

## BUILDING AUTHENTIC PARTNERSHIPS TO REDUCE SEX TRAFFICKING AND HEAL AND REBUILD LIVES, FAMILIES, AND COMMUNITIES

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### Abstract

Sex trafficking and sexual exploitation are tragedies affecting people across the United States and throughout our world. Over 34,700 sex trafficking cases in the US were reported to the National Sex Trafficking Hotline between 2007 and 2017, while globally, the International Labor Organization estimates 4.8 million people are being sexually exploited. In June 2018, Breaking Free, a survivor-led agency in St. Paul, Minnesota, began a partnership with Building Peaceful Community, a Minnesota-based violence prevention consultancy, to transform its former "John School" into "Men Breaking Free" in the hope of reducing demand among men for purchasing sex. This new approach is showing promising, transformative, healing results both with men who been arrested for trying to purchase sex from another human being, as well as with Breaking Free staff, survivors, and community partners. This paper describes the transformation from John School to Men Breaking Free, results from the first 14 months of this new approach, and potential implications for more effectively reducing sex trafficking and healing and rebuilding lives, families, and communities locally, nationally, and world-wide.

**Keywords:** Community partnership, sex trafficking, prostitution, sexual exploitation, public health, primary prevention, restorative justice, john schools.

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*What if, instead of regarding people caught in the toxic web of sex trafficking and sexual exploitation as victims or perpetrators, we instead saw them as potential*

partners bringing the greatest wisdom and desire to break these cycles of pain and loneliness, and together we engaged in the work of building peaceful, healthy relationships and communities?

*What if we were to bring together people of disparate experiences and viewpoints, seeing these differences as the key to developing and sustaining effective, sustainable, and measurable change through authentic partnership?*

*What if, instead of writing grants and developing complex agreements regarding ownership, we could work together in authentic partnership, sharing our unique gifts and viewpoints to create, implement, evaluate, and refine prevention and intervention approaches with those most affected by sex trafficking and sexual exploitation, and began to see clear and compelling evidence of positive change in everyone: the men, the survivors, and our families and communities?*

This article tells the story of a new approach to reducing sex trafficking and promoting individual, family, and community healing, by helping men who have made the mistake of trying to buy sex from another human being learn the truth about this terrible industry, while simultaneously encouraging them to re-find, and be, their best selves. In June 2018, Breaking Free (<https://breakingfree.net>), a survivor-led agency in St. Paul, Minnesota, began a partnership with Building Peaceful Community (<http://www.buildingpeacefulcommunity.org>), a Minnesota-based violence prevention consultancy, to transform its former "John School" into "Men Breaking Free" in the hope of reducing demand among men for purchasing sex. Entering its second year, Men Breaking Free is built on multiple partnerships, bringing together women and men, including those who have been trafficked and those who tried to purchase sex from others, with community organizations and committed community members, all working together toward individual, family, and community healing and well-being.

## ASKING THE QUESTION

I first met Terry Forliti, Executive Director of Breaking Free, in December 2017. Given that the Super Bowl would be held in Minneapolis in February 2018, Terry was very busy working with local and state government and nonprofit agencies to prepare for the possibility of increased sex trafficking in the Twin Cities and region, based on potential influxes of both "buyers" and "sellers" to the game and accompanying community events.

During our first conversation, Terry told me about the remarkable work of Breaking Free, a Saint Paul, Minnesota-based social justice nonprofit founded in 1996 to help women escape systems of prostitution and sex trafficking, through direct services including advocacy, housing, and education. Terry also shared Breaking Free's work on ending the demand side of the sex trafficking equation through their "John School." The John School at Breaking Free was started in 1999, working with men referred by courts and law enforcement who had been arrested for attempting to buy sex from another person. Program content and design was similar to other John Schools across the country, lecturing the men on the harm of sex trafficking and imploring them to change their attitudes and behaviors toward women.

During our initial conversation, Terry shared with me that she had spent 30 years of her life "in the life", and that most of the staff at Breaking Free were survivors of sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. I shared with her my 30+ years in Public Health and my more recent work on primary prevention of violence as a community consultant with Building Peaceful Community. Terry wanted to explore whether the John School could be improved by combining the experience and expertise of the John School staff with my Public Health/primary prevention background.

When we next met, Terry shared the agenda and other details about the John School, and asked for ideas for enhancing its impact and making more measurable progress

toward ending or at least reducing men's demand for purchasing sex. Before sharing my thoughts, I had one question for Terry, based on her 30 years "in the life." I asked her why she believed men had come to her to buy sex. From a Public Health vantage point, understanding why men engage in these behaviors was crucial for developing and implementing new strategies to more effectively interrupt this toxic cycle.

Terry's answer would have been remarkable under any circumstance, but was even more so given that she had just spent the preceding months and years working with myriad nonprofit and government agencies to reduce the number of men who would try to buy sex during the time of the Super Bowl in the Twin Cities. She said that she could not recall anyone ever asking her that question, in all of her years as a leader in the field. She agreed that trying to understand why men would act this way was crucial if we were to ever make progress toward reducing demand. We agreed that it was remarkable that this central question had rarely if ever been openly explored by the people and agencies working to reduce sex trafficking. Terry said that because she was not one of these men, she could not definitively say why they had tried to purchase sex from her, nor why they continue these behaviors now. She did say she could describe how most of them acted and seemed to her. The vast majority of men she met seemed shy, awkward, and embarrassed, and very uncomfortable being around a woman. Most of them would come into the room, say little if anything, avoid eye contact, get things done, and then leave.

I shared with Terry that this description did not seem consistent with the typical notion of privileged, misogynistic "Johns." We agreed that any work we might do together to strengthen and improve the impact of the John School would need to be based on a genuine interest in learning more about why men engage in this dangerous, destructive, and apparently not particularly satisfying behavior. We also agreed that one of the first things we would do was change the name of the John School.

