

Testimony of Shaquana

My name is Shaquana and I am a survivor of commercial sexual exploitation and domestic trafficking. At only 14 years old I was being manipulated and physically abused to sell my body for a pimp that I hoped would one day love me. I didn't have anyone in my life that I could have been completely honest about what was happening to me without them judging me. I was afraid and felt like everything I was suffering was always my fault. I was living in this big world but I felt small and alone. I cried myself to sleep many nights because I was very unhappy with my life but had no idea how to change it.

At 14, I got arrested and sent to a juvenile detention facility. Jail just made me continue thinking worse of myself. I was made to feel embarrassed and ashamed for all that I had went through. I never received counseling and was left to figure things out on my own. It was there though that I learned of GEMS, through the outreach team which was for girls that had been through the same stuff I had been through.

When I finally got out of jail I had been mandated to GEMS. It seemed like all my family and even the judge thought jail was what I needed as if I were the criminal. I started going to GEMS and created a new family for myself. It was like for the first time in life people understood me and didn't think that I was crazy. It took me a while to fully leave the life behind me but there was that constant hope for me at times when I didn't have it for myself from GEMS. I didn't get out of the life until I was 16 years old. I can't remember what actually happened but I was nearly killed after having sex with a man for money. I woke up in a hospital in New Jersey and after years of having an extremely low self esteem finally realizing I was beautiful all along.

I started participating in GEMS a lot more which helped me deal with a lot of the trauma that had happened to me and going to youth leadership where I learned about what it meant to be a victim of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking. It was through GEMS that I learned that even though so much happened to me as a young girl it didn't mean I would have to spend the rest of my life crying. I could be a survivor which meant going back to school, graduating, having real friends, and first dates. I was able to experience those things and now I'm in college. Being in school means a lot to me because at one time I didn't think that I would ever make it. I used to think that all I had to offer anyone was my sexuality but I know the difference now.

Today I also work at GEMS as an Outreach Worker. I travel to juvenile detention facilities, group homes, and schools, to educate girls on the issue of commercial sexual exploitation. This is very important to me because a lot of the times girls have no idea what really goes on in the commercial sex industry and if I can reach them before an exploiter ever does they will know the truth of what that life really offers. Through my work at GEMS I am able to tell them that if they have been a victim of trafficking that there is a place where they can get helped and won't be judged.