other people. So I wasn't aware. There weren't words for abuse. There weren't words for hurt.

So I would act out. I was a shy kid or I'd have a bad temper or I couldn't sit still or I wouldn't let a teacher touch me. For them, it was me acting out because I was disabled, but there were no words like trafficking, there were no words like abuse, there were no words like I'm being hurt, because nobody gave me those words.

MARGARET: So would you say that you were treated differently even in the school system because of your disability?

ERICA: Absolutely. The school system treated me a lot differently because I was in the special education classes. You know, back then, and even still today, the special education classes, you were separated from the other students. We had our own recesses. We had our own lunchtimes. We would walk by the other classes and see them doing their work. And I would often wonder in the back of my mind, you know, what are they learning that I can't learn. Why are they so special? But yeah, we were treated a lot differently than the other kids.

MARGARET: And tell me, so how did you end up making the decision to seek support? How did you get through that

experience, and how did you end up ultimately leaving the trafficking situation?

ERICA: I actually didn't make that decision. It was actually a fluke. My parents, like I said, were divorced, and my father remarried my stepmother. And it was my stepmother who ultimately realized there was something not right. I was sleeping, she came in my bedroom, and I screamed and ran out of the room. I was in a dead sleep. She touched me, I screamed and ran out of the room. And she said, something is not right. There's something going on, and we have to help her.

MARGARET: Wow.

ERICA: And then she started talking to my father and realizing there was more and more going on. And she ultimately came to the decision that I was to leave my mother's house.

MARGARET: So you went to your father and stepmother's house after that point in time?

ERICA: Yes.

MARGARET: And did they bring you to any counseling, any provider? Did you end up going to any meetings for healing?

ERICA: My stepmother did take me to counseling. She ultimately moved me to a different school, and made sure that I was-- she

had me re-evaluated, and realized I did not need special education classes. She had me going to counseling twice a week, and she also had me going to-- I was in a whole new family, so we had family counseling going on, as well.

It was a whole new world for me, because this was a woman who cared about my education, she cared about my well-being, she actually cared that I was eating healthy food. And she would actually talk to me about what was going on, and allowed me to learn all of these new words and vocabulary and all these things that my biological mother, I want to say, for lack of better words, kept from me.

MARGARET: Right.

ERICA: But it was just a whole different world, where I could be Erica, where I could thrive and grow and get away from this abusive situation.

MARGARET: Wow. Well, what an amazing trajectory in your story, and I'm so grateful that you were able to move into a different place and find a safe haven and be treated with that respect and support. Do you remember when you started connecting with the provider or going to the services? Would you be able to share what that process was like for you? How did it kind of change your perspective and thoughts, and maybe even like what was provided for you at those meetings?

ERICA: The first time I started going, I actually hated it because they wanted me to express my feelings, which I didn't know what those were. They would have me talk about my mother, and what happened in my mother's house was secret. You know, you don't talk about those things. My mother's house was very secretive. You didn't do that. Then they wanted me to talk about my mother.

And you know, I was brought up you love your parents, and I didn't want to betray my mother's trust. So I hated it. I think I went through, hm, two therapists before I finally found one where I'm like, this is not somebody who my parents are paying for me to talk to, where they're actually like letting me go at my own pace.

You know, if I didn't want to talk about the stuff that was going on in my life, I could talk about stuff I liked. I could talk about books or I could talk about music. And they would eventually find a way for me to talk about my feelings, but I didn't have to talk about the deep trauma in my life. I could just talk and be myself. And eventually they would get to the points in my life where I was hurting, but it was not forced out of me, so to speak.

MARGARET: So it does sound like you did end up finding a provider that did bring you a comfortable space to share and build trust. So that's wonderful. Would you say that there's any

challenges or barriers that the providers, perhaps unintentionally, may have put in front of you at that time?

ERICA: The providers before I found the provider that did work for me was that they weren't meeting me where I was. That was one of the big issues, because they wanted me to start talking about all the trauma, and I wasn't ready yet. I was just learning how to live or be, for, be a child. I was never able to do that in my mother's house.

And I just wanted to do kid things. I wanted to, you know, play video games or go hang out with my friends. I never had friends before. And the psychiatrists I had, they wanted me to talk about all of this bad stuff that I just wanted to forget about. And I didn't want to be that Erica anymore. So that was one of the barriers.

And then the teachers that I had, my stepmother would talk to them and say, don't treat her differently. You know, yeah, she has a disability, she may have limitations, but don't call it out. That hurts her. And it was really interesting how my father and my stepmother learned how to support me. And I want to say-- this is very cliché-- I was very, very lucky, and not too many people are, to have that support. But it was very interesting how psychiatrists want you to talk about all the bad stuff, and not meet you where you're at, and that's very much a hindrance. Some people are not there yet.