## COMPARING PERSPECTIVES AND STRATEGIES

Following our initial conversations, Terry scheduled a meeting with key staff and leadership at Breaking Free: Jennifer Gaines and Jeremiah Witt, John School program staff; Lori Paul, Breaking Free Communications and Development Specialist; and Suzann Brown, Breaking Free Board Chair. Our first step was reviewing the John School agenda and format.

Breaking Free's John School, in operation for 19 years, accepted referrals of men who had been arrested for attempting to purchase sex from an adult. Most were arrested in the greater Twin Cities area, though some came to the program from other Minnesota jurisdictions. The program was held the third Saturday of each month from 8:30 AM to 4:30 PM. Participants paid a fee (\$750 in 2018), with all the money going to Breaking Free to support women's programs and cover costs for operating the John School.

The John School was a full-day lecture. Men were taught the realities and impacts of trafficking on women and their families, the severe legal consequences they would face if they re-offended, and the many risks they faced from sexually transmitted infections and from exposing themselves and their families to the often-violent world of sex trafficking. There was little if any opportunity for men to talk during John School sessions, and they often absorbed anger from presenters and survivors whose lives had been deeply harmed by sex trafficking. Figure 1 outlines a typical Breaking Free John School agenda.

8:30-9:00	Sign-in, Demographics Survey and Pre-test/Introduction to John School and Breaking Free. <i>*Please completely fill out your Demographics Survey and Pre-test at this time.</i>
9:00-10:30	Legal Perspectives on Prostitution. Presenters: Assistant St. Paul City Attorney and Representative(s) from the St. Paul Police Human Trafficking Unit
10:30-10:45	Break
10:45-11:30	Health Impacts of Prostitution on You, Your Family and Loved Ones, and Victims
12:00-1:00	Lunch Break
1:00-2:15	Prostitution 101
2:15-3:00	Women Used in Systems of Prostitution: Survivor Testimonies

3:00-3:15	Break
3:15-4:00	How Prostitution Impacts our Families and Communities Discussion
4:00-4:30	Post-Test and Participant Survey

Figure 1. Offenders Prostitution Program (“John School”) Agenda

This initial review of the John School agenda and accompanying materials identified the concern, fairly common in similar programs around the country, that it was very difficult to assess the impact of the program on participating men. A pre-test was administered with more than 30 agree/disagree questions ranging from "It is acceptable for men with unmet sexual needs to have sex with women in prostitution" to "It is rare that women experience violence in prostitution." A post-test repeated many of the pre-test questions, to see if any answers changed, and added a few open-ended questions, including "What did you tell your family/friends you were doing today? Why?" Unfortunately, and importantly, whether or not the men themselves were genuinely learning and leaving the day with new found attitudes and life skills was not evaluated.

After reviewing the John School agenda, we discussed the findings of a report Terry shared, "An Overview of John Schools in the United States," prepared by Abt Associates for the National Institute of Justice (Shively, Kliorys, & Wheeler, 2012). The report summarized over 50 John Schools that had been identified across the country at that time. While there were individual variations, most John Schools cited in the article took a similar approach to that of Breaking Free. The article also highlighted debates in the field about approaches and content used at different schools, as well as uncertainty about whether and how these approaches were having the intended impact of reducing recidivism.

Following review of the John School agenda and the Abt Report, Terry asked me to share my ideas for changes based on my experience working in Public Health and primary prevention of family and workplace violence. Stating up front that I had little

direct experience in preventing sex trafficking, I thought some of my experience with community partnerships to prevent interpersonal violence might apply to developing strategies to more effectively prevent and intervene with people impacted by sex trafficking.

I shared that one of the first things I had done after my initial conversation with Terry was to contact an old friend and colleague who had been arrested a number of years ago for solicitation and had been referred to Breaking Free's John School at that time. He described the John School experience in detail, sharing that he found the lecture format and style to be ineffective with most of the participants, many appearing to close up and tune out even more during the day, due to feelings of shame and embarrassment. The only conversation he recalled them having together was wondering where the money they had to pay to attend was going, assuming much or most was going back to law enforcement and the courts.

Key concepts that I proposed to enhance the effectiveness of Breaking Free's John School are listed here (Gault, 2016).

**Moving away from lecture format** to try to **engage** the men in conversation with program facilitators and one another, being careful to avoid shaming or labeling the men based on the mistakes they made that resulted in their arrest and referral to the program.

**Building a new approach based on empathy and understanding**, both for the people being bought and sold in sex trafficking and for the men themselves. We discussed how seeking to understand and explain what may lead people to make poor choices in their lives does not excuse those poor choices and any resulting harm they may have caused, as well as trying to avoid judging and defining people by the worst moments and mistakes in life.

**Using Public Health/Epidemiological approaches** to clearly and intentionally identify the problem; try to determine why it occurs; and develop, evaluate, and continually modify prevention and intervention strategies to assure greatest impact.

**Using the "ABCs of Communication"** with men in the program: Building clear and unambiguous **Awareness** about sex trafficking, how it affects them, and how they ended up at this place in their lives; showing them how it might be to their **Benefit** to implement changes to improve their lives and sense of self, and to consider working together to end sex trafficking with Breaking Free and other like-minded women and men; and offer achievable **Calls to Action** – tools and strategies to improve their lives and provide them with more positive alternatives than seeking to buy sex from another human being. (R. Wilson, personal communication, May 1995)

**Applying principles of Restorative Justice**, acknowledging that sex trafficking and sexual exploitation are harmful to everyone involved: the people bought and sold; the people buying sex from other human beings; and families and communities of everyone involved, seeking restoration and justice so that everyone impacted has an opportunity to heal and grow.

**Considering the perspectives** of Rollo May (1972), Susan Faludi (1999), Linda Mills (2008), James Gilligan (1996) and James Garbarino (1999) that people, whether or not they are objectively in positions of power and privilege, often act out violently and cause harm to others and themselves when their subjective, lived experience is of being overwhelmed by **shame, humiliation, and isolation**.

Developing **clear, tangible, and measurable short-, medium-, and long-term goals and objectives** to measure and document progress. We agreed that this would be crucial, especially in light of the difficulties highlighted in the Abt Report in determining



whether the John School approaches were achieving the difficult-to-measure goal of reducing recidivism.

