

This Woman Was Trafficked at a Club When She Was 19 —And It Could Happen to *Anyone*

One woman's story about what it's like to be sold for sex in Canada, and why she's far from the only one

Jan 29, 2018 Sydney Loney



A RECENT PHOTO OF MARKIE DELL, NOW 26. SHE WAS TRAFFICKED AS A TEENAGER WHEN A COWORKER INVITED HER TO A NIGHT OUT AT A CLUB IN TORONTO, A PLOY TO PUT THE 19-YEAR-OLD IN HER DEBT. DELL WAS FORCED TO MAKE HER PIMPS \$1000 A DAY BY DANCING AT STRIP CLUBS—AND WORSE. (PHOTO: COURTESY OF MARKIE DELL.)

The club was big. It had two floors and, that night, it was packed. Although the room was dark, lights flashed and were reflected in mirrors along the walls. The air was stale and smelled of drugs. On one of two stages, Markie Dell danced to hip hop songs and stared straight ahead. She let the lights blind her, trying to ignore the breath of unknown men on her bare legs as they leaned toward her on the stage.

It was the spring of 2011. The tall 19-year-old with long legs, dyed-black hair and freckles muted by a fake tan was being forced to strip at a club in Niagara Falls, Ont., as she had been for the past five months—but that night, Dell saw a chance to escape.

She had confided in a client who promised to help her and she knew he was parked out on the street. When she noticed that the two women assigned to watch her were busy giving dances, Dell realized it might be her only chance. Dancers aren't allowed near the front door, but as soon as her set was over, out the front door she ran, still in her eight-inch heels and pale pink two-piece outfit.

"I was so scared. There was always someone watching and I didn't know what would happen if they caught me. I ran right through the crowd of men waiting to get in, and I didn't look back."

Her client drove her to a motel down the road. But Dell soon discovered that her rescuer was no fairy-tale knight in shining armour—and that her ordeal was only just beginning.

Human trafficking isn't what you think it is

Many people have human trafficking confused with human smuggling, which is the illegal entry of a person into a country; trafficking actually means controlling a person for the purpose of exploiting them. Usually, that exploitation is sexual and the person being exploited is a woman or child.

If you ask most Canadians, they'd say they're horrified that trafficking exists, but relieved that we live here, where things like that don't happen. After all, other nations call us "nice." This isn't the kind of place where men and women entrap teenagers, then move them from city to city, buying and selling them as modern-day sex slaves. Or one where people discover that it's happening—and don't do anything about it.

But Canada is *exactly* that kind of place.

Over 90 percent of the girls being trafficked in Canada were born here, and experts suspect there are thousands of them. (Because trafficking is a hidden crime that's tough to track—and was only recognized as a criminal offence in Canada in 2005—there are no definitive national numbers.) The average age at which exploitation begins is 13; the average age of rescue, if a girl is rescued at all, is 17. Given the statistics we do have, you'd think there'd be a massive public outcry. But this is the kind of problem we'd prefer to pretend doesn't exist, although that's getting harder to do.

Human trafficking is now the fastest growing criminal industry in the world. It's very lucrative, and business is booming, says Shae Invidiata, founder of [Free Them](#), a Toronto-based anti-trafficking organization that has helped rescue 500 victims (and counting). "One girl in Canada can make a pimp \$300,000 a year," Invidiata says. "It's happening everywhere. Whenever I give a talk at a high school, someone will come up to me and say, 'I didn't know this is what it was called, but I think it's happening to my friend.'"

This past December alone, a [29-year-old man was arrested](#) in Yellowknife for trafficking a woman from Saskatchewan; three men (two 18, one 20) were arrested for allegedly luring and prostituting a [14-year-old girl](#) in hotel rooms across southern Ontario; and in Calgary, police were searching for a 29-year-old woman who, with three teenage boys for accomplices, [held a woman captive](#) and forced her to have sex with 10 different men over five days.

It's gotten to the point where, last February, the Edmonton Police Service [changed the name](#) of its Vice unit, which historically referred to a police unit charged with investigating "moral crimes," including gambling, the illegal manufacture or sale of alcohol and adult entertainment, to the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Unit. "Traditional 'vice' work is not what we do now," says staff sergeant Dale Johnson. "It's all sex industry and trafficking."

