

Beyond The Meeting Room - Finding the Sweet in the Bitter

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Story by Mark Ray

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Donna Lynne Hubbard, founder of Woman at the Well Transition Center, was awarded the 2024 PACT Freedom Award for her work in antitrafficking. PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF PACT

WE SOMETIMES THINK of human trafficking victims as just that: victims. But they can also be victors. That's certainly true of Donna Lynne Hubbard, honored with a PACT Freedom Award this year for her remarkable work in the antitrafficking field. Her story demonstrates why it's important for hospitality workers to recognize and report potential trafficking situations.

In her early 20s, Hubbard was flying high—literally—as a flight attendant for Allegheny Airlines. "You couldn't tell me I wasn't living my best life," she said.

The situation changed drastically for the divorced mother of three when a star athlete she was dating took her to a party in a Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, penthouse. Someone spiked her champagne, and the next thing she knew, Hubbard woke up while being sexually assaulted.

"I realized I was in a room with several men who were laughing at what was happening to me, and I'm trying to figure out how I got here and what's going on," she recalled.

Mercifully, she passed out again, only awakening later when the penthouse was empty. Dazed and confused, she dressed, went home to her children and kept her mouth shut.

From there, Hubbard's life began falling apart. She treated her pain with alcohol and drugs, sometimes encountering men in nightclubs who would brag about being part of that penthouse assault.

INTO TRAFFICKING

She escaped to California with her children, only to encounter more trouble. A neighbor who helped her with things like bus money turned out to be a pimp. "He said now I owed him, and if I didn't do what I was told, then one of my daughters would end up missing," she said.

Before Hubbard could figure out what to do, the pimp sold her to a gang, which gang-raped her to further break her will. "I was being bought and sold and traded," she said. "I was traded for Super Bowl tickets. I was traded for drugs, for weapons. If they lost the bet during a card game or a craps game, I was the bounty."

Arrested for prostitution, the now-pregnant Hubbard gave birth as a prisoner in a downtown Los Angeles, California, hospital.

"As crazy as it sounds, for the first time in a long time I was safe," she said.

After her release from custody, Hubbard moved in with her mother in Minnesota. She began the fight to regain custody of her children, who were in foster care or with other family members and registered for classes at the University of Minnesota.

While reporting on gang activity during a television-news internship, Hubbard knocked on a door and encountered one of her tormenters from California. He had also ended up in Minnesota and dragged her back into a life of prostitution. Her daughters didn't know it, however. She kept the

truth from them to protect them.

Her return to a life of being trafficked eventually landed her in a federal maximum-security prison to serve two 12-year sentences. (The case involved drugs that had been moved across state lines.)

GETTING OUT

With the help of a prison counselor, she took steps to turn her life around. She got her first college degree, set up support groups for other inmates, worked to make amends with her family and found God.

Fortunately, Hubbard had been sentenced just nine days before mandatory minimum sentences were enacted, and she earned parole in 1992. Just as fortunately, she was ready to find her way in the world.

"There was a formula I used to turn my life around: accountability, commitment and consistency," she said.

Hubbard moved to Atlanta, Georgia, where her birth father lived, and started working at the Marriott Marquis hotel. She also began volunteering with Aid to Inmate Mothers (now Foreverfamily), where she started support groups and provided resources for women leaving prison.

In 1994, she founded Woman at the Well Transition Center. A \$15,000 grant from the Open Society Foundations helped her open her first center, a place where women could rebuild their lives in a nurturing environment. In the three decades since, the nonprofit ministry has served more than 6,000 rescued, trafficked, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women and their families.

TRAFFICKING TRAINING

A decade later, Hubbard returned to her first career, becoming a flight attendant with American Airlines.

During the interview process, she shared her life story. "After I told them everything, they looked at me and said, 'You know what? We think we're better with you than without you,'" she said.

They were right. Hubbard now trains pilots, flight attendants and other audiences how to recognize and report suspected human trafficking. She has trained 3,500 aviation professionals, 1,700 law enforcement officers, 950 public health officials and almost 2,000 community leaders and elected officials in several countries, from Iceland to Indonesia and Canada to Colombia.

Her ultimate goal is to stay closer to home. In retirement, she plans to open the Well Woman Ranch, a place in Georgia where women can rebuild their lives. She imagines space for gardens, job training and offices for home-based businesses. And there will be room for beehives.

"I want to make honey," Hubbard said. "I want to bring something sweet out of what has been bitter, and I want that to be the legacy I leave for my children and my grandchildren."

To report suspected human trafficking, call the police, the U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline, 1-888-373-7888, or help@humantraffickinghotline.org.