After two meetings during which we completed review of the John School and ways to enhance its effectiveness based on the ideas and tools outlined above, we agreed to partner to develop, implement, and evaluate a new approach to working with men referred to Breaking Free who had been arrested for solicitation. Our first action step was to change the name of the John School, to better reflect the spirit and intent of what we hoped to achieve together, creating a more inviting and respectful experience for the men we would be working with. Terry came up with our new name: "Men Breaking Free."

### **PARTNERSHIP: MEN BREAKING FREE**

Once we agreed to work together on transforming the John School to Men Breaking Free, Terry scheduled a series of work sessions to co-create our new approach. We agreed from the outset that our work would be a partnership between Breaking Free and Building Peaceful Community. Rather than my acting as a paid consultant, we would co-create and co-own whatever we developed together. I suggested this arrangement, as I wanted to avoid concerns about money getting in the way of genuinely working together, and saw this as the best way to most effectively share what I had learned during my Public Health career.

I remain amazed that Breaking Free would be so open to taking a Restorative Justice approach to working with men who had attempted to buy sex from other people, considering how deeply and personally harmed most staff and people associated with Breaking Free had been by sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. Within our planning group, the person most skeptical about the approach was Jeremiah. At our first acquaintance he asked me whether I or anyone in my family had ever been caught in the web of sex trafficking. When my reply was "no," he told me there was no way I could

have any idea what I was talking about. To be clear, Jeremiah's skepticism and anger were well-founded; he came to this work as the result of spending seven years trying to help his daughter escape from being trafficked. He somewhat reluctantly agreed to give these ideas a try when I asked him whether the John School approach was actually working. The recognition of the lack of evidence of the impact of the John School approach brought us all together, with the goal of creating a new strategy to more effectively and measurably reduce the profound individual, community, and inter-generational pain caused by sex trafficking. The first thing we developed after our new name was a set of clear, measurable goals and objectives. We agreed that part of everyone's frustration with the John School approach was the difficulty of being able to establish whether the one day spent with men, who came to the program under order of the court/law enforcement, was in fact achieving the broad goal of ending or reducing recidivism and demand for purchasing sex from vulnerable people.

The goals and objectives we developed together are outlined in Figure 2. Our intent is to provide clarity to the men, and ourselves, about what we hope to achieve, as well as to articulate outcomes that might be achievable and measurable, during an eight-hour workshop. We have found that these goals and objectives allow for evaluation of whether the workshop is having immediate impacts with the men, and demonstrate to participants our intent to offer usable tools and perspectives, without shame or judgment, to make positive changes in their lives if they choose.

Our goal for each of you is that you leave today with a better understanding of what brought you to this place in your life, and with clarity and strategies to help and encourage you to avoid making similar mistakes in the future. Specific goals and learning objectives for the day include:	
1.	Increased awareness and understanding of the national and local community problem of men purchasing women to fulfill their sense of emptiness inside, anger they may feel toward women, and what really goes on before and after they purchase sex from women.
2.	Understanding and owning the impacts of selling human beings, on the victims, yourself, your intimate partners, your children and their children, and your community.
3.	Developing individual and group agreements on being the person, father, and partner/husband, and man that you most wish to be and be regarded as.

4.	Developing and demonstrating new skills and commitments to help you better recognize and respond to stressful and challenging situations and relationships, without the use of physical, verbal, sexual or psychological violence.
5.	Identification and development of resources that you can help you to more fully live the rest of your life as a man of integrity.

Figure 2. Men Breaking Free Workshop Goals and Objectives

## MEN BREAKING FREE WORKSHOPS

In order to move to a more engaging and effective approach with the men, we structured our time with them as workshops rather than trainings, built around an interactive discussion guide with questions that they would be asked, invited to respond to in writing, and then discussed together in small and large groups. We used flip charts instead of slides, to present questions and ideas in a more humane and interactive manner. Another important change was moving from the former John School meeting space, a cold, cavernous room with poor acoustics, to a comfortable and inviting meeting room in a local park building featuring a fireplace, coffee, and quiet music.

Men Breaking Free workshops are held on the third Saturday of the month from 8:00 AM to 4:30 PM. All participants are referred by a court or other branch of law enforcement as a consequence of having been arrested for attempting to purchase sex from another adult; each participant pays a fee of \$800 to Breaking Free to attend. Between June 2018 and August 2019, 122 men participated in 14 workshops. Figure 3 provides a summary of demographic information for these men.

Age	20s	30s	40s	50s	60+
	27	29	34	15	12
Race/ Ethnicity	White	Black	Hispanic/ Latino	Asian/ East Asian	Other
	62	15	15	19	3
Income	<\$30,000	\$30,000-\$100,000	>\$100,000		
	38	61	20		
Education	High School Diploma	Higher Education Degree	Neither		
	26	82	10		

Relationship Status	Single	Married	Divorced		
	35	78	6		
Children	Daughters	Sons	No Children		
	64	12	26		
Where They Live	Twin Cities Metro Area	Greater Minnesota	Outside Minnesota		
	44	74	4		

Figure 3. Men Breaking Free Workshop Participants June 2018-August 2019 (n=122)

Men Breaking Free workshops open with a welcome to all the men, a brief introduction to the work of Breaking Free, and an assurance that our purpose is to offer new skills and insights that will help the men as they go forward with their lives, in a space without shame or judgment. The men are reminded initially and during the course of the day that the entire fee they pay to attend goes directly to Breaking Free to help pay for the cost of housing and related programming for women on their journey to break free from sex trafficking, as well as to cover the costs of Men Breaking Free workshops and longer-term resources that will be offered to the men later in the day. The content and format of the workshops are summarized in Figure 4.