How a girl gets trafficked

Just over a year ago, the Edmonton Police Service arrested a man in Edmonton who had previously served time for drug trafficking, but had expanded his business. After forming a relationship with an underage girl by plying her with new clothes, makeup and promises of a future together—a so-called grooming process that often only takes a couple of weeks—he pimped her out to men more than twice her age. “We believe that, while he was in jail, the accused learned that selling women is potentially easier, more profitable and more covert than selling drugs,” says Cory Kerr, a detective in the Unit.

The youngest victim they’ve rescued so far was 13, the oldest was in her 30s. “It can happen to anyone who finds themselves in a vulnerable spot and falls victim to a persuasive personality,” Johnson says. “I’ve seen intelligent, articulate, self-aware women who suddenly find themselves in situations they could never have imagined.”

Girls and young women from all socio-economic backgrounds are hunted in malls, coffee shops, movie theatres, outside their schools and, increasingly, online. “Don’t fool yourself into thinking this couldn’t be your sister, your daughter, your niece,” Invidiata says. There have been cases where girls were picked up from school, still in their uniforms, pimped out, then dropped off at home. They may be too afraid or ashamed to tell anyone, or may not even realize they’re being exploited.

“I told people, ‘I’m new, I don’t want to do this,’ but no one cared”



AVID RUNNERS, DELL AND HER DAD LOVED TO RACE TOGETHER. THEY’RE PICTURED HERE BEFORE DELL WAS TRAFFICKED. (PHOTO: COURTESY OF MARKIE DELL.)

Dell was trafficked within 24 hours. Already vulnerable (she was a shy kid with few friends and had been sexually exploited by her boss at a part-time job when she was 16), she was waiting tables in her hometown of Hamilton, Ont. when a coworker she didn’t know well told her she seemed cool, and invited her to a party in Toronto.

Dell came from a relatively sheltered, middle-class family. She had never heard of trafficking and didn't know what a pimp was. She was living with her father at the time, but the relationship was rocky. Her mother had left home three years earlier and her dad, always "the cool parent," had become really strict. "I just packed a bag and didn't even tell him where I was going," Dell says. Her new "friend," a Black woman with a blonde weave, perpetually polished nails and a penchant for crop tops who we'll call Kayla, picked Dell up in a rental car. They drove to Kayla's apartment, where they were joined by a couple of her friends, had a few drinks and got ready to go to a club. It seemed like a fun, typical night out, but the next morning, Kayla turned ugly. She informed Dell that she owed her \$600 for the car rental, the club entry and the drinks—and she got angry when Dell said she didn't have the money.

They got into the rental car, and no one was speaking. Dell thought Kayla was driving her home, but instead they pulled into a strip club. Kayla told Dell to get out and make her the money. "I was like, 'I can't do this, I don't even know how to dance, I'm not comfortable,'" Dell says. Looking back, Dell now believes Kayla was also a victim. Not only was she pimped out herself, she was also forced to recruit other women. Somehow, Dell can still find empathy for the woman who stole years of her life. "I think at one point she had a good heart and, over time, fighting for her life and freedom, she became hardened and stopped caring about people. This industry turns you into something you'd never want to be."

Dell didn't realize the trouble she was in when she walked into the strip club—or that she was about to become one of Canada's trafficked. "I was nervous because Kayla was scary and her friends were scary. I thought, 'Ok, I'll make this money for her and it will be over.' I went in and told people, 'I'm new, I don't want to do this,' but no one cared." As long as you have two pieces of I.D., you're allowed to dance. And the manager was only too happy to have a new girl in the club. He asked Dell to have sex with his business partner to see if she'd be a good fit. She declined, but they decided she could dance anyway.

