

Testimony in support of SB 2003
House Appropriations Committee
Shayla Davila, Lived Experience Advisor
March 6th, 2023

Chairman and Members of the Committee:

For the record my name is Shayla Davila and I am a survivor of human trafficking. I come to you today to share some of my experience in the hope that it will help another survivor.

I had a great childhood with two loving parents who provided and cared for me. I was an athlete whose parents attended every game, I was in choir, I did martial arts, and excelled in school including taking Advanced Placement classes. I had every support and indicator for success that a parent would hope for.

I became a single mom who worked hard to make ends meet. One of my jobs was as a bartender, and this is where I first met my trafficker. He looked like any other businessman that came in on any given night. We began dating, he treated me well, and I saw a future together. When he offered the opportunity to move out-of-state and support me in getting my real estate license, I jumped at the chance and envisioned a better life for myself and children.

I packed up all of our belongings and moved with him to a new state. The first day there, I met my trafficker's family since his mother and sister lived at his house. I didn't know until later that there was a reason for that; they seemed like a nice family and were very welcoming. The first night I was there, I was abused and forced to do things I never would have imagined. I quickly realized that our relationship was not what I thought it was. It was like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, his sister and mother were involved, and I was isolated from everything I knew.

People wonder why you don't leave. I was across the country in a strange place where I didn't know anyone. My trafficker took my identification and his mother and sister had my kids.

At that point I was never left alone with my kids. I continued to be abused by my trafficker because I am a very stubborn individual and traffickers do not like that. I'm sure many of you are parents, and the best response to why I didn't just leave is because of my kids. I would give my life for my kids and if that meant enduring physical, sexual, and emotional abuse to keep them safe that is exactly what I did. Eventually, my trafficker started to trust me and the very first time he left me alone with my children I left.

Many people think that after you leave you can just pick your life back up from where it was before, but that could not be further from the truth. My life after leaving was probably harder than it was while being trafficked. There were many prostitution-related charges on my record that were not mine to be accountable for. I was forced into this, and yet I was the one burdened with the consequences of someone else's actions. I was unable to get a decent job, I was denied a job flipping burgers at Sonic because they said I had moral charges on my background, although the manager had felony drug charges. I couldn't find decent housing with my record so I ended up renting from slum lords, who were more than happy to exploit the situation because they knew I had no other options. Landlords were happy to rent to people with other felonies on their record, just not me. The worst day of my life was losing custody of my children due to what I was forced to do by my trafficker. After losing them, it felt like my life was not worth living and I spiraled. Without my kids I lost myself and was not me anymore, I'm sure any parent can relate to this.

It took four years to get my kids back and now I am a blessed mother, wife, and grandmother. I brag about my kids endlessly and am so proud of the people they have become, despite the hand they were dealt. They are all doing great things and are all in the medical field

helping others. I overcame so much and am grateful today. Where I used to be angry about what had happened, today I appreciate the life that I have made for myself and my family.

When I got out of the life there weren't any programs for me like there are now. So here I am, working in partnership with the North Dakota Human Trafficking Task Force to bring awareness of sex and labor trafficking in the state. I've become close to a great group of survivors that have helped me heal more than I thought I needed to. The services provided in North Dakota would have helped me immensely and that is why I am here. The State helps so many people with the things I never had, or struggled to get; including housing, job training, and mental health issues. I speak out about these topics because if I can help one individual to not have to go through what I went through then I have done my job.

I leave you with this, set the bar high for every other state to strive to be. North Dakota is making big waves when it comes to human trafficking and let's work together to try and squash this problem. Thank you all for your time and I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.