<b>8:45-10:00</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Goals for and Introduction to the day and Breaking Free</li> <li>Introductions: Your name, Where you live</li> <li>Discussions:                     <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--What does it mean to be a man? What emotions are expected/acceptable for men? Where/When/How do we learn this?</li> </ul> </li> <li>Terry Crews video and responses/discussion re: Toxic Masculinity</li> <li>Discussion: What do men need to have in our lives, and need to know, to make the choice in our lives to not purchase sex from another human being?</li> </ul>
<b>10:00 - 10:15</b>	<b>Break</b>
<b>10:15-11:00</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introductions: Your name, What kind of work you do, Hobbies</li> <li>Statistics &amp; Myths:                     <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Average age of entry into trafficking? How recruited? Do people "choose" this life? Who is victimized?</li> </ul> </li> <li>When and how did it seem OK to you to purchase sex from another human being? How did you feel afterward?</li> </ul>
<b>11:00-11:30</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Health impacts of sex trafficking</li> <li>Review of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) handout</li> <li>Invitation to onsite STI testing over lunch hour</li> </ul>
<b>11:30-12:30</b>	<b>Lunch</b>
<b>12:30-2:00</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Follow-up introduction to Breaking Free</li> <li>Survivor story</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minnesota statutes; A father's story</li> </ul>
<b>2:00-2:15</b>	<b>Break</b>
<b>2:15-4:15</b>	<b>Men Breaking Free</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introductions: Your name and family</li> <li>• Circle conversation/stories with men from previous groups</li> <li>• Small group debriefs &amp; invitation for men to share their stories</li> <li>• Co-create Red/Green/Yellow circles &amp; triggers</li> <li>• Review learnings of the day</li> <li>• Invitations to Men Breaking Free 1-800 Number; 1st Saturdays Men's Circles; SAA and ManKind Project resources; Breaking Free website</li> </ul>
<b>4:15-4:30</b>	<b>Evaluations and Connections</b>

Figure 4. Sample Men Breaking Free Workshop Agenda

Discussion guides are handed out following the initial welcome. Men are encouraged to write in them freely, as the guides are theirs to keep and will not be collected nor looked at by workshop facilitators. They are also encouraged to participate in discussions as fully as they are able and willing, are assured that all conversations are confidential, and told that they are not required to participate in writing nor conversation any more than they feel comfortable with.

Goals and objectives for the day are reviewed, and participants are assured that facilitators are not there to judge or shame them. Participants and facilitators are then invited to go around the table and introduce themselves and where they live so that everyone can begin to get to know one another.

Participants are then asked to respond to three questions. These questions are asked before any content is presented, to get unfiltered responses in their own words:

- What does it mean to be a man?
- What emotions are allowable and expected for men?
- What do men need to have in our lives in order to make the choice to not buy sex from another human being?

Following discussion of their responses to these questions (see Figure 6 for examples), participants view a video from *The Daily Show* featuring a discussion with Terry Crews and Trevor Noah on toxic masculinity and making the choice to live healthy, positive lives as men (Crews & Noah, 2018). During discussion following the video, facilitators clarify that we do not regard men as being toxic, but rather that many messages and attitudes men are frequently exposed to, and often take on in our culture, may end up being toxic both to men and to the people in their lives.

Following a break, participants and facilitators are invited to introduce themselves again, this time sharing work they do, hobbies, and interests. Facilitators then lead the men in discussion to help them learn about myths and statistics to better understand the realities of sex trafficking, e.g. how people are recruited, average age of entry, and whether people truly choose this life. The men are asked to write down their answers in their discussion guides, compare answers with one another, and then in the large group, compare their responses to clarifying data and information on these topics, shared by facilitators largely in story form.

The Statistics and Myths section closes with two questions for the men to think about, write about, and then discuss together:

- When and how did it seem OK to you to purchase sex from another human being?
- How did you feel afterward?

The final portion of the morning agenda consists of local health experts providing clear and usable information about the health impacts of sex trafficking and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The men receive a comprehensive STI Summary brochure custom-made for Men Breaking Free by Pamela Glenn, a Certified Nurse Midwife and expert on screening for abuse in the health care setting; they are also offered free,

confidential STI testing onsite by county Public Health staff during the lunch hour. Agenda items covered during the afternoon include:

- Survivor stories from women from Breaking Free's speakers' bureau;
- Jeremiah's story as a father who worked for seven years to help his own daughter break free from sex trafficking, and how he continues to work with her and his family on the process of healing and rebuilding their lives;
- Circle conversations with men from previous Men Breaking Free workshops who now return monthly to participate as trusted partners with Breaking Free;
- Identification of triggers and situations men may need to fully avoid in the future (e.g. pornography), situations they may need to be careful around (e.g. driving alone in neighborhoods where they previously sought to purchase sex), and things they can intentionally do to strengthen and rebuild their lives and relationships (e.g. seeking positive people to spend time with and seek support); and
- Review of learning and discussions from the day, and offering resources including:
  - A 24-hour phone line (answered by Jeremiah) to call when feeling isolated and/or at risk of falling back into unhealthy patterns;
  - Monthly voluntary Men Breaking Free Circle groups;
  - Local resources for additional support, including Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA) and Man Kind Project support groups;
  - An invitation to partner with future Men Breaking Free workshop presentations and other Breaking Free community outreach efforts; and
  - Exchanging contact information with one another to be ongoing supports for each other on the journey toward a healthier, happier life.

The day ends with the men being asked to fill out evaluations using five open-ended questions built around workshop goals and objectives, encouragement to exchange contact information with at least one other man, and receiving cards for the Men Breaking Free hotline.

## WHAT WE ARE LEARNING FROM MEN WHO ARE BREAKING FREE

Figure 5 contains sample responses to the evaluation questions, from one workshop.