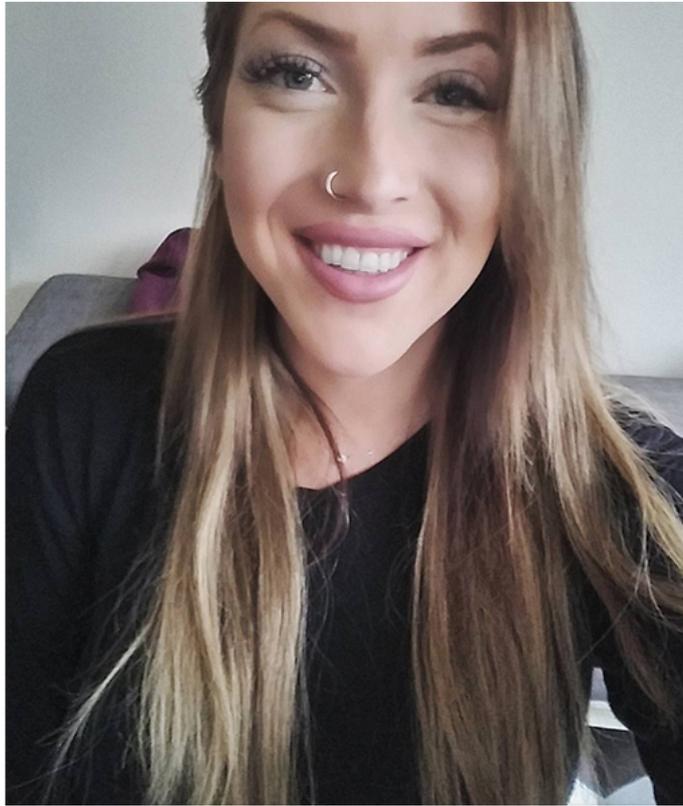
You do what you have to do to survive

That night, Kayla took Dell's phone and her ID. She was drugged and raped by two of Kayla's pimps. Later, they forced her to call her father to tell him that she hated him and was moving out. "He was crying. It was the worst experience of my life. I felt like I'd completely ruined everything."

For the next five months, Dell was shuttled from strip club to strip club and told she needed to make \$1,000 a day. Kayla and her pimps took all the money, threatened to kill her family and withheld food. "They told me, 'do what you have to do to make money.' I did coke every night and I'd always be drunk. Always. Dancing for old men? No thank you. I needed to be completely out of my mind."

But it wasn't just dancing. There were days the club was quiet, and Dell needed to meet her quota. "I started off being like, 'Oh my goodness, I would never have sex with these men, that's so gross.' But then, on dead days, I was like, 'What's going to happen to me if I don't make this money?' At first it was, 'OK, I'll do a blow job with a condom,' but then you just do a lot of drugs and you're OK with it, you know? The more messed up you are, the more you're like, 'This is just work and I gotta do it.' Something kicks in. You do what you have to do and that's that."

The trafficking trap



A RECENT PHOTO OF DELL. (PHOTO: COURTESY OF MARKIE DELL.)

Dell attempted suicide several times, but was always caught. She tried telling her clients—construction workers, businessmen, lawyers, pastors, students, teachers, fathers, grandfathers—what was happening to her. A few suggested she move in with them, offering to “take care of her.” And that’s how she finally found the courage to run.

Unfortunately, the man Dell trusted to help free her from the club was no better than her pimps. He trapped her in his motel room for a month, forcing her to have sex with him twice a day. She eventually got her hands on a cell phone and called an old boyfriend from Hamilton. He picked her up and took her home with him—but soon it became clear that he was just as predatory as the client she’d trusted to help her.

“I fell for him. He took me out and it was nice. I felt like I was safe with him.” She still cared about him, even after he began forcing her to work at a local strip club to fund his drug habit. “People look at you and say, ‘You could have just left. Why didn’t you call the cops?’ But they don’t get the chains—the mental chains—they put on you. You have to have the lowest self-worth to do this. It’s not like girls are choosing to do this, there’s reasons for it. There’s always a reason.”

The list of reasons (and risk factors for trafficking) is long, and includes everything from a history of poverty and abuse to social isolation, emotional distress and lack of social support.

Dell was forced to strip for another eight months before the owner of the club suspected what was going on and called the police. They took a statement, and she was taken to a safe house.

Surviving is only the start

But just because a survivor of trafficking has been rescued, doesn’t mean they’re actually safe, says Larissa Maxwell director of Anti-Human Trafficking Programs for The Salvation Army in British Columbia. “Most survivors say the recovery process is worse because they have to come to terms with everything they’ve lost.”

Survivors are broken. Some become subservient, can't look people in the eye, won't go to the bathroom without permission, won't engage in fun activities because they feel they don't deserve to. "Recovery is about building back a life," Maxwell says. "It can take years."

Unfortunately, many women wind up returning to those who exploited them because it's the only life they know, or they feel threatened, or there simply aren't enough resources to help them. "They despair and think, 'I'm never going to get out of this life, I will always be this girl,'" Maxwell says.

That's what happened to Dell, who returned to her "boyfriend" when her three days at the safe house were up. "I was still in the mindset that I cared about him," she says. "And because there's a limit to how long you can stay at a safe house, I went right back to him after they kicked me out."