MARGARET: Right. So the space, that time to allow you to be a young person, allow you to just be in that space, to become comfortable was super essential in order to move forward in the healing process. And were there any other challenges that you might remember of the space, the resources that were provided for you, or anything on that side?

ERICA: I'm trying to think. I want to say it was a lifetime ago, but it really wasn't. You know, for me, it was just very interesting how a lot of the teachers in the school before I was at just summed it up to, you know, she's just a troublemaker, she's just this, and not looking at what's going on in the home. They could ignore it. And then when I saw other kids in my new school getting abused, I'm just like, why aren't the teachers looking at the home? And then when I went to high school, I saw other kids getting abused, and I'm like, something's going on in their lives. Those are signs of abuse. Why aren't they looking at those?

MARGARET: So it was a challenge to recognize, or to--

ERICA: Yeah.

MARGARET: You know, there was a lack of awareness.

ERICA: Absolutely. And I still think there is a lack of awareness sometimes in the school system.

MARGARET: No, of course, that is a huge challenge. And that's a big part of why we are doing this podcast. And we're so grateful for your time and for sharing this because our hope is to have listeners, providers, teachers, anyone in the community who's able to maybe think twice when they see someone acting out, or to understand that there is more beyond what we might assume to day-to-day life for youth, and especially for youth with disabilities.

So thank you for sharing the details of that experience, for leaving the trafficking situation, for how it felt getting those services from the provider, what kinds of challenges you did face, and what ultimately made you feel comfortable and what you found solace in, and with the best provider that helped you along. So thank you very much for sharing your experience. And I'd love to ask if there is anything else that you would like to share and that we haven't discussed yet. I mean, anything for other youth, anything for providers, or just take your moment to speak to the audience.

ERICA: Well, I don't want to make it sound like I painted a rosy picture, that everything went hunky dory, because I did go through-- I mean, there were times that I thought it was my fault, everything was my fault. And I'm actually starting to tear up. And it was my fault. And I did go through a period of time

where I thought I wanted to kill myself because it was all my fault. I did this.

And I went through the what ifs. What if I was a better child? What if I was born without a disability? And I went through all those, and I still go through those. You know, there are times where my brain just goes, Erica, if you could have just done this. But I know that's not true. And there were a lot of times when I just fought with myself, a lot of times I fought with my stepmother because I was still fighting with the lessons my mother instilled on me.

But also, to tie this all back to my mother, I actually, when I graduated college, I went back and I talked to my mother. And this was, I want to say, I don't know, about 17 years ago. I actually went and I asked her why. I wanted closure. I wanted to know why she hurt me. And her answer was because, Erica, you were a disabled child, and you were worthless to me. And I'm a mother, and I don't know why a mother would find a child worthless. And to me, that was my goodbye to her. I haven't talked to her since. I can't fathom why a child would be worthless to somebody.

But a lot of people ask me if I'm angry. And yes, I'm angry every day at her. But anger keeps me going, and anger keeps me talking about it. And that's my superpower, is that I'm angry. And I don't want this to happen to somebody else.

MARGARET: Well, thank you for sharing your superpower. We really appreciate from the bottom of our hearts your time and your courage and the strength that you've shown, of course, to be so honest and vulnerable about that experience. And we honor you and we thank you so much for sharing your time and your story and your courage. So thank you.

ERICA: Thank you.

MARGARET: If there is anything else you would like to say to our audience, I'd welcome a conclusion for our audience.

ERICA: If you're out there and you're being hurt, speak up. And if you're out there and you see somebody being hurt, speak up. You know, it's really hard to say one place or another is better, but whoever you trust, speak up. Just speak up, please. You're going to save a life.

MARGARET: Thank you. Thank you for your time and for sharing your story with us here today, Erica. We honor you and appreciate you so much.

ERICA: Thank you.

MARGARET: Thank you.

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can learn more about IOFA and contact us at our website, www.iofa.org. You can learn more about the National Human Trafficking and Disabilities Working Group, NHTDWG, at [iofa.org/national trafficking disabilities working group](http://iofa.org/national-trafficking-disabilities-working-group), and find additional resources on the intersection of human trafficking and youth with disabilities.

If you are concerned that someone you care about is at risk of or being trafficked, you can get help at the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 888-373-7888 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Text 233-733 or live chat with an advocate at their website, <https://humantraffickinghotline.org>. This project was produced by the International Organization for Adolescents under award number 2016XVGXK015, awarded by the Office for Victims of Crime, Office of Justice Programs, US Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this project are those of the contributors, and do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the US Department of Justice. Thank you to our partners, National Human Trafficking and Disabilities Working Group and the National Resource Center for Reaching Victims.