<p><b>What are the most important things you learned today?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• That trafficking is very widespread and dangerous. That other people are dealing with what I'm dealing with.</li><li>• The impact sex trafficking has on society. It is a much bigger problem than I'd imagined. It ends in regret, violence and almost always in life lasting damage.</li><li>• The life cycle of prostitution. Must work actively to fix this problem.</li><li>• Learned various things about life, heard about other's pain/feelings. I won't do or think about these internet/social bad things in my life in the future.</li></ul>
<p><b>Did today's conversations change any ideas you had coming in about sex trafficking and sexual exploitation, as well about healthy relationships and seeking to live lives of integrity and respect? If so, what specifically may have changed for you?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Yes. More respect for the women who don't want to be in that industry.</li><li>• Yes. I need to wake up and be a man, because today's world has a shortage of real men. I want to leave the earth as a good example.</li><li>• To consider the needs of others before myself.</li><li>• There is no difference between prostitution and sex trafficking. Most prostituted women end up being trafficked. Did not know young women were recruited.</li><li>• Always remember, women are someone else's daughter.</li><li>• To have my family back and have a healthy relationship.</li></ul>
<p><b>What additional tools and resources would be helpful for you to build on what you learned today?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Finding a group to work with.</li><li>• I just found a church to go to. I am currently speaking with a psychologist.</li><li>• Accountability partners.</li><li>• Groups to talk to.</li><li>• Hotline #s. I think the hotline is a great idea. 24/7 talk line.</li><li>• Liked the handouts, will use them when needed. Can use the help and support.</li></ul>

Figure 5. Sample Men Breaking Free Evaluation Responses

Figure 6 contains a summary of responses to questions discussed during the course of one workshop. While these summaries represent the results from just one group of men, responses to both the evaluation and the discussion questions are remarkably consistent each month. A summary of replies collected during the first six months of Men Breaking Free workshops and additional program information can also be found on the Breaking Free website: <https://breakingfree.net/men-breaking-free-1>



<p><b>What does it mean to be a man?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Strong</li><li>• Caring, loving</li><li>• Provider, worker</li><li>• Respectful, respected</li><li>• Raising family, leader of family, house provider</li><li>• Responsible, confident, we know what we're doing</li></ul>
<p><b>What do you think of when you hear the term "toxic masculinity"?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Violence</li><li>• Beating wife</li><li>• Jail</li><li>• Controlling at home (finances)</li><li>• Cultural</li><li>• Men feel they need to dominate the women – "I'm the boss"</li><li>• Home dictatorship – "Do what I say how I say it"</li><li>• Appear God-like</li><li>• Peer pressure to be a dominant man</li><li>• Arguments in the home bring toxicity home</li></ul>
<p><b>What does it mean to be a father? How do we teach/model this?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Want to see my children succeed in life better than me, learn from my mistakes and flourish in life</li><li>• Be respectful, honest &amp; dependable</li><li>• Be a role model, help them be their best, be respectful, compassionate and good to others</li><li>• Unconditional love – always be available and be there for them no matter what</li><li>• Teach them how to work and be honest</li></ul>
<p><b>What do men need in our lives, and need to know, to make the choice in our lives to not purchase sex from another human being?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Compassion</li><li>• Have somebody to stand by you, instead of constantly being alone</li><li>• Clear understanding of what is right and wrong, respecting women and understanding what they are going through</li><li>• Have a network of people you can reach out to and communicate with – need someone to help you make better choices</li><li>• Respect women</li><li>• Be aware and wary of social media and the internet</li></ul>
<p><b>When and how did it seem OK to you to purchase sex from another human being?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Never really seemed OK</li><li>• Loneliness, sex wasn't the goal (connection &amp; touch was).</li><li>• Didn't seem harmful at the time</li><li>• It's not OK</li><li>• Struggles with intimacy with my wife</li><li>• A friend encouraged it</li><li>• Like adrenaline or a drug</li><li>• Normalized it in myself</li><li>• Internet and pop up ads</li></ul>
<p><b>Who are the victims of sex trafficking and prostitution?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• All parties involved</li><li>• The (woman) victim</li><li>• Families, communities</li></ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both parties involved</li> <li>• Families, wives and kids</li> </ul>		
Things to absolutely avoid (red)	Things to be careful/avoid (yellow)	Things to do to rebuild/restore (green)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No compulsive masturbation</li> <li>• No pornography</li> <li>• No sex outside of primary relationship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not drive in old "cruising" areas</li> <li>• Be aware of being/acting seductive toward women</li> <li>• Use caution around sexual images</li> <li>• Avoid R-rated movies and sexual TV shows</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attend monthly talks/circle meetings at Men Breaking Free</li> <li>• Find resources on Breaking Free website</li> <li>• Appreciate family and close friends (do not take for granted)</li> <li>• Walking and physical activity</li> <li>• Consider getting a flip phone to avoid being online at vulnerable times</li> <li>• Offer advice and support Breaking Free and participate ongoing with Men Breaking Free</li> </ul>

Figure 6. Sample Men Breaking Free Discussion Summaries

While the men’s responses to the open-ended questions are more difficult to quantify than numerical or yes/no queries, we find that the questions require the men to think and report deeply about their experiences and key learnings. Almost all of the 122 participants have provided extensive, thoughtful responses to the evaluation questions.

Each month, from two to four men return on their own time as partners at Men Breaking Free workshops, sharing their stories and offering participants a renewed sense of hope, and a person to call when they need to talk to someone who has walked in their shoes, to help them through times of loneliness and darkness.

A summary of lessons learned from the men who have participated in Men Breaking Free workshops between June 2018 and August 2019 includes:

- Consistent and confining ideas about manhood, reflecting that men are expected to be good, caring providers with relatively few emotions, and that showing emotion or asking for help would be definite signs of weakness.
- Participants are quite clear what they need in their lives in order to be able to make the choice to not buy sex from another person: meaning and purpose in their personal and professional lives; people they care about and who care about them; people they can truly trust and confide in; a better understanding of the realities of sex trafficking; and intimacy and physical touch with someone they care about.
- Most participants report feeling terrible about themselves and their experience after buying sex from another person, and that they never felt it was an OK thing to do.
- Participants are very clear and specific about how they ended up purchasing sex, ranging from becoming addicted to sex during early adolescence, to a confluence of stressful events (marital discord, financial/employment problems, etc.) that led them to make this choice later in life. Many report being encouraged by friends and family, and/or by online and popup ads, to purchase sex, similar in many ways to the recruitment stories told by survivors of sex trafficking. To be clear, the men do not use these circumstances as an excuse for their behavior, with almost all accepting full ownership for their actions and mistakes.
- Participants are also very clear and specific about things they can do to avoid falling into the same unhealthy patterns and circumstances that got them to the low point in their lives of purchasing sex. Most often these strategies have little or nothing to do with sex, and include things each of us might strive for, including engagement in community service; seeking and building positive relationships and friendships; and intentional lifestyle choices including regular exercise and physical activity, time in nature, hobbies, and avoiding alcohol and drug use/abuse.