Eventually, she moved back in with her father and returned to school. "But it's not like after all this happened I was suddenly good and on the way up," she says. "It was hard. I was still heavily involved in drugs and I had four clients on the side. I'd go to class, then go to work. I was back living with my dad, had a 93 grade-point average with honours and I was living this completely fake life."

Survivors face unique challenges



A RETURN TO RUNNING: DELL AFTER COMPLETING A HALF-MARATHON IN QUEBEC LAST YEAR. (PHOTO: COURTESY OF MARKIE DELL.)

Dell is now 26—and still trying to get her life back. She has tried seeking help from counsellors, but found they were ill-equipped to deal with the nature of her trauma. One gave her a printout of a stop sign and told her to look at it when she started having her "freak-out thoughts," another gave her a colouring book. "No one was willing to go through my story with me. I've had to do it myself and really dig and learn how to forgive and do some inner healing on my own."

Supporting survivors of trafficking is a relatively new field in Canada, Maxwell says, and it has a long way to go. “You need a safe, secure space because perpetrators are often looking for these girls. You need to address addiction, sleep issues, mental and physical health, and then you need to offer special support.” Safe houses and residential programs are few and far between in Canada, and the Salvation Army is one of the few organizations able to offer specialized programs for survivors, from day-to-day living skills to employment training, all of which cost money.

Part of the problem is lack of awareness, and part of the problem is that it’s a hard, ugly topic that people don’t want to talk about, which makes it difficult to get funding. “Companies and corporations don’t want to put their logos on it,” Invidiata says. “It’s not like building schools in Kenya. And it gets messy because a lot of top execs go to strip clubs.”

What needs to happen now

Invidiata says we need to strengthen our laws to protect girls and women, while cracking down on pimps and traffickers. Because so many perpetrators are never caught (and, when they are, sentences are light), Maxwell says we also need to tackle the problem at its root. Yes, she says, pimps and traffickers need to be apprehended, but what about the 400 people who purchased the girl they’re trafficking? “The biggest issue is the demand in Canadian society for sexual services,” she says. “No one’s talking about that; we turn a blind eye to it. Pimps are business capitalists and girls under 18 bring in more money—that’s a problem with our society.”

Timea Nagy, a trafficking survivor herself, agrees. She has spent the last 10 years on the front lines of the issue, and she believes that, “everyone needs to know what trafficking is about. As long as it’s a dirty little secret, it will continue to flourish in the dark, like a cockroach.”

But that’s just a first step. Nagy says we also need to foster girls’ self-esteem. Then, we need to expose the environments they can be exploited in, from hotels and strip clubs that choose to ignore it’s happening to online advertisements posted on Backpage or Kijiji, where you can buy a victim of trafficking as easily as you can buy a sofa for your living room. Hundreds of ads for women “wanting” sex are posted every day and, Invidiata says, there are clues that the posts are advertising victims of sex trafficking, including words and phrases like, “young,” “new,” “fresh,” “in town for a short time,” “available 24/7” and “barely legal.”

Finally, we need to teach people to recognize the signs a girl is being trafficked (new and expensive bags or clothes, secretive behaviour, bruising, pimp branding in the form of a tattoo, usually on the neck or wrist) and to take action. Call the police and ask for their human trafficking unit — that’s all it takes.

Most of all, she says, we need to teach boys and men that it’s not OK to buy sex. “Sex trafficking is a crime and when we recognize that, we can also recognize how much power we have to stop it.”

Finally, a dream for the future



DELL HAS FOUND HAPPINESS—AND A GENUINELY GOOD GUY—IN HER NEW BOYFRIEND. (PHOTO: COURTESY OF MARKIE DELL.)

When she was a kid, Dell wanted to be a cop and a wedding planner. She doesn't want to be a wedding planner anymore.

In 2015, she got a degree in justice services and started practicing yoga. She also has a new boyfriend, a good guy who has helped her heal. She's currently working in sales, but she still dreams of becoming a police officer and, eventually, she hopes to help other survivors of trafficking, although she's not quite there yet. It's only been a month since she stopped having nightmares.

"I'm just not emotionally ready. I'm not stable myself, so I can't be stable for other people—and I know it's going to be a few more years. For now, I'm still just kind of working on myself to get there—but I know that someday I will."

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