## **WOMEN AND MEN WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP TO REDUCE TRAFFICKING AND FIND HEALING TOGETHER**

One of the most remarkable things I have learned working with Men Breaking Free is that women and men can find common ground and a collective calling to work toward ending the tragedy of sex trafficking, for the benefit of us all. This idea was powerfully demonstrated during the summer of 2019. One of the survivors from the Breaking Free speakers' bureau had arrived during the lunch hour to prepare to speak about her experiences having been trafficked and sold for sex for most of her early 20s. On the flipchart at the front of the room were the men's responses from the morning's discussion concerning how they felt after having purchased sex from another human being. Reading their words brought her to tears, as she told me, "Their experiences are the same as ours." When she shared this realization with the men, tears were shared by most of us in the room.

Another example is the incredible connection that the women co-facilitators of Men Breaking Free workshops, notably Lori Paul, Pam Glenn, and speakers' bureau members, have been able to develop and sustain with participants. Initially, we were unsure whether the men would feel comfortable talking about such personal and painful topics with women present. We have found that, in large part due to the grace, kindness, and empathy of these remarkable women who participate in and lead portions of Men Breaking Free discussions, the men have found relief and comfort in being able to connect, and work together toward healing.

I believe that by breaking down barriers to trust and communication between women and men, Men Breaking Free demonstrates great promise toward achieving its goals and objectives – to reduce the incidence and resultant harms of sex trafficking and exploitation, by reconnecting women and men in authentic, vulnerable conversation, and helping men to consider and re-find their best selves. In addition to the results of

written evaluations and discussion summaries from each of the first 14 Men Breaking Free groups, I believe this sense of hope and promise is reflected in the following impressions from Terry Forliti, Lori Paul, and Suzann Brown, as well as the reflections of three men who previously sat as court-ordered participants and now are partners in the work of Men Breaking Free.

### **REFLECTIONS FROM WOMEN CO-FOUNDERS ON MEN BREAKING FREE**

**What are the most important things you have learned and experienced in this work?**

"That my attitudes and assumptions needed some re-vamping. My attitudes about why men purchase sex do not align with what purchasers are actually saying. I had so many bad experiences that I didn't think those who purchased me had the capability of remorse. I learned men can be introspective and have deep family connections that matter. I learned that not all men buy sex. I have learned that the attitude that drives demand can be removed."

"The brokenness in each of these men and how that has played a role in their decisions to purchase sex. That with compassion and kindness we can be the ripple effect of relevant change. Everyone has a story. We are not in the judgment business. Opening our hearts to these men is the light at the end of a very painful journey."

**What has been most surprising to you?**

"Surprised to see so many men from greater Minnesota, many with incomes less than \$30,000. Surprising that so many men engage willingly in Men Breaking Free conversations; I thought we would get more push back from them about participating. Also, that so many are willing to come to circle groups and volunteer to be part of the solution, not the problem. They want to come alongside us and help diminish demand while still taking accountability for their actions."

"The thing that has been most surprising is that some of the men have chosen to return to be part of the help to end demand."

"Seeing their remorse emerge as they become more informed, the transformation that takes place as the day progresses. Their genuine interest by the end of the day to heal,

change and engage with the other men and with Men Breaking Free. Their tears as they listen to our survivors."

**What words would you use to describe what you thought about men who purchase sex from other people prior to June 2018? What words would you use now?**

"Before: Scum, perverts, tricks, johns. Now: Men who purchase sex, children of God."

"Before: Messed up and hurting and hard. Now: Messed up, hurting, mostly wanting to change."

"Before: Self-centered, entitled, above the law, no harm – no foul, privileged. Now: Broken, alone, unhappy, rejected, personally traumatized."

**How would you describe the various partnerships that have developed as a result of this work?**

"The collaboration has been terrific between Men Breaking Free staff and stakeholders. We have built relationships with law enforcement that we hadn't had in the past. Some relationships have been repaired. We are branching into other states and reaching other stakeholders."

"Eclectic, but all share a desire to help people be better."

"Game changing. Real awareness of the root of why these choices are being made. Willingness to be part of a Restorative Justice solution."

**What do you hope we will achieve together in the coming years?**

"That we can bring awareness to the community regarding realities of men who purchase sex and messages when they decide to purchase another human being. Where are these messages coming from? How can we intervene with social media to make healthy connections and to de-stigmatize those who have purchased in the past? I hope that our whole nation becomes aware of this model of Restorative Justice."

"My prayer is that the men who purchase sex understand the harms that it causes to the women they purchased, the community and both the family of the purchaser and the

family of the person purchased. That healing will occur with both purchasers and victims. That we make a difference in the paradigm that exists today between the community, those that purchase sex, and law enforcement."

"Empowering others to do the same work and create a culture shift that restores healthy individuals for healthy relationships and sexuality."

"That our program will reach more communities across the United States. That more men will recognize how they can be part of a culture shift. That we truly impact the future of young men and move toward raising healthy boys with the voices of our men. That our men use these experiences to teach their own sons. That a movement begins based on our findings. That there are more services available to these men that are specific to their needs."

#### **REFLECTIONS FROM THREE MEN WHOSE JOURNEYS HAVE TAKEN THEM FROM PARTICIPANTS TO PARTNERS IN MEN BREAKING FREE**

**What are the most important things you have learned and experienced in this work?**

"Men who have been arrested need a place to learn about trafficking, a place where they are respected and not shamed. I now recognize that I'm not alone in all of this. The arrest, charging and sentencing are individual and lonely times. Being together here means I am not alone."

"I've found from the men that we tend to seek out solicitation because we are missing something in our own lives, whether it's companionship, emptiness, lack of connection with our partner, or even intimacy. We find out, however that the act of paying for sex does not fill these voids."

"I have learned that there are real sex-traffickers. Pimps are often stereotyped and generalized a certain way by television, and most people including me did not believe that they still existed. Sex-traffickers are technologically savvy and are experts at psychological manipulation."

**What has been most surprising to you?**

"To be honest, the only surprising part is the discussion from the women who have been trafficked. No matter how often I have heard this, it is still moving to me."

"The men's reaction of remorse when they learn through Men Breaking Free. They learn that this is a tragic life for the women involved, but also they learn what they are missing in their lives."

"I am surprised to learn the various backgrounds of the women who have been involved and those currently involved in prostitution/escorting. From hearing their story at Men Breaking Free I have learned that the reasons for going down this path are as many as those who do it."

**What words would you use to describe what you thought about men who purchase sex from other people prior to June, 2018? What words would you use now?**

"Before: Johns. Now: Men who take part in trafficking."

"Up until the point that I decided to, I thought it was slimy and that people who did it were off. Then I did it!! Men Breaking Free helped me see most of us are missing something in our lives."

"Words I would have used to describe those who purchase sex from other people prior to Breaking Free would be: Sex hobbyist. This is an actual term. There are men who have enough money to be sex hobbyists and purchase sex from escorts and then write about their experiences so that other men could know what to expect from a particular escort. These men are seen as experienced and wise. Now I know them to be fools. Time could have been spent reading books, learning a new language, or just being awesome, but their awesomeness is squandered instead."

**How would you describe the impact that your ongoing participation and partnership with Men Breaking Free has had on you?**

"I've been able to connect with Breaking Free because of the new format of the program. The anger at men is gone."



"I have met absolutely wonderful people in the program and have formed fantastic relationships and friendships. The people in this program are selfless, courageous, kind and generous!"

"My participation with Men Breaking Free has kept me in check. If I am to share my experience with men about my path to sobriety, then I must remain sober or else I am a hypocrite. It is very empowering because there are other men who sit with me and share their story. I don't feel alone as I look in front of me, ten sets of eyes looking back at me... same situation, same feeling."

**What do you hope we will achieve together in the coming years?**

"In the coming years, I would hope that more thought be given to developing programs for men and boys to prevent and reduce the searching out of sex. Not sure how to do it, but I know that when I was in high school and college, a prevention program might have changed my behavior."

"I look forward to sharing my story and helping in any way I can as long as Men Breaking Free will have me. I hope we can share as much information as possible to inform men of the harm of purchasing sex, and also to help those who have, find what's missing in their lives."

"I hope that in the future the course continues to shift away the idea and concept of "victims."

"What needs to be emphasized is empowerment. Men need to understand that they have an addiction the same way an alcoholic needs to understand it. Men need to understand what the path of sobriety is and they need to experience it for themselves. Men need to be encouraged by other men in a variety of creative ways. When he gains his life back, when he gains complete control, then he will understand how Breaking Free has changed him for the better. And he will never look back."

## **JEREMIAH AND HIS DAUGHTER**

As previously noted, Jeremiah came to this work after giving over seven years of his life and heart to helping his daughter break free from sex trafficking and exploitation. When first approached about changes to the John School, he was skeptical at best. After considering trying a new approach built on empathy and respect, Restorative Justice, and the notion that men might be acting out of shame and humiliation as much as a sense of privilege, he went home and asked his daughter what she thought of trying out these ideas. Her response: "Dad, it's about time."

After listening to and seeking to truly understand the 122 men who have taken part in Men Breaking Free workshops between June 2018 and August 2019, here is what Jeremiah says about why men may make such terrible choices, and how we can most effectively work together to reduce and ultimately end the tragedy of sex trafficking.

### **What are the most important things you have learned and experienced in this work?**

"I've learned that these men are more than what everybody including myself thought they were. They have names and are real amazing, yet uninformed guys. There are a lot more issues they go through that we never would have thought about without changing the way we used to do things. These men just have to be educated and most of all HEARD and SEEN as men. These men want to open up and share things that I would never have thought. I've also learned that once properly educated and heard, they have a desire to get involved and help in the fight against exploitation and trafficking. These men have a lot of information that will help in the fight."

### **What has been most surprising to you?**

"The most surprising thing to me is, when we give them a chance to talk and we actually listen to what they are saying, they are eager to unload things they have been carrying around for years. This helps us to get to the root of the problems and gives us a base to

start to be able to help them to not purchase another human being, and to live lives of integrity."

**What words would you use to describe what you thought about men who purchase sex from other people prior to June, 2018? What words would you use now?**

"There are a lot of expletives I used before 2018, most of which you don't let me say in class anymore; I'll just leave it at that - LOL. Now though it's completely different. Words I use now are misguided, uninformed, hurt, willing to change and help, human beings, and most of all, MEN."

**How would you describe the various partnerships that have developed as a result of this work?**

"Incredible to say the least, especially how the men come back and help with class. Also, we're developing great relationships with county and state officials, as well as with other organizations that have the same heart instead to just trying to do everything on our own. Way more effective."

**What do you hope we will achieve together in the coming years?**

"I honestly believe the goal is city wide, statewide, and nationwide with what we are doing. We've already started and I believe there is no limit. I hope to see all the men we work with take the reins and run with it and be change agents all over the world and to eventually end this vicious cycle."

## **EXTENDING THE REACH BEYOND MINNESOTA**

Immediately following the Super Bowl in 2019, a number of high-profile men were arrested in Palm Beach, Florida during a series of police raids on massage parlors. Laura Cusack, Human Trafficking Education and Prevention Coordinator with Place of Hope in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida (<https://www.placeofhope.com/>) was given the assignment to develop and offer a program to work with the arrested men. Here, in

Laura's own words, is how she found out about Men Breaking Free, how she was welcomed as a partner, and her reflections on what she has learned and experienced being a part of this work to date:

"After a series of arrests in our area prompted a request to our agency to offer a 'John School', I began researching online to learn about different programs across the country. I came across [demandforum.net](http://demandforum.net), which listed various studies and programs across the country, and their success rates, etc. Men Breaking Free was the only one I came across that utilized a holistic, person-centered approach, to really address the underlying issues that lead men to purchase sex. I believe that this is the key to resolving the demand that fuels sex trafficking.

"After contacting Men Breaking Free, I was so excited not only that they responded but that they were willing to work with me to bring this program to my area. When I visited and observed a Men Breaking Free class, I became even more confident that this program was exactly what this issue needed. Seeing men break down with emotion, open up about their struggles, be honest with the class about their questions, challenges, concerns....it was incredible. I could literally see the change happening before my eyes during that class.

"We have successfully done one class of our own now here in Florida, and are working toward a second one. The feedback we received from the men in our first class showed how much their eyes were opened and how they were impacted by the knowledge they received. I am so thankful to have found Men Breaking Free and to have been allowed to bring it to my area!!"

## **FINAL REFLECTION: ON MEN BREAKING FREE, THE POWER OF AUTHENTIC PARTNERSHIP, AND POTENTIAL ANSWERS TO THE QUESTION**

To this day, given her decades of experience both being sold for sex, and now working to end this ongoing tragedy, I still find it stunning no one had ever asked Terry Forliti The Question: Why do men try to buy sex from another human being? I continue to find it equally, if not more stunning that Terry and the staff and community partners working with Breaking Free, people who have been so directly and deeply harmed by sex trafficking, would be the ones to be open both to asking this question, and to listening to and honoring answers and perspectives from men who had made the choice to buy sex from another human being.

The Question of why men buy sex is one that I hope will continue to be considered and debated. While I can't say with certainty that our Men Breaking Free experience has provided a definitive answer to The Question, I can say for myself that the men whom we have encountered and connected with through Men Breaking Free have as much humanity, decency, and potential as anyone I have encountered in my life. While they have certainly made profound mistakes that have caused pain and hardship to others, as well as to themselves, I recall another core premise of Men Breaking Free workshops: that we neither judge nor define these men, nor do we wish to be judged or defined, by the worst moments and mistakes in our lives.

I strongly believe that the first step in authentic partnership, and finding real potential for change, is the courage and willingness to genuinely listen and consider viewpoints and people toward whom we may carry judgment and even disdain.

I also strongly believe that partnership and genuine connection are the keys to our success: connecting Breaking Free's experience and wisdom with Public Health principles and strategies; connecting women who have been trafficked with men who have been complicit in their trafficking; and (re)connecting men to their best selves

and other men in similar straits. Through these multi-layered partnerships, we are seeing genuine healing, change, and growth among everyone involved with Men Breaking Free – the women, the men, and our larger community.

I believe that the challenge and opportunity presented by what we have experienced and learned through Men Breaking Free is to consider what we can do now, individually and as a community, to assure real, lasting change, with the goal of preventing sex trafficking and sexual exploitation while simultaneously promoting healing for everyone impacted by these tragedies. Through our work connecting and partnering with men participating in Men Breaking Free, we have found new pieces to the puzzle of why men may make this terribly harmful choice, and also what we all can do to prevent these tragedies in the present and into the future.

I believe that one reason nobody ever asked Terry Forliti The Question may be because we have designed our responses to this terrible problem, including John Schools, on a set of often unspoken assumptions. These include the impacts of social and sexual toxicity on men (e.g. pornography and patriarchy), as well a belief among many that males are inextricably, and perhaps biologically, prone to violence against women (as well as against children and other men.) This notion can make it seem inevitable for men to be violent both sexually (buying and otherwise sexually exploiting women) and interpersonally (harming intimate partners and children).

From our Men Breaking Free work, as well as my own personal and professional life experience, I would answer the question of why men so frequently make choices that are harmful to others and themselves somewhat differently. I concur that negative behaviors in men may often be driven by repeated exposure to socially and sexually toxic messages and expectations of manhood and male privilege. However, I do not concur with the belief of male violence being inevitable, nor that violence is unique to males. Rather, I suggest that these external social toxins may ignite inside of men in

combination with internal, almost always unspoken and unacknowledged feelings of emptiness, loneliness, and lack of authentic meaning. However counterintuitive it may seem, I suggest that the likelihood and intensity of men acting out harmfully toward self and others may actually be exacerbated by social expectations of male privilege, a level of privilege that is not realized in the real-life experience of so many of the men I have met in this work and life.

Finally, I suggest that we pay attention to the stories of so many Men Breaking Free participants who made the choice to purchase sex at moments of immediate, acute stress in their lives. Many men have shared their experience that in these darkest of moments, they had no one in their lives to turn to for positive support, and yes, intimacy - not necessarily sexual intimacy, but sincere, helpful, trusting connection and guidance. Many men report that at these moments they are encouraged, usually by other men, to seek immediate comfort through the purchase of sex from another human being – encouragement reinforced in myriad ways by our socially and sexually toxic culture. This is not a statement of excuse for their harmful choices, but rather one of understanding and acknowledgment that we all need people in our lives we can turn to, especially in our darkest moments.

Men Breaking Free offers a surprising, simple, clear, and doable call to action for all of us. Of course, we need to redouble our efforts to reduce pornography and related social toxins, to challenge unhealthy gender and social norms and other drivers of sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. At the same time, we can, and I believe must, each take action - today and into the future, to promote internal healing and growth for men and women so that we might together prevent these tragedies, using genuine, courageous empathy and authentic partnership to reconnect to one another's, and our own, innate humanity.

Again, this means reaching out to and connecting with the very people toward whom we may carry judgment and disdain. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,

"Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that" (King, 1963, p. 49).

Acknowledgement: The author wishes to thank the staff of Breaking Free, Men Breaking Free participants, and our community partners for opening and sharing their lives and hearts; Teddie Potter for her ongoing encouragement and support; Richard Wilson for his wisdom and insight; and Heidi Bruce and Marty Lewis-Hunstiger for their editorial guidance and assistance.

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## Gault: Building Authentic Partnerships to Reduce Sex Trafficking

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